

## Lynn, Lynn City of Sin: What Are You Going to Do about It?

Richard Turner

At the beginning of many of the literature classes I taught, I would recite a two-line ditty about a city near Boston that I remembered from my childhood: “Lynn, Lynn, City of Sin/ You never come out the way you come in.” I offered this slim bit because I wanted students to see that reading literature and doing the assigned work required engagement with the texts that was personal and would change them in some important ways during the course of the semester. I wanted them to understand that literary art works hard to involve them in the experience of the text and both that experience and the subsequent interpretive work would make a difference in them and to them. My talk today focuses on the connection literary art and other aspects of our experience have with our ethical disposition to do something about the things that are wrong and/or what can be made better. In short, when encountering a realization about an ethical need, what are we going to do about it?

That literary art has the power to engage and change its listener/reader has been recognized since Plato and other classic writers. Sidney (“The poet only delivereth a golden [reality]) and Shelley (“Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”) were quite confident about that power and recent research by psychologists has demonstrated the significant impact texts have on readers, especially the degree of empathy engendered by fiction. It is safe to say that recent attitudes toward the uses of literary art are more muted in their claims for what art can do to and for us. However, my concern is the absence of very much common, public recognition of the power texts have in shaping us and, once that has been recognized, the obligation that experience places on us as readers and inhabitants of the same world captured and represented in literary art. I will limit my talk to literary texts, poems for the most part, but I

am convinced that the capacity of literary texts to engage us and bring us close to important aspects of our experience is also true for other texts and other experiences.

My problem, and as you can see I am intent on making it your problem as well, is with the apparent absence of urgency about the issues driving texts to engage us and prompt us to action. Art has not changed in what it claims for itself nor have we explicitly abandoned our sense that art is important. What is absent is a readiness of readers to accept the exhortations that texts make and turn to action. I hope that this discussion of the ethical obligations poems place on us can extend to other of our encounters with our worlds. I hope that we can see more clearly than we have before that coming face-to face with challenges to our values and aspirations will prompt us to do something about them.

I recently learned that that two-line ditty I had been reciting for my classes is actually just the beginning of a longer poem:

Lynn, Lynn, the city of sin  
You never come out the way you come in.  
You ask for water, but they give you gin.  
The girls say no, but then they give in.  
If you're not bad, they won't let you in.  
It's the damndest city I've ever lived in.  
Lynn, Lynn, city of sin,  
You never come out the way you come in.

And what did the good citizens of Lynn do when faced with this damning characterization of their city? Why, they made a tee shirt celebrating this widely held slur! But it must be said that this poem does not ask much of its reader. It belongs to a genre of scurrilous verse that has roots

in ancient Greece and Rome. What the poem says about Lynn may or may not be true, but it hardly seems like a call to action.

Now I would like to share with you a poem that does seem to challenge its reader to do something when faced with the world captured in the verse:

#### Quatrain

The golf links lie so near the mill  
That almost every day  
The laboring children can look out  
And see the men at play. (1935)

Sarah Cleghorn

The aggressive chiasmus that inverts the reader's usual associations with childhood and adult activities challenges the reader to find some reconciliation of this troubling contrast. The poem goes out of its way to grab the reader's attention and call on the reader to come to terms with the appalling inequity presented. Of course, reading is an active function so we are in effect co-producers of these fictions and so align with either the victims or the perpetrators. The poem doubles down on the force of the contrast with the speaker's buoyant tone and cadences reminiscent of Robert Louis Stevenson's "*A Child's Garden of Verses*" (1885). Once the reader is drawn into reflection about the appalling inversion of roles and situations, other aspects of the juxtaposition, one of which is that the children are toiling to create profits so that the owners of the mill can have the leisure time to pursue pleasures such as golf. As the reader pursues (more or less systematically) the implications of the poem's strategies, the recognition that something should be done to address these inequities emerges. Reading the poem in 2018 means that child labor laws of the early twentieth century have taken care of the specific situation depicted in the

poem, but millions of exploited and abused American children today do demand our attention and action. A reader of this poem needs to ask what am I going to do about it.

