THE LOOK OF DISTANCE
I • Introduction

This book is an effort to talk about some matters that have deeply concerned me for nearly a lifetime of reading and teaching, and to do so in a way that will not do violence either to the kinds of experiences I talk about or to the nature of my engagement with them. In general, there is a disturbing gap between the conventional modes of discourse about literature and literature itself. When the subject is suffering and sympathy, that distance seems not only uncomfortable but indecent. My own engagement has been largely in the form of a debate with myself—about particular literary works, particular characters, and particular issues—and my deepest effort as a teacher has been to persuade my students to take part in that same debate rather than to sell them a thesis or survey a body of material. Inevitably, it seems to me now, the book has taken on a similar form.

Put most broadly, the debate is about whether the reading and teaching of literature can be decent occupations in a universe so much ordered by suffering as this one and about the appropriateness of various responses to suffering—by authors, fictional characters, and readers, including the readers of this book. Put more personally, it is about whether in my reading and teaching I am performing something ugly, voyeuristic, and evasive or am doing one of the best and least harmful things I know how to do. Subordinate questions have to do with the relative merits of too much compassion as against too little; with the relations between compassion and self-crucifixion; with the appropriate distances between humans, between humans and other animals, and even between gods and men; with the possibilities of human connection and the curious ways people have found to remain simultaneously together and apart; and with what might be called “moral aerodynamics”: the motions of highfliers like Icarus, Jesus, Vittorio Mussolini, and Joyce, and the impacts of all sorts of things—from boys to bombs to violets—that can fall from the sky. As may be evident already, it is a debate
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about tones as well as ideas and feelings, for suffering is not adequately acknowledged by solemnity alone.

Obviously these are not questions that are subject to answers or even ones that yield much light when approached directly. What light this book does provide is generated chiefly, I believe, from the motions of its own flight, its moment-to-moment journey through and above the landscapes (and seascapes) it crosses, rather than a place it arrives at. And I urge my readers to attend not only to the human inhabitants we encounter but to the various birds, animals, and flowers as well, especially to their use and misuse, whether it be Zeus's use of a swan to rape Leda, Conrad's use of the horse that Stevie Verloc wishes to take to bed with him, William Carlos William's use of an injured dog for singing away his pain, my own use of eagles, deer, and roses, as I seek to hold my book together and to conclude it. I hope the reader will not merely observe my debate with myself, which from a distance may seem excessive, but will join in, at which distance it may seem more necessary, even quite urgent. What I am hoping really—and I know it is much to hope—is that my reader will be able to think of what follows more as a poem than a treatise: will read it with something of the kind of moment-to-moment engagement a poem compels; will, as he and she encounter the recurrent characters and images, the shifts in my own tones and distances, and the transactions between sky and earth, trust the resonances as much as the reasons, the modulations as much as the meanings.

I like to think that despite its essentially ruminative nature the book does accumulate toward something. In my most confident moments, I believe that it accumulates the way a poem accumulates, or even a symphony, and that upon finishing it the reader will experience some sense of comfort or closure along with the lacerations I mean to inflict. In less confident moments, I am content to view the book as a kind of anthology with commentary, in which the things I talk about gain resonance by virtue of the unconventional company they have come to keep. Have come to keep because, for reasons not pertinent here, my reading and teaching have
followed lines in which American and non-American writers, fiction and poetry, old and new, even fiction and reality have not been able to keep their usual distances. There is no question but that this breeds confusions—for me and my reader both—as well as what I hope is illumination. I hope readers will be patient when the light seems more muddy than bright, when they know more about the particular writer or work than I do, and when I have neglected to mention some favorite text of theirs that is relevant to my subject. Indeed, the subject is so pervasive in literature that I imagine it could be explored using an almost entirely different set of texts. I hope, in fact, someone will want to do just that. In defense of my willingness to mix real and fictional characters, I will say here only that my own world is peopled with both; and that although I understand it is frequently important to distinguish between the two, I find they are neither so unlike one another or independent of one another as is often thought.¹

