



Reclaiming the Aesthetic: A Case for Reading Literature as Literature

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<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n4.36>

Abstract:

This paper contends that contemporary critical and theoretical approaches to literary interpretation, while valuable in their own right, have systematically disfigured and displaced the inherent aesthetic core of the literary text. Through an analysis of the hermeneutic proliferation that has characterised literary studies, particularly from the second half of the twentieth century, this paper argues that interpretation has increasingly become a mechanism of appropriation rather than a mode of engagement. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from Derrida, Sontag, Rosenblatt, Iser, and Kolaiti, and utilising a culinary metaphor as an illustrative analogy, this paper examines how the organic wholeness of the literary work is lost through analytical dissection. The paper further explores the historical reception of Shakespeare's plays, particularly *King Lear*, as a case study in the transformation of interpretive practices across centuries. Ultimately, this paper calls for a recovery of the aesthetic dimension of reading, advocating for an approach that prioritises lived experience, emotional engagement, and what Roman Jakobson termed "literariness" over mechanical signification and theoretical appropriation.

Keywords: Aesthetic Value, Literariness, Hermeneutics, Interpretive Theory, Reader Response.

Article History: Submitted-19/07/2026, Revised-30/07/2026, Accepted-07/08/2026, Published-31/08/2026.

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1. Introduction

In the ever-shifting landscape of literary studies, where a multitude of critical and theoretical frameworks vie for interpretive dominance, it is often the very aesthetic core of the literary text that bears the heaviest burden. Contemporary critical discourse, in its relentless pursuit of ideological and methodological appropriation, frequently engages in a practice that not only neglects but actively distorts, disfigures, and displaces textual aestheticism. Rather than encouraging a reading that is felt, lived, and intimately experienced—what Susan Sontag famously championed as an "erotics of art" over hermeneutic suspicion—such discourses privilege a largely superfluous mode of analytical dissection, forcing the text into a Procrustean bed of prefabricated theoretical parameters (Sontag 14). Harold Bloom would argue that such coercive readings are less about the work itself and more about the critic's anxious appropriation of it (Bloom 4). This transformation in the very ethos of textual interpretation—from an act of immersive engagement to one of clinical diagnosis—necessitates, as this paper contends, a profound and urgent re-evaluation of our interpretive methodologies, an appeal echoed by Eugene Goodheart's lament over the "demise of the aesthetic" in modern scholarship (Goodheart 141) and Paolo Euron's call for a renewed phenomenological encounter with the literary object (Euron 22). The critical imperative, therefore, is to re-centre the interpretative act on the inherent textual aesthetic, that which constitutes its fundamental "literariness"—a term codified by Roman Jakobson to distinguish the poetic function of language from its merely communicative utility (Jakobson 22). We must resist the temptation to disembowel the text through arid, reductive analyses that systematically rob it of its aesthetic vitality, for as Peter Lamarque cautions, reducing narrative to mere propositional content obliterates its distinctive cognitive and affective power (Lamarque 58).

As Washington Morales Maciel affirms, it is precisely within the undecidable richness of aesthetic reading that genuine literary value resides (Morales Maciel 252).

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature, tracing the proliferation of interpretive frameworks from New Criticism to post-structuralism and beyond, while engaging with key theoretical voices including Barthes, Sontag, Iser, Rosenblatt, and Kolaiti. Section 3 establishes the Derridean theoretical framework, examining how the pursuit of the "transcendental signified" has propelled interpretation into an endless spiral that ultimately dissolves the text's aesthetic integrity. Section 4 offers a culinary analogy drawn from lived experience—the dismemberment of a sheep in preparation for a feast—as a metaphor for what befalls the literary text under critical dissection. Section 5 examines the historical reception of Shakespeare's *King Lear* across centuries as a case study in the transformation of interpretive practices, from Johnson's moral criticism to the Romantics' aesthetic readings to the theoretical appropriations of the modern era. Section 6 analyses the eclipse of the aesthetic in contemporary criticism, using Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as an illustrative example of how critical commentary can obscure the text's literary fabric. Finally, Section 7 advances the case for aesthetic recovery, advocating for a hermeneutics of recovery that prioritises lived experience, emotional engagement, and the reader's immersive encounter with the text over mechanical signification and theoretical appropriation. The paper concludes in Section 8 with a reaffirmation of the urgency and necessity of reading literature as the artistic creation.