I would like to read another short poem that seeks to engage you in another set of concerns about how we live our lives and what we can do to improve our world, but with a much broader focus:

Parting in Wartime

How long ago Hector took off his plume,  
Not wanting that his little son should cry,  
And kissed the sad Andromache goodbye –  
And now we three in Euston waiting room. (1948)

Frances Cornford

Here the poem juxtaposes one of the most famous and most poignant episodes in the *Iliad* with the almost equivalent tableau of a soldier taking leave of his family in a railroad station in London during World War II. The juxtaposition first engages the reader in the feelings of sadness and loss as well as the stark recognition that war has been a part of the human condition throughout recorded time. At the same time, the comparison reminds the reader that war has changed from heroes engaging in one-on-one combat to the impersonal and highly mechanized exchanges of incredibly destructive weapons that allow little room for the heroic ideals adumbrated in the *Iliad*. Furthermore, the war alluded to in the last line ended with hitherto unimagined destruction of life. Faced with this dramatic reminder of such imminent threats to all human life, what should the reader do about it? The scale of the problem dwarfs that of the exploitation of children, but is there nothing for the reader to do about it? What responsibility do we have to make the world a better place and how does art engage that responsibility? If we

don't follow up on an ethically important issue, are we ignoring something essential to our being human?

Now I would like to turn to a poem by someone who was dead sure that literary art was meant to prod audiences to work for the changes needed to improve the world. For much of his career, Bertolt Brecht worked to offset the tendency of bourgeois societies to prefer art that left its audiences entertained, but without any sense that the meaning of a play or poem should cause them to change their world. He deplored the tendency of audiences to assume that their experience of art affected their dispositions toward the world rather than their sense of their responsibilities toward that world, a distinction similar to the difference between benevolence and beneficence when considering helping others. Brecht developed what he called "epic theater," an approach that compelled an audience's attention to issues by assaulting the theater's fourth wall and constructing dramatic actions as thinly veiled versions of contemporary life. The following Brecht poem incorporates some of the strategies of epic theater to ensure that the audience is engaged by its call to do something to make the world better:

#### Places for the Night

I hear that in New York

A Man stands on the corner of Broadway and 26<sup>th</sup> Street

Every evening during the winter months

And procures for the homeless who gather there

By entreating passersby a place for the night.

The world is not thereby made different

Relations between human beings are not improved

The age of exploitation is not thereby shortened

But a few men have a place for the night  
The wind is kept away from them one night long  
The snow destined for them falls in the street.

Don't put that book down yet, you who are reading it, man!

A few people have a place for the night,  
The wind is kept away from them one night long  
The snow destined for them falls in the street  
But the world is not thereby made different  
Relations between human beings are not thereby improved  
The age of exploitation is not thereby shortened. (1931)

Bertolt Brecht

(Trans. by John Barlow)

Brecht confronts us squarely with the difficult choice individuals must make between responding to the immediate needs of those who suffer and working to change the conditions that cause people to suffer. Groups within societies also find themselves debating between creating mechanisms for relieving the distress of people or devoting resources to change what is wrong with the world. Marxists in particular attack charity and philanthropy as sops to the working classes and mechanisms for delaying the needed overthrow of capitalism. The stern warning to the reader to not put the book down, which separates the two opposing perspectives on what to do about homelessness, is Brecht's version of his "epic theater." The interjection breaks up the flow of the lyric poem just as Brecht's interruptions break the "fourth wall" barrier

in place in most traditional plays. The break in the poem changes the tone and bearing of the speaker by dropping the standard pose of the speaker of a lyric poem to a more dramatic interchange between speaker and audience, a break that turns the audience toward the rhetorical strategies of the poem, something close to what we would call an “in-your-face” encounter. The first perspective offers a touching image of personal charity at work; the second perspective, by simply reversing the order of the lines, presents a forceful call to action to combat the “age of exploitation.”

