

IN DEFENCE OF LITERATURE,  
OR THE MIRACLE OF SAINT ROCH

*(For S. P.)*



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ON SOME DAYS, the literary fundamentalist inside me yearns for an absolute ban on reading all forms of literature altogether – epic poems, dramas, novels, novellas, short stories, lyrical poems, biographies, autobiographies. The ban, of course, extends to us, college professors in the humanities, those who make a living by prescribing to the future minds of our nation that they should read this and read that.

As you may well imagine, this idea is a product of my agony from reading too many student papers – their morally correct opinions and binary judgements derived from imaginative texts have been tormenting me. Furthermore, students are always hunting for authorial intentions, as if these things make clear the *right* answers. Authorial intentions, to hell with them. Perhaps ... I must admit grudgingly ... literature has moralised to some extent from the beginning. Proselytisers have forever been thrusting mind-nurturing books against poor pupils' chests. These books are supposed to be life lessons written by masters. But is it our role, at the school of letters, to squeeze the moral essence out of works of literature? If it takes four years of extensive and intensive close reading to figure out what a certain writer meant, might that imply that the writer didn't actually know how to write well? If the world, including the students themselves, assumes that this is what college students are up to in their full-time education – downloading the message the writer is trying to get across – it is no wonder politicians and bureaucrats regard the humanities as a waste of time and money. If this is really the purpose of reading at college, I would not send my child (if I had one) to college to study literature. I would try to persuade her to learn cabinetmaking or gardening.

Hence my ban on reading.