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Foucault, Dewey, and the Experience of Literature*

Timothy O’Leary

You should hesitate to change the style of your literature, because you risk everything if you do; the music and literature of a country cannot be altered without major political changes.

—Plato

For all art is a process of making the world a different place in which to live.

—John Dewey

Poetry makes nothing happen.

—W. H. Auden

I

Plato, in his wish to banish the painters and poets from his ideal city, showed a deep concern with what it is that art does. As the above quote shows, he believed its influence was both far-reaching and potentially subversive. Auden’s opposing judgement, on the inability of poetry to do anything, appears in his poem on the death of the Irish poet W. B. Yeats—“Ireland has her madness and her weather still,” he says, “For poetry makes nothing happen.” No matter how different the attitudes of Plato and Auden are, both respond to an important question about the efficacy of art and literature. That question, which I want to address here, is: what can literature do?

In 1934, at the beginning of the rise of fascism in Europe, the French writer André Gide wrote: “For a long time now, works of art will be out

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of the question.” Faced with fascism, Gide thought that literature had no power. Half a century later, Seamus Heaney expressed the same concern. In one of his essays on the nature of poetry, he tries to counter his own fear that “the efficacy of poetry is nil—no lyric has ever stopped a tank” with his belief that its efficacy is “unlimited.” In the face of fascism, then, in the face of tanks, the writer feels powerless. And this is hardly surprising. Maurice Blanchot, in his discussion of the way the modern writer confronts this problem, points out that artistic activity always “proves insufficient at the decisive hours.” For Blanchot, this self-understanding of literature, as ultimately ineffective discourse, is a product of the shift from a premodern culture in which “Painting served the gods, [and] poetry made them speak” to a modern culture in which “action become[s] conscious of itself as the universal requirement” (213). In the face of this modernity, this world of action and agents, the writer is always tempted—fatally—to accept the judgement of action upon the text. “Thus,” Blanchot warns, “faithful to the law of the day, the artist finds himself in a position where not only does he subordinate the artistic work but renounces it and, out of fidelity, renounces himself” (214). This law demands that we give up the idea of the efficacy of poetry, but this is a renunciation that is always made with reluctance.

Thus, the question persists: can we expect that poetry, or literature, or art, should engage in the world of action, the world of doing things? Do we reluctantly accept, with Auden, that poetry makes nothing happen, or do we adopt Heaney’s optimism that poetry might be able to stop tanks? One way of responding to Auden’s pessimism—which I have done elsewhere—would be to show how, in fact, Yeats left Ireland a very different place from the country he was born into; and to show what part the work of the Literary Revival had in those changes. But, on this occasion, I want to focus on the more intimate transformations that literature can effect. This is both easier and more difficult than showing the effect literature has on the social and political plane: easier because the claim of efficacy is much more modest; more difficult because the effect is not so easy to discern. To do this, I will bring together two very different thinkers: John Dewey and Michel Foucault.

We can begin to think about the possible effects literature can have in terms of a series of comments by Foucault about the sort of effect that he wished his works to have. In his late work, Foucault conceptualizes philosophy as a practice that is experimental by virtue of the transformation it effects in the experience of both the writer and his or her audience. He contends that the effect of his own works results from their capacity to paralyze conventional experiences of, for example, social power, sexuality, and ethics by forcing a fundamental refocusing of thought on the contingency of its own history. The kind of book he
wants to write is not what he calls a “truth-book” or a “demonstration-book,” but an “experience-book” (un livre-expérience). Remembering that in French expérience is both experiment and experience, this would be a book that not only conveys the experience of the author, or changes the experience of the reader, but that constitutes both an experiment that the author carries out on him- or herself and an experiment in which the reader too can participate—thus participating in the subjective transformation that the book makes possible. Foucault wants to write books that will lead to a transformation in his own form of subjectivity and also facilitate a similar transformation on the part of his readers. Now what better way could there be of describing the effect we hope literature can have, if not in terms of this play between experiment and experience, a play from which one emerges no longer the same as before? But how can we conceptualize the way this happens in the field of literature? What would it mean, in the first place, to have an experience; and what would it mean to say that our experience is changed; and how would that make it possible, ultimately, to understand transformation in forms of subjectivity?

