

LITERATURE AND...

Peter Brooks

I suppose an “intellectual trajectory” should, in the manner of many a novel, tell the story of a vocation. Such is the outcome of the three thousand pages of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, for instance. But that doesn’t quite correspond to my experience: I didn’t find a vocation so much as drift into one.

Of the many places I might begin, ninth grade stands out. My parents to my disgust had just moved the family from New York City, where I grew up and which I loved, and where I had learned to travel up and down town on the Madison Avenue bus if not yet the subway, to the Connecticut suburbs. I was resentful and bored; too young to have a driver’s license, I couldn’t get anywhere. I spent the year as I recall sitting in the same comfortable chair reading books, of any description. I never quite recovered from that. But to be honest it led me into academic life only by default and without my quite knowing it. After graduating from Harvard and spending a year in England and France, I returned there for graduate school because I felt I had so much more to learn, not realizing that graduate study would largely be a narrowing experience and that when completed I’d be fit for nothing but university teaching. But then I was fortunate to land my first job at Yale – these were times of academic expansion and optimism – and though my salary was \$5,400, Yale turned out to be a good place to complete my education. What I want most to talk about today is how my intellectual and research interests were from the start wholly intertwined with my teaching and my life in this institution.

The beginning was not entirely auspicious, not only because I was teaching three courses a term, including on Saturday mornings (language classes met then). I recall one afternoon walking into the Introduction to French Literature class that I was teaching to fifteen male students, to find each and every one of them absorbed in the latest issue of *Sports Illustrated*. Is this the right place for me, I asked myself? But in fact Yale in 1965 was on the cusp of transformation under Kingman Brewster’s presidency. I spent my third year on a Morse Fellowship in Paris – where I was able to observe at close quarters the events of May 1968 – and when I returned Yale already felt different. Women arrived, which immediately upped the intellectual level of classes in

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the humanities. It was also the moment of protest against the Vietnam War, intense faculty debates, trips to New York and Washington to participate in demonstrations, Bill Coffin's inspirational organizing, and the loose formation of a group of left-liberal faculty that included Ken Keniston, Robert Lifton, Art Galston, Tom Greene, me, and others. And then a kind of local apotheosis in May Day 1970, when Yale confronted an influx of all sectors of American radicalism to "free Bobby Seale." Yale seemed to be mutating to some new rhythm of American society. Though later, alas, came years of reaction.

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I published a first book, *The Novel of Worldliness*, that was a rewrite of my PhD dissertation. But at the same time, I was undergoing a kind of reeducation. An assistant professor in French, Jacques Ehrmann, was putting together the issue of *Yale French Studies* on structuralism, which would be the entering wedge for radically new ways of thinking about literature largely imported from France. The Yale French department became the port of entry to the US for *maîtres à penser* (as the French put it) such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes. Harvard had lived in near total ignorance of all this, and I found myself, under the impulsion of colleagues and students, teaching myself all sorts of difficult new material. It was exciting if often anxiety-producing. Fortunately, the French department at the time had a rich junior faculty culture: we worked together and partied together, united in opposition to our elders and in the desire to see things anew. My second book, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, was somewhat on the divide of old and new in its interests and approach; like much of my work, it got caught in crossfire between those who found it too uncanonical and those theorists who found it hopelessly unrigorous. That book, published in 1976, had a very slow start. It seemed to have sunk from sight, but then was given a new life in film studies, where the concept of melodrama was becoming crucial. Reprinted twice after its original publication, it is still in print now.