2. Literature Review

The theoretical landscape of literary studies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been characterised by a remarkable proliferation of interpretive frameworks, each offering its own lens through which to read and understand the literary text. This proliferation, however, has come at a

high cost. The critical traditions that emerged—New Criticism, structuralism, post-structuralism, new historicism, cultural materialism, gender studies, psychoanalysis, and post-colonialism—each brought its own interpretive apparatus, often treating the text less as an aesthetic object and more as a site for ideological excavation (McDonald xix-xx; Taylor 4-6). Roland Barthes's proclamation of the "death of the author" in 1967 further accelerated this process by radically divorcing the text from any stable origin, thereby liberating interpretation from authorial intention but simultaneously subjecting the text to ever more elaborate hermeneutic operations (Barthes 147). Susan Sontag, writing in the same decade, diagnosed this condition with prophetic urgency, arguing that the modern style of interpretation had become actively harmful—enforcing fallacious, complicated "readings" that seem to engulf an artwork to the extent that analysis of content begins to degrade and destroy it (Sontag 7).

The reader-response theory that began to take hold in the 1960s, significantly influenced by phenomenological approaches, sought to restore the reader to a position of centrality in the meaning-making process (Rosenblatt 25; Iser 14). Yet even this ostensibly reader-centred turn was quickly absorbed into the larger theoretical machinery, becoming yet another lens through which the text could be analysed rather than an invitation to genuine aesthetic immersion (Rosenblatt 25; Iser 15). Wolfgang Iser's concept of the text as a "virtual space" that comes into being only in the reader's consciousness represented a significant advance in our understanding of the reading process (Iser 14). Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory similarly emphasised the irreducibly aesthetic and personal nature of the reading encounter, insisting that "a poem is what the reader lives through under the guidance of the text" (Rosenblatt 25). Yet these insights were increasingly marginalised as more aggressive theoretical frameworks came to dominate academic discourse.

Patricia Kolaiti, in *The Limits of Expression*, identifies the dominant tendency in contemporary literary studies as "interpretationalism"—"the reduction of literary study to interpretation, resulting from a tendency to treat the experiential aspect of literature and art as subordinate to, and ultimately at the service of, its conceptual content" (Kolaiti 76). Under interpretationalism, artworks and literary texts are treated as "ostensive stimuli," objects ultimately designed to achieve effects at the conceptual level by communicating meanings, by being interpreted and understood (Kolaiti 76). The implicit assumption is that the primary, if not sole, function of literature is to convey meaning—and that the critic's task is to excavate, decode, and articulate that meaning. The consequence, as Kolaiti warns, is that "the aesthetic and the experiential dimensions of literature" become "peripheral, secondary, or even irrelevant" to the critical enterprise (Kolaiti 78).

3. Theoretical Framework: Derrida and the Hermeneutic Spiral

Though it is likely that the hermeneutic process in literature may stretch inevitably deeper in search of the elusive transcendental signified, this very stretching has actually led to the aesthetic dissolution of the text to the point where complex interpretative influence weighs down the original text to insignificance. Derrida's concept of the "transcendental signified" refers to a signified that transcends all signifiers, a meaning that transcends all signs—a stable, permanent centre that would guarantee the closure and stability of any structure (Literariness.org). Yet Derrida's entire philosophical project is devoted to demonstrating that no such transcendental signified exists or could exist; as he argues in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," "the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification infinitely" (Derrida 280). Every signified may turn into a signifier, so that no closure of meaning is possible—there is no transcendental or final signified (Grant 8-9). Signification, founded on

differences and constantly undermined by deferral, is an effect of *différance*, the inescapable lack conditioning the self-differing of language from itself (Grant 9-11). Meaning, in this Derridean framework, is always deferred, always dependent on context, always shifting through difference; it can never be fully present to itself.

The hermeneutic enterprise, once liberated from the tyranny of a single, stable meaning, thus finds itself propelled into an endless spiral of interpretation—each reading generating further readings, each signifier pointing to another signifier in an infinite chain of signification. What began as a philosophical critique of metaphysical presence has, in the hands of literary critics, become a license for interpretive proliferation that knows no bounds. Yet paradoxically, this very proliferation—this endless stretching of the hermeneutic process in pursuit of a meaning that can never be finally attained—has resulted not in deeper understanding but in the aesthetic dissolution of the text itself. The text, weighed down by the accumulated mass of interpretations, theoretical frameworks, and ideological readings, gradually recedes into insignificance; it becomes merely the occasion for critical performance rather than the object of aesthetic encounter.