II

If we turn, firstly, to Dewey’s philosophy of art we find a highly developed answer to the question of the nature of experience; an answer which is, moreover, worked out precisely in relation to the sort of transformation of experience that art makes possible. The distinctive feature of Dewey’s philosophy of art—which is presented in his 1932 lectures *Art as Experience*—is the idea that the aesthetic is continuous with our everyday forms of experience. In other words, art cannot be isolated and confined to a special realm in which we use special faculties such as imagination and creativity to produce and discern objects of beauty. Rather, according to Dewey, art is “a quality of doing and of what is done” (214). In his aesthetics, as in the rest of his philosophy, Dewey was resolutely opposed to hypostatization. Any abstract term, such as *art, mind, or imagination*, which took on the form and solidity of a substantial entity or faculty was open to his criticism. In all such cases he urged us to rethink the concept as an adjective or a verb rather than as a noun. So, in the philosophy of mind, he prioritizes the idiomatic use of *mind*—in which the term is a verb meaning to care or pay attention to something. In aesthetics, he criticizes the way imagination is treated as a special faculty with “mysterious potencies.” Imagination, along with beauty, he says, is the dominant concept in “esthetic writings of enthusiastic ignorance” (267). If we view imagination, however, in the
context of the creation of works of art, we will see, according to Dewey, that it is rather a quality, a way of making and observing things. What Dewey wants us to notice is that the substantive nouns art, imagination, and even beauty get their meaning from the adjectives that qualify the way we engage in certain activities. And the point that these are activities is crucial: “It is no linguistic accident that ‘building,’ ‘construction,’ ‘work,’ designate both a process and its finished product. Without the meaning of the verb that of the noun remains blank” (51). What we must remember is that the work of art engages the activity of both the artist and the audience. And experience, in general, has this same quality: it is not something that simply happens to us, it is not something of which we are merely a passive recipient. It is also a form of activity. In its broadest sense, experience is “a matter of the interaction of organism with its environment” (246).

The central idea here, and the image that Dewey returns to again and again, is that experience is a matter of doing and undergoing. In experience, he says, “the self acts, as well as undergoes, and its undergoings are not impressions stamped upon an inert wax but depend upon the way the organism reacts and responds.” The organism, therefore, “is a force, not a transparency” (246). Every interaction between the human organism and its environment—both natural and social—is constitutive of experience. But not all experience is equal in Dewey’s view. There are experiences that are qualitatively different, and of greater value, because they constitute a unified, whole experience. In other words, it is sometimes a matter of having an experience, rather than just experience. And it is this type of experience that art, among other things, can provide. The living organism is continuously in the midst of a flow of experience; a flow that springs from the constant interaction between the organism and the environment. In general, this flow of experience is inchoate. In contrast with this, we have an experience, Dewey says, when “the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and only then is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess . . . or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience” (35).

There are two characteristic features of this type of experience. Firstly, it combines the seamless flow of successive parts with an increasing distinctness of each part. In other words, it comprises both the unity of an experience and the diversity of a potentially great number of distinct
elements. Secondly, this type of experience is distinctive in its begin-
nings and its endings. In fact, according to Dewey, it does not have a
mere beginning, but an initiation, and not a mere ending, but a con-
cluding or a consummation (40). It is a type of experience, there-
fore, that is situated between the two extremes that dominate much of
our lives. These are, on the one hand, the “humdrum” and the
“slackness of loose ends” that characterize “aimless indulgence” and, on
the other hand, the “tightness” and “rigid abstinence” of “submission to
convention” (40). We have an experience when we navigate between
these two poles, and it is this type of experience that also characterizes
the aesthetic.