Like many another young teacher in the humanities, I was enlisted to teach the literature segment of Directed Studies – the "great books" of Western lit course that continues to this day. The students were superb. But a number of us teachers thought students were missing out on what was most exciting in literary study. Their introduction to the great books was unproblematic, content-based, and didn't ask the questions that interested us: what is literature? what is its social function? how does it work, and how can you analyze it? So we – I mean mainly Adam Parry in Classics, Michael Holquist in Slavic, and I – put together a course at first known as Literature X (later normalized as Lit 120) that tried to ask basic questions about the nature and role of fictions in our thinking and living. It took a somewhat anthropological approach to the fact and the nature of literature and of fictional thinking more generally. We taught it first in 1970–71. Soon it was joined by Lit Y (later 300), a course on the history of literary theory begun by Peter Demetz (later continued with great success by Paul Fry), and then Lit Z. I recall vividly how that course originated in a somewhat raucous meeting convened by Dean Horace Taft in response to objections by René

Wellek and others that the new program we were proposing – The Literature Major – was short on attention to what a member of the Slavic department called the “verbal art,” meaning the close study of style and language. Paul de Man volunteered to fill that gap. He teamed up with Geoffrey Hartman to create Lit Z (alias 130), which turned out to be something far different from what Wellek had in mind. It became the laboratory of what was to be known as “deconstruction,” especially after Jacques Derrida came to Yale as a regularly returning visiting professor. The Literature Major was at the outset something of a children’s crusade: its first proposers were mostly untenured, with the exception of Alvin Kernan, who gave us respectable cover, and I am still amazed that we received such encouragement from the dean and the provost’s office, as well as a great deal of freedom in what we were doing. It was Yale at its institutional best.

I had feared the anthropological interests of our program might be swallowed up by the partisans of semiotic theory – the general theory of signs, which claimed a universal applicability. Umberto Eco, the world’s greatest expositor of sign theory before he became a best-selling novelist, was a visiting professor at the time. But it was instead the camp of the deconstructionists that became famous – though not in fact dominant within the undergraduate program – especially when J. Hillis Miller appeared on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* publicizing what he called “The Yale School.” I was never part of that; I found its methods interesting more than compelling, and I did what I could to keep the Literature Major from becoming the place of a single critical and theoretical orthodoxy, maintaining an openness to many ways of thinking and reading. It attracted notable students.

My next book, *Reading for the Plot*, which to this day remains the most widely read of anything I’ve written, was published in 1984. It derived directly from teaching Lit 120. I’ve never in fact understood the supposed opposition of teaching and research, since all my so-called scholarly work has really been an attempt to put into orderly form ideas generated in the classroom. If there is a core message in my remarks today, it is that research and publication in the humanities as I understand them are tied to the pedagogic enterprise, a kind of formalization of what we do in the classroom. This seems to me broadly true of the best contemporary critical practice ever since I. A. Richards’s experiments in practical criticism at Cambridge in the 1920s. Our acts of interpretation are founded in a classroom praxis that took hold easily in American soil because it works in democratic and consensual conversation, at least ideally. I had been fortunate as a graduate student to serve as teaching assistant to Professor Reuben Brower, Richards’s student and at Harvard the sole practitioner of this kind of close reading of texts. The Lit Major continued this tradition while attempting to explore poetics, that is the grounds of interpretation, the ways in which texts come to signify. Even deconstruction at its best, as practiced by Hartman and de Man, was text-based and pedagogical.

Chairing the Lit Major in its early years was fun. I moved on to become what was then called director of the Division of the Humanities (later replaced by the dean

of humanities). Since *Reading for the Plot* had categorized me, somewhat abusively, as a psychoanalytic literary critic—largely because of a chapter on Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as a model for novelistic plots, the most frequently read and anthologized piece I have ever written—I wrote a slim book called *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*. I had begun to read Freud only long after my formal education. I can’t quite explain why he became so important to me and has continued to be. His work seemed deeply clarifying of human action and intention. What you might call his tragic humanism, his sense of the triumphs and limitations of human creations in a world marked by aggressivity and the will to destruction, still sounds a note I find realistic.