4. The Culinary Analogy: Dismemberment and Transformation

This theoretical predicament may be illuminated through a culinary analogy drawn from lived experience. At a close relative's wedding, knowing the *waza*, a celebrated local cook, I positioned myself beside him at the *wuru*, the wood-fire station where the feast was being conjured. There, the *waza* and his men had tethered a magnificent sheep—fat, long-curved horns, perfect form—bound with rope and laid upon the earth. Within an hour, the living creature lay dismembered in pieces across wooden pallets; some men hewing it further, others pounding the flesh repeatedly with short-handled wooden tenderisers (*gowhpore*). Throughout this methodical butchery, the men conversed animatedly about the cuts, their quality, taste, and the dishes they would

become: *rista*, *gushtab*, *kabab*, *tabak maaz*, *rogan josh*, and *qarma*—each a transformation of the original into something else entirely. The sheep, as an integral being, was lost; its organic wholeness effaced. I imagined the feast-day crowd feeding upon these creations, discussing taste and experience, yet nowhere did the original sheep, in its living integrity, appear. It had been utterly obliterated through the very processes meant to celebrate and consume it.

This culinary dismemberment offers an exacting metaphor for what befalls the literary text under the scalpel of critical evaluation. Just as the *waza* reduces the living sheep to culinary fragments, each piece valued not for its participation in a living whole but for its utility in a prescribed dish, so too does contemporary criticism dismember the literary work, reducing its organic unity to a collection of analysable parts. The critic, like the butcher, operates with professional precision. Yet in doing so, the wholeness of the text is irrevocably lost. It is precisely this organic integrity where, as Frederick William Roe observes, "the final beauty of a poem, its permanent message or meaning, resides" (Roe 12). Without this organic unity, as Roe continues, "literature is dead, a lifeless bundle of fragments" (Roe 12). The readership community, like the feast-goers in my imagination, is served transformed products, interpretations, ideological readings, and theoretical appropriations, but is systematically disconnected from the original text in its aesthetic integrity. Ihab Hassan, in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, employs a similar metaphor to diagnose "a radical crisis in art and language, culture and consciousness," wherein the modern critic, like the dismembering Orpheus, "sings on a lyre without strings" (Hassan 25). The text is dismembered, its aesthetic body torn apart, and what remains is not the living work but the critic's own theoretical feast. The parallel is exact; just as the sheep's living essence is lost in the transformation to *rista* and *rogan josh*, so too is the literary text's aesthetic soul sacrificed upon the altar of analytical method. The reading public, meanwhile, is left to consume interpretations that,

however sophisticated, have little to do with the felt, lived experience of the text itself. For as Louise Rosenblatt reminds us, "a poem is what the reader lives through under the guidance of the text" (Rosenblatt 25), and what cannot be lived through cannot, in any meaningful sense, be said to have been read at all.

5. The Transformation of Interpretive Practices

Mainly in the field of literary and critical studies, analytical methods for textual interpretation have multiplied with an almost aggressive fervour. Though interpretation remains indispensable to any text, its exponential growth and the concomitant control it has asserted over the text have progressively dwarfed the aesthetic significance of the literary work itself. This phenomenon became particularly pronounced from the second half of the twentieth century onward, with the advent of highly unconventional and often subversive theoretical interventions. As Russ McDonald observes in his anthology of post-war Shakespeare criticism, the period from 1945 to 2000 witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of theoretical positions, methodologies, and modes of argument that fundamentally reshaped the critical landscape (McDonald xix). The consequence, as this paper contends, has been a progressive estrangement between the text, its readers, and the interpretations that purport to mediate between them—a distance that has only widened with each successive theoretical wave.