If, to use one of Dewey’s examples, playing a game of chess can
constitute an experience because it begins, develops, and is consum-
mated in a certain way, then we can say that reading a poem, listening to
a piece of music, or looking at a painting can do the same. But these
experiences—the experience of an artwork—are different from the
experience of a game of chess, firstly, because of their expressive nature
(an artist has tried to express something through the work) and, secondly,
because of their ability to enter into and modify the experi-
ence of their audience. If experience in the most general sense is a
matter of doing and undergoing, then the experience of works of art is
equally active on the part of the audience. Of course it is possible to be
passive in the face of a work of art, but for Dewey any such experience is
not aesthetic. To have an aesthetic experience is to recreate the work in
one’s own experience. “A new poem,” he writes, “is created by everyone
who reads poetically” (108).

But what exactly does this mean? First of all, Dewey is not just making
the obvious point that the poem will mean something different to
everyone who reads it. And he is not simply, I would say, making the
point Sartre makes in What is Literature?, that the work is only completed
once it has been read by someone other than the writer.11 Dewey himself
does point this out—“the work of art is complete only as it works in the
experience of others than the one who created it” (106)—but the
crucial feature to note here is this idea of the work working in the
experience of others. This is crucial, not only for Dewey’s philosophy of
art, but also for the question I am addressing here—the question of what
works of literature can do to us and in us. Before pursuing this question
further, however, and before returning to Dewey, we need to make a
detour through Foucault’s account of the historical singularity of
experience, in order to get a better idea of the possibilities for its
transformation.
The concept of experience runs through Foucault’s work from his early writings on madness and literature in the 1960s right up to his last lectures and interviews in 1984. The term is occasionally used in a nonaccented way, but more often than not it is given a particular, albeit changing, theoretical significance. In the essays on Georges Bataille and Blanchot, for example, there is discussion of transgression as an experience that is “decisive for our culture” and an attempt to give an account of “the experience of the outside” (an experience that can be conveyed to us through a certain kind of literary language). But the notion of experience itself is not explicitly theorized in these writings. By the time of the publication of the second and third volumes of The History of Sexuality, in 1984, however, Foucault has begun to think of his entire intellectual trajectory as being concerned with experience. I will draw on these later writings in this paper, both because they are more focused on experience per se and also because they form part of an investigation of the kinds of transformation to which experience is subject.

At its most basic level, we might be inclined to think of an experience as a feeling, as a subjective state of mind. For Foucault, however, experience is not purely subjective. In the introduction to The Use of Pleasure, and in the rather different early version of the same text, he gives an account of experience as the effect of a particular arrangement of fields of knowledge, ensembles of rules, and forms of relation to the self. In the books on sexuality, he says, his aim is to analyze sexuality as “an historically singular form of experience,” where experience is understood as “the correlation, within a culture, between domains of knowledge, types of normativity and forms of subjectivity.” In the earlier version of the same text he explains his entire trajectory in these terms. His task, right from the early 1960s, had been to investigate the possibility of thinking “the very historicity of forms of experience.” And even though he admits that in Histoire de la folie (1961) his use of the term was “très flottant,” he nevertheless insists that even back then his focus was a certain “locus of experience”—the experience of madness—and that his aim was to analyze “the genesis of a system of thought, as the matter of possible experiences.” His objective, then, whether in relation to madness, power, or sexuality, has been to give an account of “the historical a priori of a possible experience.”