The next chapter in my academic life came from a conversation with Bart Giamatti in the summer of 1980. We had known each other for many years. I had worked with him on an anthology of Western literature that was supposed to make us enough money to send our children to college, in the manner of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* years earlier but in fact scarcely made a cent—published I think just as the heyday of the anthology was waning. We continued to talk often after he became president: he was far more socially conservative than I, but we could usually find common ground. Bart had been involved in an experimental humanities center program funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities that ran briefly at Yale under the directorship of Maynard Mack. That had not had a sequel for reasons that remain obscure: in the hiatus between the Brewster and Giamatti presidencies, no one had followed up with a funding request to NEH. But the building at 53 Wall Street that housed that pilot center had come on the market—it had been the parish house of the Episcopal church—and Bart bought it with unspent monies from Jock Whitney’s gift to fund two new colleges on the Whitney-Grove site that never were built (vetoed by the New Haven alders). He asked me to think about creating a humanities center that would be housed there.

I took on the assignment with something like joy. I believed in the project. My guiding principle in building the Whitney Humanities Center was a lament by Geoffrey Hartman: that we faculty at Yale invested great time and energy into teaching our students but did nothing to teach one another. I had learned much from my peers in the French department during my early years at Yale, had often regretted that we didn’t, with rare exceptions, attend each other’s courses. (Yale now has a program for this.) Here was an opportunity to realize a kind of “institute for advanced study” within the university, an institution that would build upon Yale’s faculty strengths a kind of overarching structure, in the form of a place and a program that would enhance our knowledge and reach. It was to be interdisciplinary, of course, but not in any facile sense: it would build on the wisdom acquired in the several disciplines while testing their limits and their capacity to learn from one another. Sociologist and political scientist David Apter (originator of this *Intellectual Trajectories* series and a close friend as well as co-conspirator on many projects) and I had for a time run an informal discussion group called “from disciplinary orthodoxy to guilty knowledge”

that attempted to do a kind of archaeology of the existing disciplines, asking what might have been suppressed or excluded in the process of their formation. That experience seemed to point to a possible way to analyze the university and our roles in it.

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But there was of course a minefield ahead. Like all universities, Yale was increasingly atomized and privatized. Departments were the dominant units, the doors between them were watertight, and they felt themselves to be largely autonomous. They negotiated upwards, with deans and provosts, but rarely with one another. The trick would be to convince departments that a super-departmental center would not infringe their autonomy but rather enhance their task and make the life of their faculty more rewarding. My powers of persuasion were sorely tested; they worked to a degree, but not 100 percent. The center appealed on the whole to those faculty who were restless in their defined academic units, who wanted to share ideas across boundaries; it wasn't always welcomed by departments as such. I faced the paradox that faculty members in the humanities generally welcomed the center whereas the structures in which faculty were organized resisted it.

So we built the center, putting together budgetary bits and pieces, picking up a couple of significant foundation grants, and moving into the commodious building at 53 Wall Street which Yale had bought at a fire sale price – but then to discover that the roof leaked, copiously, that the fire marshal wanted to condemn some of the internal spaces, and that we didn't have the funds to install decent seats in the auditorium. And so on. Also, once we were launched, there were constant fights with the Yale College registrar's office, which thought the building was new classroom space rather than space for faculty teaching faculty. That turned out to be one of my hardest tasks; it proved Geoffrey Hartman's point. When we had built it, in rudimentary form at least, there remained the question: would they come? Yale faculty are a notoriously independent minded lot. And we were offering very little for their participation: no course relief, a token research grant, use of an office (if they would in fact use it) – a bit like the beginnings of the Koerner Center, perhaps, though the Whitney had no endowment, and funds at Yale in the early 1980s were scarce.