This estrangement is nowhere more vividly illustrated than in the reception history of Shakespeare's plays across the centuries. Consider, for instance, the case of *King Lear*. The play's critical and theatrical fortunes have undergone such radical transformations that each era has effectively produced its own Lear, often bearing only a distant resemblance to what earlier audiences encountered. In the seventeenth century, Shakespeare's original tragedy was performed in its unaltered form, though it gradually fell out of favour with Restoration audiences who found

its unrelenting bleakness difficult to stomach. The eighteenth century witnessed what is perhaps the most dramatic act of interpretive violence ever perpetrated upon a Shakespearean text: Nahum Tate's infamous 1681 adaptation, which supplied *King Lear* with a happy ending, restoring Cordelia to life and marrying her to Edgar. So popular was Tate's version that it established itself as a stock play in the early eighteenth century; it was Tate's *King Lear* that David Garrick took up in 1742 and made into his greatest role, and by the time Garrick retired in 1776, it was one of the acknowledged mountain peaks of the English repertoire (Foakes 45). Samuel Johnson, in his 1765 *Preface to Shakespeare*, famously approved of Tate's happy ending on the grounds that the death of Cordelia was "contrary to the natural ideas of justice" and too painful for audiences to bear (Johnson qtd. in Foakes 52). Johnson's judgment, however morally motivated, at least sprang from a concern with the audience's emotional and aesthetic experience—a desire to preserve what he called the "appeal open from criticism to nature" (Johnson xiv).

The Romantic critics of the early nineteenth century, by contrast, rejected Tate's adaptation with equal fervour. Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge insisted that *King Lear* was essentially unperformable and that its true power could only be experienced through reading. They saw themselves as recuperating *King Lear* as a reading text from the approval by Dr Johnson of the happy ending, and they shifted the critical focus decisively toward psychological depth and character interiority (Foakes 46). Coleridge, in particular, brought to his Shakespeare criticism a new organic aesthetics that emphasised the organic unity of the literary work, treating each play as a living whole rather than a collection of parts to be dissected (Badawi 15; read.nlc.cn). The Romantics valued *King Lear* for its internal, individual conflict, reflecting the strong contemporary emphasis on inner struggles and character (Rosenberg 179). By the mid-nineteenth century, *Hamlet* had begun its ascent to the status of the quintessentially modern

tragedy, its protagonist celebrated as the embodiment of introspective consciousness (Sen 33-34). Throughout these centuries—from Johnson's moral criticism to the Romantics' aesthetic and psychological readings—the reader and audience remained at the centre of the interpretive enterprise. Criticism served, however imperfectly, to mediate between the text and its reception, but it did not, as a rule, seek to displace the text itself or to subordinate aesthetic experience to theoretical allegiance.

What has been lost in the contemporary critical landscape, this paper argues, is precisely the collective reader response to a literary text that characterised preceding centuries—an era when readers approached the text simply as a text, and not as a commentary on a particular theme or ideology in alignment with fashionable theoretical approaches. As early as the first part of the seventeenth century, readers of Shakespeare were sensitive to well-constructed plots, interested in characters and the expression of emotions, and formulated critical and aesthetic comments on his works (Mayer 12). This tradition of engaged, responsive reading—what might be called a poetics of reception—sustained Shakespeare's reputation across the centuries. The readers of earlier ages would, therefore, appreciate the aesthetic and literary values of the text in the first place, leading to what Aristotle termed a desirable catharsis among the reading and viewing public. Catharsis, that most intractable question in aesthetics, remains the fundamental measure of a tragedy's power—the release of emotion that constitutes the very purpose of dramatic art (Birney 11-12). When interpretation becomes an end in itself, when the text serves merely as raw material for theoretical demonstration, that cathartic experience is foreclosed. The reader is no longer invited to live through the text, in Louise Rosenblatt's memorable phrase, but rather to decode it, to appropriate it, to dismember it in the service of a critical agenda that has little to do with the work's aesthetic vitality.