For Foucault any experience, whether individual or collective, participates in both universal and historically specific forms, and therefore any experience is transformable. Taking again the example of sexuality, he does not deny that there may be universal elements in this experience,
although his method directs him to exercise a “systematic scepticism” about any such anthropological constant. Instead of pursuing the universal, his project leads him to investigate the emergence of historically singular forms of experience. And this process of emergence, as we saw, occurs as a function of the interaction between the three domains of knowledge, normativity, and subjectivity. The first of these domains—or axes—was the focus of his work of the 1960s, the second was the focus in particular of *Discipline and Punish* (1975), while the third axis would be the focus of the late work on the history of sexuality. These studies are all partial, however, as no full analysis of a locus of experience could be given without taking all three into account. Certain forms of experience, then, are historically variable. And their historical singularity rests upon a complex web of practices—both discursive and nondiscursive—which one could characterize as the ever-changing play of “games of truth.” And for Foucault it is through these games of truth that being is, ultimately, “constituted historically as experience; that is, as something that can and must be thought.”

From the idea of historical variability it follows that experience can be modified, and not just over the course of centuries or millennia. Indeed, Foucault’s project is not simply to describe these forms of experience, but to force us to “think otherwise.” His project is to write a *critical* history, a history which would “bring to light transformable singularities,” singularities that could be changed through the work of thought upon itself. Needless to say, this is not a matter of pure introspection or philosophical meditation. Rather, since thought itself is the very form of action—“action insofar as it implies the play of the true and the false”—it follows that transformation can only come about through a practice that combines critical interrogation with forms of experimental action. This is why, in his 1983 lecture “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault characterizes his understanding of critique as “the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.” The most important material for this experimentation, at least in his late work, will be the self. Foucault insists, again and again, that for him the whole point of writing (or reading) his books is to try to “se dépandre de soi-même”—to detach oneself from oneself, or even to “disassemble the self.”

Before considering how this account of experience might be relevant to an understanding of literature, there is one more clarification to make with regard to Foucault’s use of the idea. It would seem that Foucault jumps between two major senses of the term. On the one hand, as we have just seen, there is the relatively precise idea that emerges in the late work. This is a use of the term that makes sense of such phrases as “the modern experience of sexuality” or “the ancient experience of
ethics.” Let us say that this use refers to the ordinary experience of a given historical and cultural milieu. But, on the other hand, there is a use of the term, running throughout his entire work, to denote a form of experience that is, we might say, extraordinary. Hence the use of such phrases as “limit-experience” when discussing his early reading of Nietzsche and Bataille and the idea of a “livre-expérience”—a book which in the fullest sense possible is an experience, a book which changes one’s relation to oneself and the world. And hence, for example, the early version of the preface to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, which ends with the rather enigmatic claim “the pain and the pleasure of the book is to be an experience.”

What is the relation between these two senses of experience: experience as the general form in which being is given to us “as something that can and must be thought,” and experience as that which tears us away from the familiarity of our everyday lives and forces us to enter into a new relation with ourselves? For Foucault the relation between these two phenomena is complex and mutually conditioning. An experience, such as the reading of a certain kind of book, is distinctive in that it intervenes in, and potentially undermines, the general form of experience that is given as its background. It has the power to do this precisely because it constitutes an experience. But the background of ordinary experience is also what makes possible this intervention—since, for example, it is only within a certain historically singular form of experience that a work of literature could have a transformational effect. It might seem, then, that the distinction for Foucault is rather like the one Dewey makes between the general run of inchoate experience and the kind of experience that a work of art—or a game of chess—can convey. The crucial difference, however, is that for Foucault the extra-ordinary experience is an intervention in the conditions that make ordinary experience possible—it is always valorized for its capacity to shake the grounds of our everyday, unthought experience. For Dewey, on the other hand, the idea of an experience does not necessarily carry this value. Even though, as we have seen, there is a conceptualization of the capacity of those experiences that art makes possible to continue to work within the audience’s experience long after the work has been seen, Dewey does not seem to share Foucault’s fascination with—and his demand for—de-subjectivation. For Foucault then, a work of literature might be capable, perhaps through a particular quality of its language or the structure of its narrative, of intervening in the everyday experience of an individual or a group and bringing about a shift in their form of subjectivity. It might be capable, that is, of helping us to detach ourselves from ourselves, of helping us to think otherwise.
Now let us turn to a concrete example that might help to relate this discussion of Dewey and Foucault to what actually happens when we read a poem—in this case, a poem by Paul Muldoon. I am sure many people have had the experience, when they pick up a volume of poetry, of reading and reading, and maybe the poems don’t really speak to them, and then all of a sudden there is one that is arresting, one that demands, at the very least, to be read and reread. This is something like the experience of arrest that Foucault hoped his books would have, and it also demonstrates a point Dewey insists on when he says, “it cannot be asserted too strongly that what is not immediate is not esthetic.” In the case of this poem, I am not making a claim for its greatness; I am simply saying that it may have an immediate effect.