They did come, tentatively, to see what it was all about. Bart and I put together the initial lists of whom to invite as fellows; he had a keen political sense of how to construct a kind of balanced slate, so the center would not be seen as enlisted in any particular intellectual school or movement. We from the outset had fellows from the social sciences, such as David Apter, Kai Erikson, Don Brown, even the hard sciences, such as Bob Shulman, and the professional schools: from Law and Music and Architecture. And in addition to the dozen or so senior fellows, we had a half-dozen junior faculty, who I think may have benefitted the most from their fellowships: it gave them a nonhierarchical space in which to dialogue with their elders, and a couple of graduate student fellows as well. And later, we had some Mellon Foundation postdocs. My notion was that the fellows should form the core of the center, and their weekly meetings the intensive function of the center, exchanging discussions of works-in-progress and also

carrying on a continuing discussion of the idea and function of the university at a moment when its definition and very existence were under attack in the “culture wars.” Then there was a more public part of our enterprise in the form of lectures, conferences, and working groups organized by faculty on topics of interest across disciplines. Early on, a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation enabled us to invite the Luce Visiting Scholar in the Humanities and Social Thought—Elie Wiesel, Juliet Mitchell, Alasdair MacIntyre, Natalie Zemon Davis, Carlo Ginzburg were among them. Later, a few endowed programs—the Tanner Lectures on Human Values, the Finzi-Contini Lectures in Comparative Literature—were added to the menu.

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It worked, I think because people were thirsty for the kind of interaction and exchange it provided. Academic life in the humanities has become increasingly lonely, driven, privatized. Our electronic prostheses have made it possible to live in perfect isolation from one another, appearing on campus only to teach. There has been a loss of the intellectual collegiality that once—I don’t think this is merely nostalgia—characterized faculty life. As faculty, we have largely renounced worldly power. In exchange, we ought at least to have the advantages provided by a kind of All Souls College.

Not only the Whitney but also a number of other humanities centers were born around the same time (the Whitney opened in 1981). They became something of a lightning rod for thinkers on the Right who believed the humanities had lost their way and succumbed to novelty, “theory,” and popular culture. Sociologist Robert Nisbet sneeringly called us center directors the “new men of power” in academia. New directions in the humanities, especially in literary study, were castigated by Lynne Cheney as director of NEH, Roger Kimball (a Yale MPhil) in his wretched book *Tenured Radicals*, and Hilton Kramer, who in the pages of his journal *The New Criterion* repeatedly intoned warnings that the academic humanities were in a death spiral. I organized a couple of symposia, one on The Humanities and the Public Interest, another on Moral Education, that included Kramer and others in dialogue with academic “progressives” in an attempt to create an intelligible dialogue on our differences, in vain, of course, since the cultural Right was not interested in the facts but rather in polemics, branding academic humanists as destroyers of the true and the good. It is curious that the natural sciences have always been allowed to follow the paths where research took them, and praised for new discoveries. Whereas the humanities were supposed to remain the place of timeless truths and values that should not be contested by new methodologies or the expansion of the curriculum beyond the traditional texts.

An informal group of humanities center directors coalesced around the idea of a reasoned response to our critics—a group that included Catharine Stimpson at NYU, Jonathan Culler at Cornell, Marjorie Garber at Harvard, Ann Kaplan at Stony Brook, George Levine at Rutgers, and me. The president of the American Council of Learned Societies, Stanley Katz, supported us, and the result was a collectively-authored pamphlet entitled *Speaking for the Humanities*, published by ACLS, which claimed in essence that the current storm and stress in the humanities pointed to exciting

possibilities of renewal of subjects that had become a bit dusty. It was immediately subject to vituperation from the cultural Right: *The New Criterion*, of course, but less predictably John Searle in *New York Review of Books* and an old friend, Tzvetan Todorov, in *The New Republic*. Lynne Cheney took out a full-page ad in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* to castigate us. The pamphlet had vulnerabilities, I admit (collective documents tend to); it served mainly as target practice for the other side.

