

Conference Paper

## Living in Change: The Role of Literature in the Preservation of Culture

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I want to thank the organizers of this conference, and especially my friend Dr. Eva Leiliyanti, for this invitation to discuss a topic that is both interestingly complex and close to my heart. Thanks to all of you who have signed on as well; I am sorry that we do not have the opportunity to meet in person, but I am nonetheless grateful for this virtual encounter.

Later on, I will spend some time interrogating and even challenging the three keywords here: “literature,” “preservation,” and “culture,” and I’ll propose a role for literature beyond mere “preservation.” But first, let us explore a few touchstone texts for some of the time-honored ways of *affirming* literature’s role in preserving culture. That way, if you get nothing else from this talk, you’ll at least get to hear a few poems.

Why not, then, begin with the writer commonly recognized as the greatest in the history of Anglophone literature: William Shakespeare. Here is his famous sonnet 55:

Not marble nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,  
But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
Then unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.  
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,  
And broils root out the work of masonry,  
Nor Mars his sword nor war’s quick fire shall burn  
The living record of your memory.  
'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity  
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room  
Even in the eyes of all posterity  
That wear this world out to the ending doom.  
So, till the Judgement that yourself arise,  
You live in this, and dwell in lovers’ eyes.

The first two lines of this poem suggest a sort of competition between two types of artifacts that are the most likely to survive as memorials. The first is physical monuments, such as sculptures and gravestones, or architectural sites such as temples. In ancient Greece and Rome, for instance, these were generally made of the most material of materials, the hardest and most durable, such as granite or the “marble” of Shakespeare’s opening line. The second type of memorial is works made of words, whose survival depends not on the material durability but on the *transmissibility* of the original. Shakespeare claims it is in this type, exemplified by “this powerful rhyme,” that the past will best be kept alive, and the memorialized shall “pace forth,” to “live in this, and dwell in lovers’ eyes.” The “this” that dwells in lovers’ eyes is, literally, the poem, the words on the page—and through them, figuratively, in “the mind’s eye,” the beloved’s face. This poem, then, testifies to and honors its own preservative power as much as it honors the lover.

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*How to cite:*

Byers, T. B. (2023). Living in change: The role of literature in the preservation of culture. *International Conference on Culture, Arts, Languages, Literature and Education*. NST Proceedings. pages 148-154. doi: 10.11594/nstp.2023.3719

Three centuries later, another English poet takes up Shakespeare's theme of the transience of even the most durable materials, in a poem of acute irony at the hubris of humanity and the relentless destructiveness of time. This is Percy Bysshe Shelley's

Ozymandias  
 I met a traveler from an antique land,  
 Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
 Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
 Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;  
 And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
 My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
 Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
 Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
 The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Once again, the transience of even the most durable material is emphasized: of all the great pharaoh's works, only two legs, a shattered visage, and the pedestal of this one sculpture remain. Compare this "shattered visage" to the "living record" in Shakespeare's words. On the other hand, while Shelley powerfully suggests the general futility of memorials to one's glory, the poem actually does preserve Ozymandias, though ironically it is only his *hubris* that lives on, not his achievements. But it is only through language that he is memorialized at all. Only the inscription preserves his name. Moreover, his name is passed down through not one, but four linguistic acts: the inscription; the traveler's tale; the account of that tale given by the poem's speaker; and finally the poem itself, authored by Shelley. Nor does the chain stop here; the poem has survived by being published and republished, read and reread, often taught—and sometimes even learned. We may want to think back to this chain of transmission later, when I get around to discussing the horror movie, *The Ring*. Ultimately, in any case, Shelley's tale of arrogance conquered by time has become embedded, and widely disseminated, in cultural history.

My third example comes from Shelley's contemporary, John Keats. In this one, the poet celebrates a literary encounter's capacity to bring the reader something new and revelatory and epiphanic, and therefore worth preserving.