Knowing that Brecht was a deeply committed Marxist suggests to a reader that the poem inverts the initial position celebrating charity to end with a promotion of the second perspective’s call for the overthrow of capitalism. The momentum of the ideas in the poem roll toward an emotional appeal for the reader to commit to the Marxist solution to poverty and homelessness. But the formal structures of the poem, interestingly, seem to complicate the rhetorical process by allowing for the possibility that the intricate inversion may lead to another inversion and that inversion to yet another to a theoretical endless back and forth between the two perspectives. These playful formal structures seem to suggest that these two opposing perspectives, which each seem to call for action, have equally competing claims on us. The art of the poem seems to win out over the dogma, bringing the reader to rest with a sense of both claims on their commitment, but with a clear call for some kind of action. The art and the ideological preserve both the call to action and the recognition that the problem to be addressed is complex as well as important.

Take a moment to think of works of art that have indeed made a difference in the world. Swift’s *Drapier’s Letters* (1724-25), published in an age when public shame of public officials was still possible, forced the cancellation of Wood’s pence, a debased coinage that would have driven the Irish further into dire poverty. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) is

widely agreed to have coalesced anti-slavery sentiment and made it a factor in the abolition of slavery eleven years later. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*(1904) led to deep reforms in the meatpacking industry and to food regulations generally. But the list is short. More to the point is the number of times a work of art has prompted smaller changes, certainly changes of heart, but more importantly changes in behavior.

I know that arguing for the importance of pursuing the ethical obligations arising from an engagement with a literary text puts me at odds with the stand taken by our fellow Indianapolis Literary Club member George C. Calvert, whose paper, "A Defense of the Dilettante," was first presented on December 5, 1910 and, more recently, read here last year by Past President, Stephen Towne, as a fill-in. Calvert argued that engagement with art was a matter of personal taste and individual choice. Someone who creates or consumes art, Calvert argued, does so without needing to answer to critics or social norm enforcers. Calvert's essay echoes the art-for-art's sake movement of the late nineteenth century and eschews the appeals to the power of literary art to engage imaginations and shape approaches to life among readers. No unacknowledged legislators of the world in George Calvert's universe. Art cannot or should not constrain or determine a response by its consumer; expecting control over response leads to Soviet Realism. Art has always been valued for its power to make meaning not only on the canvas, in the stone, or on the page, but also within the hearts and minds of its consumers. Recognizing that impact, that apprehension and appreciation of meaning and significance, implies a common enterprise pursued by the artist and the audience. The ethical responsibility that follows engagement with art arises from the acceptance of the impact and the effect art has. Leaving the experience of the work of art moves beyond the confines of the experience of the work, but the impact of that experience continues and should prod the reader to act on the



insight or perspective arising from engagement with a poem or story. Art can make a difference and so it should make a difference.

In my admittedly aggressive approach to the responsibilities that reading imposes on us, I am influenced by Brecht's aesthetic and echoing a stance taken by Peter Singer, a moral philosopher, in his writings and in particular an article he published in *The New York Times Magazine* in December, 1999, "Singer's Solution to World Poverty." Singer challenges readers to think about the choices they make in spending their disposable income. He points out that "a \$200 donation to Oxfam or UNICEF will help a sickly 2-year old transform into a healthy 6-year old, offering safe passage through childhood's most dangerous years." He argues that an American family of four can live a respectable and dignified life for about \$30,000 (\$45,000 in 2017 dollars). He suggests that everything above that amount can go to saving the lives of children worldwide. Earlier Singer had provided the phone numbers (remember it was 1999) for Oxfam and UNICEF. He then invokes the practice of another ethical philosopher by calling readers out on the fact that, since a child dies from hunger every six minutes, the failure to call Oxfam or UNICEF while continuing to read the article amounts to a choice to let a specific number of children die. He says, "Now you too have the information you need to save a child's life. How should you judge yourself if you don't do it." Although Horatio Alger, Jr. included real aid agencies in some of his novels and Dickens and others include very thinly veiled versions of specific charitable options, poems and novels don't usually provide the specific information for carrying out the actions they promote, but the force of their visions about how life ought to be carry no less a sense of urgency. Literary texts engage us in worlds that are fictional, but still very real and so make our experience with that world as compelling as if we had come across it on our own. I imagine, as you probably have already, how unlikely you are to invite Peter Singer to a dinner party. He seems dead set on making you and me uncomfortable.