6. The Eclipse of the Aesthetic in Contemporary Criticism

What is common in academia now is that when a professor of literature or an expert speaks on a literary text, he or she prefers to talk about the structural, thematic, topical, or symbolic aspects of the text rather than the aesthetic, narrative, and elements of literariness of the text. The reader or interpreter searches more for what the text teaches, where it addresses the reader's problems or their condition, rather than finding where the text pleases, where the sublime resides, where the ordinary looks pleasantly extraordinary. This is where the literariness of the text is traded for the more mechanical signification of the text. Kolaiti identifies this tendency as "interpretationalism"—"the reduction of literary study to interpretation, resulting from a tendency to treat the experiential aspect of literature and art as subordinate to, and ultimately at the service of, its conceptual content" (Kolaiti 76). The implicit assumption is that the primary, if not sole, function of literature is to convey meaning—and that the critic's task is to excavate, decode, and articulate that meaning. What is lost in this transaction is precisely the aesthetic dimension: the felt experience of reading, the sensory and emotional engagement with language, the pleasure of form, the sublimity of style. As Kolaiti argues, it is only by focusing on aesthetic achievement that we might "get an idea of the complex psychological and sensory states underlying" the literary encounter (Kolaiti 76). The reduction of literature to its conceptual content—to what it teaches rather than what it does—is a fundamental betrayal of the literary work's essential nature.

Consider Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* as a case in point. The novel, first published in 1927, has generated an immense body of critical commentary over nearly a century—fourteen far-ranging analyses in a single modern study alone address its characterisations, view of time, form and structure, and approach to sexuality (Vogler 5). Contemporary reviews and modern research alike have subjected the novel to every conceivable theoretical lens: psychoanalytic

readings that mine the text for Oedipal dramas and maternal ambivalence; feminist critiques that examine the novel's representation of gender and domesticity; modernist studies that focus on its formal innovations and narrative technique; post-structuralist analyses that deconstruct its language and expose its instabilities; and cultural materialist readings that situate it within the ideological formations of interwar Britain (Homans; Pease). Each of these approaches has its validity, its insights, its contributions to our understanding. Yet what has been progressively obscured in this avalanche of interpretation is the novel's aesthetic fabric—the quality of its prose, the rhythm of its sentences, the texture of its imagery, the affective power of its rendering of consciousness. Where, in all this critical apparatus, is the reader's experience of Woolf's luminous prose? Where is the sensory immersion in her rendering of the Hebrides landscape, the emotional resonance of Mrs. Ramsay's character, the formal beauty of the novel's tripartite structure? These are the elements that constitute the novel's "literariness"—what Roman Jakobson identified as the poetic function of language, that which distinguishes the literary from the merely communicative (Jakobson 22). Yet in the contemporary critical landscape, such aesthetic considerations are often dismissed as naïve, as insufficiently theoretical, as belonging to an outdated humanism that criticism has long since superseded. The result, as Susan Sontag famously warned, is that "the modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys"; it enforces fallacious, complicated "readings" that seem to engulf an artwork to the extent that "analysis of content begins to degrade and destroy" it (Sontag 7). In place of aesthetic engagement, we have mechanical signification; in place of lived experience, we have conceptual extraction. The literariness of the text is traded for its utility as a vehicle for theoretical demonstration.

7. The Case for Aesthetic Recovery

Given the above transformation in the approaches to interpretation of a literary text, it can be asserted with conviction that there exists a profound and urgent need to read literature as literature, to encounter it on its own terms, to accept it as it offers itself to the reader, and to live its aesthetic wholeness without the mediation of external theoretical apparatuses. The excitement that quickens the pulse, the pain that constricts the heart, the rush of emotion that overwhelms the senses, the curiosity that propels the reader forward through the narrative's unfolding—these are not incidental byproducts of the reading experience but its very substance and essence. The perfect language that gives voice to what readers have sought for ages, the ambiguity that invites multiple interpretations without demanding a single resolution, the strange turns and twists that surprise and unsettle, the wit that sparkles with intelligence, the irony that cuts with subtle precision, the symbolic that resonates with hidden depths—all of these, together with those small, almost imperceptible moments that place an unconscious smile upon the reader's face or summon an expression of quiet sadness, are not meant to be appropriated in light of any theoretical approach. As Rosenblatt profoundly observed, literature is a "lived-through" experience; the literary work is constituted in the "transaction" between reader and text, and this transaction is irreducibly aesthetic, emotional, and personal (Rosenblatt 25; Rosenblatt 32). The text, as Iser argued, is not a fixed object but a "virtual space" that comes into being only in the reader's consciousness, a space where the reader "shapes" the meaning through an active, creative engagement that is fundamentally experiential rather than analytical (Iser 14; Iser 24). It is in this shaping—this slow, organic process by which the text gradually takes birth in the mind of the reader—that the true life of literature resides.