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer  
 Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,  
 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
 Round many western islands have I been  
 Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
 That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;  
 Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
 When a new planet swims into his ken;  
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
 He stared at the Pacific—and all his men  
 Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

The poem celebrates a powerful immediate experience; yet the trigger of that experience is a mediation: a particular translation (Chapman's) that is the key unlocking a chain of transmission,

from Homer; forward to all the other translators into English known to Keats (Alexander Pope would likely be a prominent one); then to Chapman who historically precedes but to Keats surpasses them; then to Keats himself, who celebrates both Chapman and Homer—and ultimately to Keats’s readers as well. Through Chapman Keats finds Homer and his world, his “western islands” and “deep expanse” of wine-dark sea, preserved in vital form. Keats also preserves Chapman himself, his countryman of more than two centuries prior, who is now far more well-remembered than he would have been without this poem.

Keats’ sonnet is but one (though a particularly famous one), of the many, many markers in literary history of Homer’s ongoingness. Clearly the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are preservers of ancient Greek culture. They are among our earliest artifacts of that culture, and were among the most highly valued by the later Greeks of the ancient world. While they are obviously not purely mimetic or historical, they offer a significant sense of what that culture found important and valuable, and of its idealized models of human being. As much even as the physical spaces that cultures create, their literature conveys a *felt sense* of them to us. Ultimately, and this may be the most important way in which literature preserves culture, literature preserves a culture’s representation of itself to itself, and to posterity: its hopes and fears, its dreams and nightmares; its sense of right and wrong, love and hate; of masculine and feminine, friends and enemies; its imagination of its past and its future. We live in and through the stories we tell ourselves and our successors—and literature is one of the prominent places where such stories are created and worked and shared.

In addition, over time a culture’s changing present responds to its past in a way that preserves and discloses *both* past and present. The history of literature prominently features such responses, not only in the form of translations but also in new tales. Think, for instance, of Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “Ulysses,” which uses Homer’s hero to represent Victorian ideals of the heroic explorer. Or of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, in which the combination of honoring and ironizing *The Odyssey* is one of the chief elements by which Joyce’s novel becomes definitive of high modernism. While we are paused on Joyce’s text, consider also its famous “Oxen of the Sun” chapter 14, which offers a compact history of British literary style, as Joyce writes successively in the manners of (among others) an early Anglo-Saxon bard, Thomas Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*, the King James Bible, Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Samuel Pepys, Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, Addison and Steele, Laurence Stern, and on and on (Gilbert). This chapter is pastiche and parody as a tour-de-force of cultural preservation.

Interest in the Homeric texts and other Trojan war tales persists intensely even in our own young century. Caroline Alexander’s 2015 translation of *The Iliad*, and Emily Wilson’s of *The Odyssey*, published in 2018, were major publishing events, not least because they were the first translations into English published by women. Wilson’s version of *The Iliad* just appeared last month and is being widely and favorably reviewed. In addition, a number of significant novels retelling aspects of the Trojan War have been published and celebrated since the turn of the century. Here are some notable examples: Barry Unsworth, a two-time Booker Prize winner, retold the story of Iphigenia in his 2002 *Songs of the Kings*, in which reviewers such as Hilary Mantel found significant parallels between Euripides’ play and contemporary “wars and rumors of wars.” Dan Simmons’s sci-fi novel *Ilium* is partly about “a race of metahumans living out existence as the pantheon of classic Greek gods. These ‘gods’ have recreated the Trojan War with reconstituted Greeks and Trojans and staffed it with scholars from throughout Earth’s history who observe the events and report on the accuracy of Homer’s *Iliad*” (Amazon review). *Ilium* won the 2004 Locus Award for Best Science Fiction Novel. Past Commonwealth Book Prize winner and Booker Prize finalist David Malouf’s 2009 novel *Ransom* retells books 22-24 of *The Iliad*. Madeline Miller’s 2011 *The Song of Achilles*, which won the Women’s Prize for Fiction, retells *The Iliad* from the point of view of Patroclus. Past Booker Prize winner Pat Barker was a finalist for both the Women’s Prize for Fiction and the Costa Novel Award for *The Silence of the Girls*, her 2018 retelling of *The Iliad* from the point of view of Briseis, the Trojan queen enslaved by Achilles. One of the other Women’s Prize finalists for that year was Madeline Miller’s *Circe*, based on the *Odyssey* and