The Train

I’ve been trying, my darling, to explain
To myself how it is that some freight train
Loaded with ballast so a track may rest
Easier in its bed should be what’s roused

us both from ours, tonight as every night,
despite its being miles off and despite
our custom of putting to the very
back of the mind all that’s customary

and then, since it takes forever to pass
with its car after car of coal and gas
and salt and wheat and rails and railway ties,

how it seems determined to give the lie
to the notion, my darling,
that we, not it, might be the constant thing.

This, at least by Muldoon’s standards, is a simple poem. It has none of the obscure allusions and references that characterize much of his work. It has a quality of simple intimacy—a man and woman woken in the middle of the night by a passing freight train; and the sense, in the dead of night, that the sound of the heavy carriages will never stop.

The sense of intimacy is struck in the first line and is underlined when the phrase “my darling” reappears at the end. But, between these intimacies something public happens. Even though the poem is ostensibly addressed to the person with whom Muldoon shares his bed, it is
also—explicitly—addressed to us. And what it does in us is to set up a
train of thought which, like the freight train itself, persists long after we
expect it to finish. But it does this through what Dewey calls the
“immediacy” of an aesthetic experience. Muldoon is not a Heraclitus,
making a philosophical argument to convince us that only change is
constant. Instead, he brings us to that thought, or something like it, by
leading us into the experience of lying awake listening to the train; by
building up the elements of that experience in the same way the train
piles up its cargo, and by keeping till the last words the nature of the
question, the puzzle, with which the poet has been grappling. First of all,
how is it that a train, which like all trains runs on sleepers, is the thing
that wakes us every night; and, more importantly, how is it that a train—
that symbol of transient uncertainty—may in fact be more constant than
we?

Now there are many other aspects of this poem that could be
discussed here. For example, the effect of the speaker saying “I’ve been
trying, my darling, to explain / to myself how it is . . . ” How long had he
been trying to explain it to himself silently before he spoke? And is he
now enlisting his partner—or us—in the attempt to solve this puzzle?
And what part does this implied appeal to the reader play in engaging us
in trying to answer the question that is being asked? Another aspect of
the poem one could address is the matter of the contents of the freight
train. I suppose the train in the poem might be a freight train, and not
a passenger train, for the simple reason that that really is the kind of
train that wakes Muldoon and his wife every night in Princeton, New
Jersey, where Muldoon is Professor of Humanities. But why is it not
simply a train—as in the poem’s title? Perhaps so that it can be given its
eclectic cargo: “car after car of coal and gas / and salt and wheat and
rails and railway ties.” Is there something about this freight that makes
the train the more constant thing? Or is it simply the fact of its
eclecticism that fits it for a constancy that the human individual—or
couple—cannot hope for? In any case, even without this kind of detailed
analysis, the point I want to make is that the poem has an effect; and we
can think about this effect not only in terms of our experience while
reading the poem, but also in terms of the way the poem can potentially
live on in our experience long afterwards.