I hope too that the reader will understand that the lengthy summaries and quotations I provide are as much the substance of this book as my own commentary and will allow them their proper weight—which is greater than mine. They are included in part, but only in part, because the works I discuss are such an idiosyncratic selection that few readers can be expected to have read, much less remembered, very many of them, and because the book is to some extent a dialogue between a large number of writers who do not ordinarily speak to one another: a dialogue that I have arranged and participate in but that to be worth much must exist in their languages as well as my own. I hope, therefore, that as he reads about the dilemmas of Major Scobie or Lily Briscoe or Agee's young Richard, for example, or about the ways Mr. Ramsay and his children struggle to remain together and apart, or about the plight of Agee's tenant farmers, or even briefly views a hunted slave or a cholera victim in a Whitman catalogue, my reader will attend to them in the way he might while reading the works in which they appear as well as to what I have to say about them. Except on rare occasions, the quotations and summaries are not included as examples to
prove or illustrate arguments. They are parts of the arguments, their contents part of my contents, and the reader must permit them to be part of his experience of the book. There is more at stake than this, however. I want my readers as much as possible to experience or reexperience the writings in the light of my subject; even more, I want them to become afflicted, at least provisionally, with the compassionate views, however excessive, of some of the characters, to attend with more than customary care to what I shall later term "the Stevies, Miss Lonelyhearts, and Major Scobies of the world and of one's own heart." And to let them remain present while more sensible voices are holding sway. I want them also to witness again, rather than merely to recollect, the terrible ambivalences over separateness and connection that afflict so many of the characters here, to witness again, rather than merely to recollect, the flights, descents, and martyrdoms that must be part of this account. If this is too much to ask so early, I might add that in view of the underprivileged status of literary texts (to say nothing of their contents) in some recent modes of criticism, there is a special need for some of us to work toward their reconstruction.

A few further comments about my hopes and intentions may be helpful to some readers. I did not consciously set out to write a sequel to my With Respect to Readers: Dimensions of Literary Response, a book in which I argued that teaching and criticism should take more account of individual reader’s responses; and I would certainly be disappointed if what follows were to be viewed mainly as the illustration of a theoretical position or as an exercise in what has come to be called reader response criticism (or perhaps the word should be "horrified," to express my dismay at the extent to which such criticism has blacked out the responses of actual readers and become an arena for theoretical controversy—one more darkling plain with "neither joy, nor love, nor light" on which, shall we say, theorists clash with professional delight). I would be content, however, to have it seen in part as an extended offering of one reader’s responses to a number of writings that have engaged his deepest attention; and as such
it may serve as an answer to those who expressed a wish for a fuller and more personal demonstration of the kind of activity I urged in the earlier book. I would be even more content if it is viewed as the exposure of a way of responding to literature, a way that offers the reader some of the freedoms and opportunities afforded by current modes of criticism but without depriving the text of its more traditional powers and integrity. It is a way that enables a reader to exercise his sympathies, allows a story to become (as a colleague put it who read this book in manuscript) "an occasion for coexistence imaginatively with a fictional person's way of feeling"; it allows one to be educated or angered by a text, to let a text speak for one, to quarrel with it or simply to be in awe of it—in short, to respond in all the ways a live individual reader as opposed to a theoretical one might wish to respond to a text. It allows, finally, what I have meant to be true in these pages, the act of reading and writing to be a way of bearing witness, or to use the language of Martin Buber to which I turn at the end, a way of being "attentive" and presenting ourselves with less than our usual armor.