other mythic texts. Shortlisted for the Women's Prize a year later was Natalie Haynes's *A Thousand Ships*, which retells the Trojan War from multiple female perspectives. I could go on with this, but I think the point is made. Homer lived about 500 years after the Trojan War; about three thousand years from his time, we are in the midst of an explosion of works based on his and other literary preservations of that war. Many of these examples also have the capacity to preserve for *future* readers the whole project of feminist rereading and revision that has been a major component of Anglophile literature in the last half-century. By the way, while my examples are directed mainly to adults, there are also several new entries in the children's and young adult categories. That we continue to transmit these tales to the young is further evidence of their importance as cultural preservation.

The skeptic as to the role of literature in cultural preservation might, however, dismiss all of this evidence with two simple words: "So what?" While this may sound flippant, it is actually a serious question, opening up a range of challenges. As literature teachers, we all know that, despite the lip-service paid to it, literature matters very little to most people. Its readership in the English-speaking world is quite small compared to the audience for popular media, and the money made by literature, though not insignificant, is miniscule in comparison to that raked in by popular media blockbusters.

In my world, the smallest literary audience is for poetry. A solid run for a first printing of a book of poems is around 1,200 copies in a country of 340,000,000 people. Even the press runs of works by the most visible and successful poets are remarkably low. Here's one example: Graywolf Press, one of the most successful of the independent literary presses, had a big score with Diane Seuss's 2021 book, *frank: sonnets*, which won two of the three most visible annual awards for poetry: the Pulitzer Prize and the National Books Critics' Circle Award. In answer to my query, Mattan Comay of Graywolf kindly sent me information about this book's print runs to date. In the two years since it was first published, the book has had five printings, totaling 21,500 copies, and has sold an estimated 2,000 more through print-on-demand programs. Now, 23,500 copies is a *lot* for a book of poems, as befits the honors the book has received. We should note, however, that all but 9,000 of these copies came after the award of the Pulitzer (thus indicating the importance of this prize). Meanwhile, for the sake of comparison, the movie *Saw X*, the tenth entry in a bloody horror franchise, took in \$71,000,000 worldwide in two *weeks*. And yet as of that time it was only the eighth most profitable of the ten films in the series (<https://collider.com/saw-x-global-box-office-71-million/>). Whatever role literature may have in preserving culture, it is not a role affirmed by the relative size of its contemporary audience.

How is it, then, that literature persists at all? A certain kind of skeptic would answer that it persists, at least in the US and Europe, as a form of bourgeois cultural capital, propped up by classist traditions and by universities that have, in the words of British Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, "absurdly overrated the importance of 'culture' and fostered a jealously elitist conception of it" (Eagleton 207). Indeed, the very word "literature" is a gatekeeping term whose changeable definition is at any given time determined by cultural elites. Literature is not "the best that has been thought and said," as Matthew Arnold put it, but rather what people of cultural privilege, like Arnold, believe and declare that best to be in their particular moment. Following this line of critique, the "culture" of which Eagleton speaks, and that literature preserves, is not really culture in the anthropological sense summarized by Patricia M. Hudelson as:

The shared set of (implicit and explicit) values, ideas, concepts, and rules of behaviour that allow a social group to function and perpetuate itself ... the dynamic and evolving socially constructed reality that exists in the minds of social group members. It is the 'normative glue' that allows group members to communicate and work effectively together.

Certainly literature is a part of this, but it is a small part.

