Afterword

In his magnificent novel *Dr. Zhivago*, as translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Boris Pasternak writes, in the voice of his title character, “And to me art has never seemed a subject or an aspect of form, but rather a mysterious and hidden part of content….Works speak through many things: themes, situations, plots heroes. But most of all they speak through the art contained in them” (334-335). Readers and teachers should pay attention to these words. Too often, particularly in teaching, we ignore questions of artistry. Perhaps the reasons are understandable. It is, for instance, almost impossible to teach artistry. You can point out how well characters are described, how well the language is used, how intriguing structure may be, and all those other factors that make up artistry, but people can only learn about artistry by being exposed to it, by living with it. The other factor, of course, is that we cannot test a student’s perception of artistry with a multiple-choice question:

Dorothea Brooke is an artistically drawn character because

1. a.) she likes painting
2. b.) she has pretty hair
3. c.) she dresses well
4. d.) she is described in life-like terms that make us feel as though we have come to know on a personal basis someone whose experiences we can share and learn from (and so on)

It just won’t work, and if we can’t test things, and if we can’t test them in standardized ways so that we can report the scores and prove that we are doing our jobs, well, then we’ll just ignore them. We can, of course, have students write about such issues, thereby encouraging them to think about such ideas, but essays take time to read and consider, and the scoring cannot be standardized, so the system works against such methods.

Furthermore, reading literature seriously often means seeing that what it says is subversive, that is, that it undercuts accepted truths. If The *Iliad* truly is, as I presented it, an anti-war poem, it went against some basic principles of the society in which it developed. It goes against some of the basic principles that people in our society still hold. If *Pride and Prejudice* contrasts a part of society that values things and another part that values people, then Jane Austen is undercuts a basic principle of her society, and of ours. These are, certainly, superficial examples, but they indicate what I mean. Reading literature means challenging oneself, one’s beliefs, one’s actions. These are vital issues that human beings must consider to prevent themselves from becoming dehumanized and from becoming dehumanizers.

And finally, at least for purposes of this book, literature teaches us how to read—how to read books, how to read people, how to read situations, how to read the world. These are basic skills. Again, I don’t know how we can test them, but I find over and over that when I present these skills, as well as artistry, as well as the subversive nature of literature, in class, students respond. Literature becomes not just another school subject, another hurdle on the way to their degrees. It becomes something important to their lives. I have no way of knowing if my students continue to read literature after they graduate. I hope they do. But at least they know that they can read it, that they can benefit from it, and that they can enjoy it. Like Virgil in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, all the teacher can do is point the way. Dante, the student, has to be willing to go where the teacher points—and then go even further.