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One of the aims of the Whitney Humanities Center had been to foster new cross-disciplinary courses that would be team-taught by faculty from different fields. A few of these came into existence, notably the course on science and literature taught by Michael Holquist and Bob Shulman. At the center, I began a dialogue with Paul Gewirtz of the Law School that resulted in our meeting for lunch once a week for a year to plan a course together. We'd discuss topics of interest, then Paul would set his research assistant to work to prepare a high stack of possibly relevant court cases, which I'd have to digest before the next lunch. It was immense fun. The amorphous field of "law and literature" was under construction from many directions. What I discovered in legal materials was a gripping set of stories, stories that really mattered since their outcome, as decided by juries and judges, had drastic real-world consequences. "It is so ordered," the Supreme Court opinion typically concludes. This sense of producing an outcome in reality might make poets and novelists envious: it is language with consequences. I was attracted to such an empowered use of language — not the usual experience of literary criticism. And yet I found that the law very rarely reflected on its performative uses of language, or the ways it told stories — the stories of searches and seizures under the Fourth Amendment, for instance. There was precious little awareness of the roles played by rhetoric and narrative in the law. So Paul and I put together a course on that very subject and held a conference which resulted in a book, *Law's Stories*, subtitled *Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law*. I continued to teach from time to time at the Law School (and later was appointed to the University of Virginia School of Law) and became obsessed with one of the topics Paul and I had explored: the meaning of confessions obtained under interrogation. Confession is a strange form of utterance, crucial in religion and in literature as well as law, serving apparently different functions in each yet always in a belief that what utters from your own lips has a special prerogative of truth. The law insists that your confession be "voluntary," the product of a free will — while police interrogators work to break down your free will. Literature may suggest, as in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, that there is always some sort of compulsion at work in confession. The subject seemed worth exploring. My book *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* was published in 2000. Since that time, there has been much notable work done by psychologists on the mechanisms of false confessions, far more common than one might think, but a notion that has barely penetrated into the law. I think the large justification of the "law and . . ." movements (law and society, law and psychology, law and literature) fits under that old adage: law is too important to be left to the lawyers.

The Whitney Humanities Center, and I'd maintain the rest of Yale as well, did not fare very well under the presidency of Benno Schmidt, who seemed to have swallowed the view of a Yale run by wild radicals promoted in the editorial pages of *The Wall Street Journal*. I stepped down as director. I became chair of Comparative Literature, and in that role I became increasingly aware that I belonged to something of a dying field, that basically no one wanted to read literary criticism any more. The kind of exposition and exegesis that genuinely excited faculty and students when I was young in the profession no longer seemed to matter much. So in my next book, called *Henry James Goes to Paris* (2007), I tried something new, for me anyway: to graft analysis of some of my favorite novels of this great novelist on the story of James's decision to live in Paris—a stay that lasted only a year, 1875–76, and ended with him seeking London with relief, to stay in England for most of his life. The Paris year in my reading of it was an encounter with the very crucible of the modern in art and literature that James largely didn't like or understand but which returned to inflect his most experimental work many years later. It was my attempt to make "lit crit" into a narrative. I published also a slim book called *Realist Vision*, based on the series of lectures I gave as the DeVane professor, and then later as Eastman visiting professor at Oxford. I also returned for another five years to the directorship of the WHC under Rick Levin's presidency, after one of my successors in the position left Yale for another university. Then I taught at the University of Virginia for three years, between the English department and the Law School. It distinctly wasn't Yale, which I missed very much. It did have this advantage: that the university was so much a part of its community and indeed of the whole Commonwealth of Virginia, which took pride in it. Teaching at UVA, you felt you were a prized member of a statewide community. You don't feel that kind of public support at Yale. I nonetheless returned happily to Yale. And then, with my retirement in 2009, I took a nontenured position at Princeton, largely for reasons of geography—I wanted to spend time with two younger children in Alexandria, VA—and perhaps curiosity as well. What would it be like to teach at this place where money never seemed to be an obstacle, and where fresh air seemed needed? I also admit that I was flattered to be offered a new job at age 70.