But the “culture” of which Terry Eagleton speaks is not culture in this broad sense, but is rather what is often called “high culture,” the culture of the “cultured” as opposed to the “uncultured” person (note how this distinction is meaningless under the anthropological definition of culture since there is no person without culture by that definition). “High culture” is defined by the Oxford Reference website as “‘Authentic’ works of art and individual creativity and the aesthetic pleasures associated with their appreciation which require the demonstration of taste, discrimination, and sophistication derived from and contributing to the cultural capital of an elite as distinct from the ‘mere entertainment’ values associated with popular (mass) culture, commercial commodification and uncritical consumption” (Oxford Reference). Here “culture” is clearly not an anthropological so much as a value term, and an embattled one at that. Even as one who profoundly loves literature, I don’t think I could have felt good about devoting my professional life to it if it were only cultural capital for an elite. But as teachers of it, we must face up to the fact that this is indeed part of what literature is, and we have to work that much harder to try to show why literature is not just a bourgeois hobby or a form of conspicuous consumption. We have to balance its status as the property of an educated elite with a commitment to its powers of cultural critique and its democratizing potential, as in Walt Whitman’s inclusion, in his “barbaric yawp,” of those excluded from polite society. This inclusiveness is, to me, essential for the health of Anglo-American literary history. Happily, in our time there have been radical changes both in who is writing the most celebrated literature and in what it is about. Much of Anglophile contemporary literature these days, including much of what wins the highest prizes and gets into the literature syllabi, is work of anti-racist, feminist, and decolonizing dispositions, and focuses on giving voice to those previously excluded by high culture. Time does not permit me to elaborate on this, but if you are interested simply look up the winners and finalists for the major US and UK literary prizes in, say, the past five years.

The vitality of this new writing speaks to my problem with the term “preservation.” Often we preserve something that has already died: we preserve organs in formaldehyde, or fruit in a jar with sugar and acid. “Pickling” is a form of preserving. But I want to think of literature as more than pickles, and more than preservation. I want to think of it as vital, as part of the pulsing life of culture. To that end, I will now propose a reading of one of the “classics” of American literature as a parable of literary life and death.

Henry James’s novella *Daisy Miller* traces a series of encounters in Europe between the title character, a young woman from a *nouveau riche* American family who is on a grand tour with her mother and brother, and the story’s central consciousness, a somewhat older and more securely upper-class American who now lives in Geneva, Switzerland: Mr. Winterbourne. Daisy is quite a free spirit by the standards of Winterbourne’s very proper social circle, and throughout the story, Winterbourne is frustrated as he tries to read Daisy accurately, so as to determine to what degree her indiscretions with regard to the code of social appearances might be signs of real immorality. The climactic moment of this process, and of the story as a whole, comes one evening when Winterbourne enters the Roman Coliseum to see it by moonlight, and discovers Daisy there, alone with her Italian suitor, Signore Giovanelli. For these two to be there at night and unchaperoned is a violation of the social code so extreme as, for Winterbourne, finally to decide the question of how he is to regard Daisy. The crucial passage reads as follows:

Winterbourne stopped, with a sort of horror, and, it must be added, with a sort of relief. It was as if a sudden illumination had been flashed upon the ambiguity of Daisy’s behavior, and the riddle had become easy to read. She was a young lady whom a gentleman need no longer be at pains to respect....He felt angry with himself that he had bothered so much about the right way of regarding Miss Daisy Miller. Then, as he was going to advance again, he checked himself, not from the fear that he was doing her injustice, but from the sense of the danger of appearing unbecomingly exhilarated by this sudden revulsion from cautious criticism. He turned away towards the entrance of the place, but, as he did so, he heard Daisy speak again.

‘Why, it was Mr. Winterbourne! He saw me, and he cuts me!’ (James 54-55)

In the ensuing conversation, Winterbourne warns Daisy about the danger of contracting Roman fever (malaria), and he advises her to take one of her valet's preventative pills (presumably quinine). But when she tries to exchange pleasantries with him as she has throughout, he makes it clear that their flirtation is at an end and that he disapproves of her. Her reaction to this, as she and Giovanelli leave, is to say "I don't care," . . . in a little strange tone, 'whether I have Roman fever or not.'" And sure enough, she does come down with the dread disease, and shortly dies of it. Apparently, in her dismay at Winterbourne's treatment of her, she has in fact failed to take the valet's pill. If so, it seems that Winterbourne has indeed "cut" Daisy, the innocent flower. Indeed, at the story's end he himself tells his aunt it is "on his conscience that he had done her injustice." The injustice consists of Winterbourne's "sudden revulsion from cautious criticism"—his relief at ceasing to grapple with Daisy's complexity in favor of a rush to harsh judgment. It consists, in short, of a refusal to continue to *read* Daisy, and to interpret her in an ongoing way, as we scholars of literature do to texts. Such a refusal turns out to be, as it were, murderous; it truncates the life of Daisy Miller, two words that name both a person and a book.