This process of gradual emergence, of the text taking birth in the reader's consciousness, is precisely what is lost when criticism subordinates the aesthetic to the ideological, the experiential

to the conceptual, the felt to the analysed. The theoretical approaches that have come to dominate academic discourse—from new historicism to cultural materialism, from post-structuralism to post-colonialism, from psychoanalysis to gender studies—each bring their own valuable insights, their own ways of illuminating aspects of the text that might otherwise remain obscure. Yet these insights, as valuable as they are, remain secondary to the primary encounter with the text itself. They are instruments of analysis, not substitutes for experience. To approach *King Lear* primarily as a document of early modern patriarchy, or *To the Lighthouse* predominantly as a meditation on gender and domestic ideology, or *Hamlet* chiefly as a case study in Oedipal psychology, is to read the text for something other than itself. It is to treat the literary work as raw material for theoretical demonstration rather than as an aesthetic object deserving of sustained, immersive engagement. What should be central—the reader's lived encounter with the text's aesthetic and sensory richness—is marginalised or sometimes entirely forgotten.

The recovery of this lived encounter requires a fundamental reorientation of our critical practices, a shift from what might be called a hermeneutics of suspicion to what Paul Ricoeur famously described as a hermeneutics of recovery. While Ricoeur used these terms to distinguish between traditions of interpretation that seek to demystify and those that seek to reappropriate meaning, the distinction is useful for our purposes (Ricoeur 27). The dominant mode of contemporary criticism is predominantly suspicious: it approaches the text with a predetermined set of questions, seeking to expose its hidden ideologies, its unconscious assumptions, its structural instabilities. This mode of reading, however valuable, treats the text as something to be unmasked, something whose apparent meaning conceals a deeper, less palatable truth. What is needed, by contrast, is a hermeneutics of recovery—a mode of reading that approaches the text with openness and receptivity, that seeks to recover the aesthetic richness of the work, that allows the text to speak

on its own terms rather than compelling it to answer questions it was never asked. This is not to suggest that theoretical approaches have no value, or that texts exist in a vacuum, innocent of ideology and politics. On the contrary, the critical tools developed over the past century have enormously enriched our understanding of literature's relationship to history, society, and the unconscious. But these tools should be instruments of understanding, not substitutes for experience. They should enhance our appreciation of the text's aesthetic wholeness, not replace it with something else entirely. The text, fundamentally, should be read for the aesthetic and experiential richness it offers, not for what is forced upon it from without. The theoretical has its place, but that place is of secondary significance; it serves the primary experience, not the other way around.

8. Conclusion

The recovery of the aesthetic is, in the final analysis, a recovery of what makes literature literature—that quality of literariness that distinguishes the poetic from the merely communicative, the literary from the merely informational. It is the recovery of the reader's right to encounter the text with all the senses, with all the emotions, with all the complexity of a fully human response. It is the recovery of the pleasure, the pain, the excitement, and the sadness that literature has always offered its readers across centuries and cultures. As the Romantic critics understood, and as the New Critics reaffirmed, the literary work is an organic whole, a unity of form and content that cannot be reduced to its themes, its politics, or its ideologies without doing violence to its essential nature. Coleridge's insistence on the organic unity of the literary work, his sense that the poem is a living whole whose parts are interdependent and mutually constitutive, remains as relevant today as it was in the early nineteenth century (Badawi 15). The New Critics' emphasis on close reading, on the primacy of the text itself, was an attempt to recover this organic unity from the extrinsic

concerns that had come to dominate criticism. Yet even the New Criticism, in its own way, became a method—a set of procedures and techniques that could be applied mechanically to any text. What is needed today is not a new method but a new orientation, a new disposition toward the text—a willingness to read with the whole self, to risk the vulnerability of genuine aesthetic engagement, to allow the text to work its magic on us without immediately subjecting it to the dissecting instruments of theory. This is the task to which this paper has been committed: the recovery of the aesthetic, the restoration of literariness, the reclamation of the reader's lived encounter with the text. For without this recovery, literature is reduced to mere data, mere raw material for the machinery of criticism. With it, literature becomes once again what it has always been: a source of delight, of insight, of transformation—a living presence in the reader's consciousness, a voice that speaks across the ages to the deepest truths of human experience.

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