I went to Princeton with a large grant (the Distinguished Achievement Award) from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that I used to create a program called The Ethics of Reading and the Cultures of Professionalism. That topic was my reaction to reading what became known as the "Torture Memos" produced by the Office of Legal Counsel at the Department of Justice, traditionally the source of authoritative legal advice to the Executive Branch. We were into the post-9/11 so-called "war on terror," and these were legal opinions justifying the use of torture in breach of the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, codified in US law by act of Congress, and doing so by the most twisted, ingenious, perverse, and unethical interpretation of legal texts. No one trained in the rigorous analysis of poetry, I said to myself, could possibly engage in

such bad-faith interpretation without professional conscience intervening to say: this is not possible. The premise of my seminar was that the kind of close reading we do in literary study (and related humanistic fields) could itself be an ethical practice, one that ought to be exported to fields of professional study and practice, especially the law. I was fortunate to have half my Princeton appointment in the University Center for Human Values, where I was free to mount a seminar open to all takers: students, faculty, and community. And with the Mellon funds, I could invite frequent visitors, especially law professors with more expertise than I. I worked through a number of topics: Reading Law Reading; Law, Psychoanalysis, and Ideas of Human Agency; Cases, Histories, Case-Histories; and others, to arrive finally at a course called simply, if derivatively, Crime and Punishment. It was an interesting experience, but the lack of a law school at Princeton limited its reach. And also, when I first arrived in Princeton, I lunched with Stan Katz, now on the faculty, who said to me: “Peter, the one thing you must understand about this place is: never try to change anything.” Since I had spent so much of my time at Yale participating in institutional change, this was discouraging. But I have to say Stan was right: Princeton as an institution largely resists change. None of the experiments I made endured beyond my time there.

I also, under the aegis of the Center for Human Values, created an undergraduate course called Clues, Evidence, Detection: Law Stories, which became larger every time I taught it and might have become larger still except that it wasn’t easy to find teaching assistants (“preceptors,” in Princeton speak) to handle discussion groups. The course juxtaposed each week a legal opinion and literary texts that seemed to speak to the same issues. About the fourth time around, I discovered that one of my preceptors was teaching a version of the course in New Jersey’s maximum security women’s prison as part of the Princeton Prison Teaching Initiative. This took place within a structure provided by the Rutgers School of Criminal Justice, which gave BA credit for selected courses, and indeed a BA degree. That preceptor invited me to accompany him one evening. Those two hours within Edna Mahan Correctional Facility were powerful and troubling. They led to my teaching a version of the course on my own the following year, at East Jersey State Prison in Rahway, where I had twenty-five male students, all of them incarcerated for thirty years to life, almost all African-American. (I gave a report on that teaching experience in a piece published in *Yale Review* in 2019.)

It was in many ways overwhelming. Spending time with those who have lost their freedom is sobering: to join them in prison, even for one evening a week, is to feel the deep horror of incarceration, where your free will is gone, surrendered to your masters—that condition of unfreedom the central, unchangeable fact of your existence. Add to that the monochrome ugliness and dirt and smell of the prison, and its surreality, from the three sets of air locks you have to pass through on your way in (and out again) to the strangely chaotic initial atmosphere of the classroom, where the students drifted in by twos and threes (they had traveled from different cellblocks) and somehow produced contraband items such as ballpoint pens (you’d been warned

by the wardens that weapons could be made from them) and happily indulged in forbidden behaviors (no touching, you'd been told) such as giving their teacher a high-five. They turned out to be just about the most committed students I have ever encountered, supportive of me and kind to one another. The course was intense from the start, and when we reached questions of interrogation, confession, and punishment our discussions carried a kind of wisdom of those who saw themselves fated by American society to end up in prison that ought to be made available to every actor in our so-called criminal justice system. I never asked what they had done – presumably most were in for homicide – and no one argued he was innocent. But they were acutely aware that the process by which they were judged and especially sentenced was deeply skewed. They believed in the rights guaranteed by law, articulated for instance in the famous Miranda warnings. But they did not feel they had ever been full partakers in the rights of American citizens. And who could tell them otherwise?