But ethical obligations, when thrust upon us, almost always make us uncomfortable. When art engages us in experiences that entail some recognition of a moral responsibility that lies beyond the page, we have both the pleasure of the experience and the weight of whatever mission we recognize as flowing from that experience.

We are deeply engaged by our contexts and shaped by our environments and our experiences. We never come out the way we went in. And those engagements require us to reflect on and respond to the implications of those engagements with our worlds. We can put the book down (Pace Brecht!) or walk away from a painting or sculpture, but we cannot undo that connection we had, and continue to have, with the work. The specifics of how art engages us suggest how deeply we are affected and why we need to take those moments of connection seriously.

Much of this essay to this point has argued for greater recognition of the challenge art makes to its consumers to act on the ethical imperatives suggested by the content and the method of the work. At this point I would like to return to the suggestion that opened the talk – that readers of literature like visitors to Lynn are changed significantly by the experience. One might dismiss Shelley’s claim about poets being the unacknowledged legislators of the world as mere enthusiasm of a Romantic poet and so not a call to action. But contemporary research by psychologists has revealed how reading changes us even before we have finished our connection with a text. The very act of reading requires a commitment by the reader and that connection has an impact on the reader that amounts to a significant change. A series of recent studies have understood the degree and the shape of the engagement of readers of all texts, but especially fiction, and end with measurable and significant changes in the attitude and disposition of the readers (Gogan). Other studies have focused on the specific increase in empathy (Coplan, Bal and Veltkamp, Kidd and Costanzo)). Those researchers report an increase in both positional

empathy (what is often labeled as identifying with one or another character in a story) and emotional empathy (the response to a situation in a text as real and as an appropriation of the emotions emerging from the situations in the text). These research findings tell me that reading literary art does indeed implicate us not only in the fictional worlds of the text, but also in the ethical directives that arise from the reading.

What researchers refer to as positional empathy echoes the activities often associated with critical thinking, a disposition and a skill connected to the independent and analytic work people do as they determine the meaning and significance of events they encounter, both real and fictional. That process seems to be a familiar part of thinking about how and why we decide to make a difference in the world. But the other form of empathy, emotional empathy, has a less recognized place in processing experience, especially in the case of public discourse, arising perhaps from the Enlightenment's greater comfort with reason than with passion. All aspects of engagement with texts are important to keep in mind when making the decision to act on what a text suggests.

John Frow, a literary and cultural theorist, talks about the "practice of value" and parses the elements of value judgments, using himself as a case study of how that process works. For our purposes, his detailed analysis of the regimes and institutions that shape his actions from sitting on a committee to adjudicate a plagiarism charge to stopping by a greengrocer on his way home from work to his choices for home entertainment offer representative decision-making acts as shaped by a complex set of values. Frow spells out the degree to which our choices, while free and undetermined, are deeply influenced by values that may not be explicit at the moment decisions are made. Frow's extended inquiry into the practices of value suggests that what we do and how we choose is not a static matter and, like other practices, responding to our world can be shaped by our reflection on our actions and our commitment to shape these habits

of choice. We can do something about how we approach and exit the experiences that comprise our lives.

Recognizing the ethical imperatives developing in an act of reading is a first step toward making that an ethical practice. The ethical practice that follows from reading literature is the focus of a book edited by Peter Brooks, *The Humanities and Public Life* (2014). Brooks and the other fifteen literary scholars whose conversations about the value and the place of literary interpretation in public life comprise this volume begin by looking for a theory of the value of literary study without constricting that value to an instrumentalism that they agree from the beginning interpretation of literature cannot support. They finally conclude that literary study has value not from the outcomes of reading texts, but from the practice of reading and especially the ethical habits of construing the significance of texts. They develop an understanding of critical practice as something that eschews “suspicion or debunking” and “becomes a pathway to hope,” a way of thinking “differently, of opening up possibilities for living and livability” (138). Brooks and his colleagues work to move the importance of interpretation from the broad realms of literary theory to the actual moments of understanding and recognition that shape individual readings. That convergence of theory and practice for experts in the field succeeds in a commitment to the habits of responding to the ethical imperatives literary texts create.