When Dewey talks about this kind of experience, he points out that
while the work was, most probably, spurred by some particular, datable
occasion, what keeps the work alive is its capacity to “enter into the
experiences of others and enable them to have more intense and more
fully rounded out experiences of their own.”28 A work of art, such as
Muldoon’s poem, therefore, makes possible “the expansion and inten-
sification” of experience. And, “just because it [itself] is a full and
intense experience, [it] keeps alive the power to experience the common world in its fullness” (133). It would seem, then, that according to Dewey the value of the work of art is that it expands and intensifies our experience—and not just our experience of the work, but our experience of what he calls “the common world.” This is not just a matter of making the banal claim that daffodils will never be quite the same after Wordsworth; because the common world is the human world as well as the natural world, and the expansion and intensification that the work makes possible is an effect that makes itself felt in the full complexity of our relations with others—and also, crucially, of our relations with ourselves. Because the viewer, or the reader, of a work of art who wishes to “perceive esthetically” must, Dewey says, “remake his past experiences so that they can enter integrally into a new pattern. He cannot dismiss his past experiences, nor can he dwell among them as they have been in the past” (138). In other words, engaging with a work of art not only has an effect on our future experiences of, for example, daffodils and trains; it also changes our past experiences and forces us to recast them in a new pattern. And according to Dewey the person who does this, the person for whom something is “undergone in consequence of a doing,” this person will be modified in the process (264).

But what kind of modification is this? What value does it have? Does the poem simply have the power to change, or is it the power to change, in some sense, for the better? Dewey shares with Foucault the idea that experimentation is central to aesthetic experience. Foucault, as we saw, regards his experience-books as experiments that he carries out on himself—and on others. “I am an experimenter,” he says, “in the sense that I write in order to change myself and in order to no longer think the same thing as before.”29 It might be easy to see Foucault in the role of Nietzschean exponent of radical experimentation on the self, but at first sight it is difficult to see Dewey in a supporting role. However, for Dewey, too, one of the “essential traits” of the artist is that he or she “is born an experimenter.” The artist must be an experimenter because he or she has to express “an intensely individualized experience through means and materials that belong to the common and public world” (144). In other words, the task of aesthetically conveying a private experience to the public world requires constant experimentation with the artistic media. And it is only by virtue of this experimentation that the artist is able to “open new fields of experience and disclose new aspects and qualities in familiar scenes and objects” (144). But Dewey’s claim about experimentation is not confined to what happens in the artist’s studio—it is not just a matter of experimenting with materials and forms. For when the artist remakes his or her experience through the act of expression, what happens is not, Dewey insists, an “isolated
event confined to the artist and to a person here and there who happens to enjoy the work.” Much more significantly, it is also “a remaking of the experience of the community.” It is not clear how exactly this remaking extends from artist and audience to the community, but it is clear that for Dewey it is this potential remaking that forms part of what he calls “art’s office” (81). With this idea—the idea that art can in some way remake a community—we are beginning to return to Plato’s concern with what art does: if art can do this, then perhaps Plato was right to fear its power.

But what kind of remaking does Dewey think art can effect? Is it the sort of remaking that would threaten the polis? Even though Dewey’s lectures on art rarely confront the question of the function of art directly, it is possible to piece together his views. We have already seen his comment that art, when it “exercises its office,” engages in a remaking of the experience of the community. And this is a remaking, he says there, in the direction of “greater order and unity” (81). In another place, while discussing the role of the viewer in creating the work of art, he comments that the outcome of this interaction is “an experience that is enjoyed because of its liberating and ordered properties” (214). Order and unity then—two qualities that even Plato would have to admire. But what about these liberating properties of the experience? What sort of liberation is being promised?

The most interesting statement Dewey makes about the role of art occurs almost parenthetically, in one of the later chapters of his book, when he is discussing what he calls “the human contribution”—that is, the contribution of individual psychology—to the work of art. I will quote this passage at length: “But just as it is the office of art to be unifying, to break through conventional distinctions to the underlying common elements of the experienced world, while developing individuality as the manner of seeing and expressing these elements, so it is the office of art in the individual person, to compose differences, to do away with isolations and conflicts among the elements of our being, to utilize oppositions among them to build a richer personality” (248).