Although I do not want to seduce myself into a lengthy discussion of the present critical scene, I must say a word or two, however insufficient and unfair, about where I think my way fits in. Professional literary study has always been a somewhat armored (not to say combative) activity in which distance, dispassionateness, impersonality, and methodology have been the favored positions—in many classrooms as well as most critical and scholarly books and journals. There are obvious reasons for this, and obvious benefits have come from it. But the losses have also been great, for the very adoption of such postures wards off many gifts that literature offers and blunts many of its powers. Not only its power to move, excite, and trouble its readers but its offering of certain kinds of truth—those imparted by the mysterious and irreducible innards of metaphor and by the moment-to-moment experience of reading—above all, those truths that come into being only when armor and distance are removed or when the reader permits himself to read as nearly as possible with what
Coleridge has called the whole of one's soul. Until the early part of this century, however, there was, I believe, a tacit recognition of this disjunction between the acts of studying and reading and a sense that the study would contribute somehow to fuller readings. I fear that understanding has progressively diminished. For some critics and scholars, as for many social scientists, truth became more nearly equated with what was presumed to be scientific precision. More and more ways were found to classify literary texts or to convert them into instances or examples of something or other—a period, a style, an archetype, a political or sexual stance. The New Criticism and its various descendents rescued texts, and continue to do so, from certain kinds of distortion and emasculation by insisting on their autonomy and examining them carefully and closely. But by viewing them essentially as sets of internal relations or as objects in a network of other literary objects, such criticism also dehumanizes them. When we remove a text, whether explicitly or implicitly, from the context of author and reader, we obscure the fact that whatever the theoretical rationales and whatever the layers of static or disguise, literary works are forms of communication, often quite wonderful ones, between human authors and human readers. And by so doing we help prepare for those current intellectual gymnastics in which all those poems, stories, novels, and plays that have given us so much are only texts, not different presumably from other texts or verbal constructs—graffiti, military manuals, lectures, critical discourse. No different, but apparently better off demystified and deconstructed (deprived of mystery and torn down?) to make sure we will not be tricked into loving or learning from them. Of course we can train ourselves and others to look at literature that way, look at anything that way—love, sex, loyalty, hope, and even cries for help—if we like. We can define a person as a text and erase him, or as a biochemical construct and maybe clone him. Of course we are clever enough to play games at the borderline between sense and nonsense and to dance at the edge of the abyss. We have become clever enough, in fact, to deconstruct the planet, but
why do we have to go on proving it? I am being strident and unfair, I know, and I must confess that some of my nicest and smartest students are fascinated by the poststructuralist scene and have profited from it. I, myself, like, and have learned from, colleagues who are part of it. But I am also very frightened. If we deny to words and literary works their power to move and mystify us; if critics and writers remain infatuated by pronouncements about the fictionality of fiction; if we refuse to let words create fictional worlds for us to respond to as though they were real; if all that lies before us is semiotics and a landscape of texts to decode, what an empty prospect, what a terrible bore. I have had a sense in the past year or so that there is a movement away from such textifying and from other extremes of critical distance and dispassionateness, one that allows a reader to respect (yes, even to "privilege" or submit to) literary texts and in which critics neither muffle their own voices nor use them to despoil, but rather seek to make audible their personal stakes in the writings that engage them. If I am right, though this book was not written for that purpose, I hope it will help swell and shape that tide.

For those who do not like to set out on a journey without a map, I can add here to the Table of Contents that Part One of this work presents and examines the ways a variety of authors and fictional characters respond to sufferings, both great and small, and worries especially about some excesses and insufficiencies of compassion. Part Two looks at the aspect of human behavior perhaps most intimately related to suffering and sympathy—the distances, both physical and psychological, we occupy in relation to one another, and considers a variety of lonely embraces people use to manage their profoundly ambivalent needs for connection and separateness. I argue that such embraces are especially attractive to artists and have much to do with the origin and shape of literary creations. Part Three wonders mainly about various forms of singing about suffering (the ways art makes pain palatable) and about the voyeurisms such singing compels.

The ending of my title—Auden to Agee, Whitman to Woolf—has been somewhat worrisome to me and some
friends and editors: for its improper suggestion that this work might be a survey of all that lies between those writers, as if such were possible, for its seemingly facile assonance and alliteration, and for the awkward length it gives the title. I decided to retain it for several reasons. First, because I hope the pairings will clearly announce my intent to cross between nations and genres and sexes; second, because the four writers have for a long time occupied especially compelling positions in my thinking. Auden and Agee present profoundly though not totally opposed postures toward suffering, and they do quite literally appear at the beginning and ending of this work. Whitman and Woolf are wonderfully different and alike in the ways they embrace the mysteries of separateness and connection, including that final distance, death. Finally, I remain awed by the mysterious way those two central attributes of poetry—assonance and alliteration—can coincide with my own thought and reduce the distance between four so apparently separate men and women.

The opening phrase of my title—The Look of Distance—as many readers will recognize, is drawn from Emily Dickinson's poem "A certain slant of light." I intend the phrase to have all the meanings my reordering of her words have given it, and that set of meanings better than any other sums up the concerns of the book. But the phrasing in her poem and the poem as a whole must also belong to my text.

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons—
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes—

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us—
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are—

None may teach it—Any—
'Tis the Seal Despair—
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the air—
When it comes, the Landscape listens—
Shadows—hold their breath—
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death—²