Martha Nussbaum’s *The Monarchy of Fear, A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (2018) offers a way to pull together some of the issues I have introduced tonight. Nussbaum begins her book with her reaction to the 2016 election, recounting the deep and debilitating fear that dominated those moments. Much of the book explores the ways in which fear creates an inability to act and a reluctance to enter into regimes of change or reform. Nussbaum ends *The Monarchy of Fear* with a chapter on hope, which she suggests is the necessary ingredient for pursuing a conviction to take an action to improve the world. That invocation of hope echoes the

conclusions of Brooks and his colleagues that an ethics of practice is tied to an assumption that better times can come. Nussbaum supports her case for embracing hope and its attendant call for action by invoking Kant: “Kant believed that we have a duty, during our lives, to engage in actions that produce valuable social goods – actions that make it more likely that human beings will treat one another as ends, not mere instruments. (Central to his own thinking was the aim of producing world peace.) But Kant also understood, and plainly felt in his heart, that when we look around us it is difficult to sustain our own efforts: we see so much bad behavior, so much hatred, human beings everywhere falling so far short of what we might wish human beings to be and do. . . . But if we ought to be pursuing valuable social goals, then we ought to motivate ourselves to pursue them – and this means embracing hope. So, Kant concludes that we should choose hope as what he calls a “practical postulate,” an attitude that we take on without sufficient reasons, for the sake of the good action it may enable” (208-209). Much of my insistence on our taking seriously the mandates adumbrated by art comes with a recognition that consumers of art need to enter into the process with an open mind that will recognize the new order invoked by a work of art and the readiness, perhaps the hope, to enter into whatever change is needed in the worlds we share with others. I began this essay by looking at ways art engages us with or without our intention, but the full force of our pursuit of the responsibilities of living in a world where art has value to us is cultivating not just the taste for artistic works but also the readiness to pursue their implications.

Plato shares my sense that poetry implicates us in its involvement with value-laden conflicts, although we disagree of what to do with that engagement. In “Book X” of *The Republic*, Plato worries about poets fooling children and gullible adults with their imitations, appealing as those imitations do to the appetitive elements of the soul. But even more rational adults are sometimes loosed in their hold on reality by encounters with imitations and eventually

erode their ability to maintain a healthy distance between real and imagined worlds. I am asking for a greater appreciation of how deeply our lives are connected to the worlds created by poets, novelists, and dramatists, and by all others who create within a text a version of the world credible enough to warrant our attention. Plato's reasons for banishing poets from the Republic are many and varied, but I am convinced they include an unwillingness to have citizens' senses of how the world should be disturbed by poems and novels. Art should push us to reflect on and then act on new and compelling visions of the world.

Horace's "Ars Poetica" assures us that art both pleases and teaches (*"utile et dulce"*). The part about pleasing seems simple enough; we enjoy a work and that experience is ours to savor or not. But the "teaches" part is more complex and presumes to engage us in matters beyond our own personal consumption. How we pursue those suggestions that emerge from our reading, our engagement with and transformation by a poem or novel, may be difficult in a world where public discourse has made doing something to improve the world controversial and where even the power and value of art is no longer widely accepted or assured. How we incorporate our experiences with art into our public presence and indeed how we even approach our public presence is under pressure and a continuing challenge. Works of art do many things, but we ought to value their ability to engage us in matters that are crucial to our lives as humans. We need to have the hope and the courage to keep our engagement with art, and indeed with other discussions for which we have responsibility, a part of our lives and our positions toward the world.

I would be hard-pressed to instruct those before whom I stand on making an impact on the world or pursuing work that has made the world a better place, so many and varied are their accomplishments. But I can urge that going forward you become more immediate in your conversations about making the changes that the world needs, thus extending your considerable

influence to efforts to make the world a better place. Seeing that process of engagement at work in a quatrain is relatively simple; pursuing the responsibilities of engagement in the more complex encounters of life is more difficult, but more important.

Well, that's my paper. What are you going to do about it? Thank you.

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