I mentioned above that I was reading James's text as a parable: as a story that teaches a moral lesson. And James pushes that lesson even farther—and indeed closer to home. After years of teaching "Daisy Miller," I was delighted when I came up with this interpretation of it. I thought I had finally figured out a conclusive way to prove that my negative view of Winterbourne was right. But I quickly realized that, in my proud pleasure, I had *become* Winterbourne: I was closing the book just as he had done, and had thus become a similarly murderous reader. So, James, who is indeed a moralist, had constructed an ethical trap to teach me a lesson: to show me that the story itself threatens to read me as I read Winterbourne, and as he reads Daisy. Then further, by the way, I realized that "my" critical strategy was not original on my part, but rather was something I had learned from essays by Shoshana Felman on James's "Turn of the Screw" and Barbara Johnson on Melville's "Billy Budd." It was part of a process of reading that I had been doing for years, and that others had done before me.

In sum, the point of "Daisy Miller" as parable is that the foreclosure of reading is on the side of death. If this is so, then we may infer that, according to James, to continue reading is life-sustaining. And here we are back to the proposition that literature is preservative, but only if we understand that literature is not just a text, but a *transaction* between text and reader—or more accurately a series of transactions among the literary text, the reader today, and other prior readers (recall here how Keats's reading of Homer rests on Chapman's prior reading). Once again, as in Shelley's "Ozymandias," a monument made of words, unlike one made of marble, survives not by material durability but by *transmission*.

And this leads me to a few remarks on a text that, at first glance, seems very far from "Daisy Miller"—but at second glance perhaps a bit nearer. I am speaking of one iteration of a tale that exists in several versions: the 2002 US horror film, *The Ring*, directed by Gore Verbinski. It is based on the 1998 Japanese film *Ringu*, directed by Hideo Nakata, which in turn is based on the 1991 novel by Koji Suzuki. Thus there is already a line of transmission here. Briefly, *The Ring* is about a strange video tape whose viewers are cursed to die within a week after they view it. The only way they can save themselves is to make a copy of the tape and give it to someone else who then views it—and who then has a week to repeat the process.

While the tale seems grim, the message is strikingly analogous to that of *Daisy Miller*: here it is only by furthering the circulation of the text that its recipient can live. In *Daisy Miller* it is murderous to stop interpreting; in *The Ring* it is suicidal to stop transmitting. Circulation, like interpretation, is on the side of life—not just of culture's preservation, but of its vitality. Arguably, if a tree falls in the forest and there is no one to hear it, it does not make a sound. More certainly, if a text sits in the library and no one reads it, its telltale heart does not beat.

For those of us who are professional readers and interpreters and, most of all, teachers of literature, it is our job to continue the circulation of the blood of the text. We do not just *pre-serve* literature and culture, but we actively *serve* them, by creating readers. And doing this is on the

side, again, of life. The great US poet William Carlos Williams, who was also a physician who delivered over 1200 babies (a fact I love), said famously:

It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.

Culture as a whole would not die without the institution that we call literature—though it would very likely die without stories. But without literature, culture would be at least somewhat impoverished and spiritually malnourished.

I will end, then, with some summary lines from Dr. Williams's great contemporary, and, as it happens, my favorite of all poets, Wallace Stevens, writing 75 years ago on what artists and writers and readers together contribute to culture, not only to its preservation but to its life:

That's it. The lover writes, the believer hears,  
The poet mumbles and the painter sees,  
Each one, his fated eccentricity,  
As a part, but part, but tenacious particle,  
Of the skeleton of the ether, the total  
Of letters, prophecies, perceptions, clods  
Of color . . . each one  
. . . ever changing, living in change.