On a less gloomy subject, I have found that my writing, slow to develop when I was a young faculty member (I think I barely made tenure), has accelerated in old age. It's become something of a necessary narcotic: I am unhappy if not writing. In relatively quick order I published: *Enigmas of Identity*, begun at Yale and finished at Princeton; then a collective volume that came from a symposium I organized as part of the Ethics of Reading program called *The Humanities and Public Life*; and then in 2017 *Flaubert in the Ruins of Paris*, a book about the reactions of the novelist Gustave Flaubert to the "Terrible Year" of modern French history – the year that saw French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, the occupation of much of the country, including Flaubert's native Normandy, and the uprising of the Paris Commune in the spring of 1871 and its bloody repression by the French army, which invaded Paris and slaughtered the Communards, a battle during which much of central Paris was burned to the ground. It was as a visitor to the ruins left by the conflict that Flaubert claimed that if only his compatriots had read his novel *Sentimental Education* – published a few months earlier – none of this could have happened. Quite a claim to make about a piece of literature: what did he mean?

I also published two novels, both historical novels: the first, *World Elsewhere*, based on a sketchy journal I discovered written by a young man who escaped his debts in France by signing on to Admiral Bougainville's voyage around the world in 1767, in the course of which the French "discovered" Tahiti, which they took to be a version of Rousseau's perfect first communist society; the other, *The Emperor's Body*, focused on the return in 1840 of Napoleon's body from the island of Saint-Helena, where he was a prisoner of the English from after the battle of Waterloo until his death, to entombment in the Invalides in Paris – a political gesture to appease the restless Bonapartist party, but one that backfired and instead led to another Napoleon becoming emperor eleven years later. Both books had some enthusiastic reviews (though the first also a crucially negative one), but neither had any commercial success. Survival in the world of commercial fiction eludes me.

Once I had played out my contract with Princeton, I found I had no desire to remain there. So I came back to New Haven and very happily became a fellow of the Koerner Center. I published in 2020 a book called *Balzac's Lives*. This was another experiment in doing literary criticism otherwise, trying to make available a novelist I had long read and loved but who had sunk from sight in the English-reading world. I decided simply to tell the life stories of a few of the 2,400 characters Balzac invented and to show how their intertwining creates a remarkably complex and interesting version of society in the wake of the French Revolution and its aftermaths. Then I turned back to some of the questions that occupied me in *Reading for the Plot* to talk about the enormous inflation I saw in the use and valuation of storytelling. "Story" has entered the orbit of political cant (candidates now all have "great stories" in their background; "I love his story," said George W. Bush of one of his cabinet appointees) and corporate branding. Every corporate website now carries a rubric "our story." The media proclaims story everywhere, as if that were the only form of understanding left in our civilization. This mindless proliferation of narrative needs critical attention: to the way stories are told and the way they work on us, their listeners. We need to be skeptical of narratives of "who we are," as a nation as well as individuals. Stories can otherwise too easily turn into myths that claim to explain reality. Such is the subject of *Seduced by Story: The Use and Abuse of Narrative*, published in 2022.

In my restless attempt to make literary study readable, I now have returned to Henry James, writing a pendant to my earlier *Henry James Goes to Paris* to be called *Henry James Comes Home: Rediscovering America in the Gilded Age*, trying to recreate his trip back to his native land in 1904–05, and his critical reaction to what he found there.

Let me say in closing that I have always been interested in the way the field I drifted into, the study of literature and language, intersects with others: not only how literary study can be enriched by other disciplines but also how it in turn can inform work in other fields, including professional disciplines such as law. I believe that the humanities can be, should be, an export commodity. The kind of reading and interpretation we perform is very much needed in other fields. We humanists are often too modest in making our claims on university resources and on public attention. We should not lose faith in the importance of what we do: analysis, critical reading, ethical interpretation. These are more crucial than ever in a world committed to merely instrumental knowledge. Shelley may have overreached in calling poets the unacknowledged legislators of mankind. Nonetheless, poetry, narrative, and the critical thinking they induce are forms of knowledge very much needed in the world.