Art, then, plays a twofold role. In the public, shared world it unifies by breaking down conventional distinctions that usually prevent us from seeing and expressing the common elements of the world. While at the level of the individual it unifies by building up the complexity and richness of the individual personality. On the one hand, it changes the way we see and experience the world by removing barriers and differences; on the other hand, it changes our self by composing differences.

One way of stating the value of art, for Dewey, would be to say that it promotes the expansion of the community of experience. In a world that is full of divisions that limit this community, works of art are the only
“media of complete and unhindered communication” (105); they are “communication in its pure and undefiled form” (244). And it is literature, in particular, that has the power to communicate in this way—because, unlike other art forms, its medium is language. But within literature, Dewey distinguishes between prose, which works by extension, and poetry, which works by intension—the poetic “reverses the process” that occurs in narrative prose. The poetic “condenses and abbreviates, thus giving words an energy of expansion that is almost explosive” (241). According to Dewey, then, the potentially explosive intensity of the poetic is capable of liberating us from the constraints and barriers that narrow our experience of the world. And, similarly, it makes it possible for us to expand ourselves, by giving us the means to incorporate more of the conflicting and opposing elements of our being. So, a poem such as “The Train” would work in our experience by, in Dewey’s terms, expanding ourselves and our experience of the world, or in Foucault’s terms, by intervening in and modifying our forms of relation to self and others. And it would do so, through the power of its language, in a way that is both subtle and long-lasting, both gentle and explosive.

And now, let us return to my opening question: what can literature do? It would be easy to dismiss this question as merely embodying a pious wish that literature could in some way participate in the world of “action.” Earlier in this paper, I said that Foucault’s characterization of a certain kind of philosophy as facilitating a transformation in subjectivity is a perfect description of the effect we hope literature can have. But why would we have such a hope for literature—why not simply allow literature to entertain us? Why should it have to “do” something also? There are of course no ready answers to these questions. But now, in the case of Muldoon’s poem, and following Dewey and Foucault, I think we can say that for the reader who reads poetically, for the reader who is active in the doing and undergoing of the poem, a change becomes possible; a change in the way he or she experiences the world, and a change in the way he or she experiences his or her own past—and future. Needless to say, the effect of any one poem on any given reader will be imperceptibly slight. It is no doubt true that a single poem cannot stop a tank. But if a poem were capable of having some effect on our present, our past, and our future, I think we would have to admit that that would be rather more impressive than the mere ability to stop either a tank or a train in its tracks. And that is the same effect that
Foucault had in mind when he spoke of works that can provoke us to transform ourselves. No doubt his theoretical commitments would lead him to a different understanding of this process than we see in Dewey, but he shares with Dewey the idea that literature, or let us say certain kinds of books, can lead to modifications in the way that we relate to ourselves and to others. They can lead, in effect, to changes in the way that “being is historically constituted as experience.” I will conclude by saying that this possibility has always been a part of our understanding of the function and importance of literature. In fact, I would be inclined to say that the idea that literature—and indeed philosophy—can have this kind of effect should be taken as axiomatic rather than as an example of wishful thinking.

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NOTES

9 I have discussed the way this happens in Foucault’s own work in my book, *Foucault and the Art of Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2002). See chapter 8, “The Practice of Philosophy.”
11 One of Sartre’s central claims, which is pursued in reader-response theory, is that for a work to emerge there must be a “conjoint effort of author and reader.” See *What is Literature?* (London: Routledge, 2001), 37.
16 Foucault, “Preface,” 334 (579).
17 Foucault, “Preface,” 336 (581).
19 Foucault, “Foucault,” 635.
20 Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 6–7 (13).
23 Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 8 (14).
24 Paul Rabinow suggests this as a translation of the French phrase. It is certainly better than the standard English version, which gives “to get free of oneself,” but I would say that “detach oneself from oneself” is closer to Foucault’s idea. See Rabinow, “Introduction,” *Michel Foucault, Essential Works*, vol. 1, *Ethics*, xxxviii.
25 Foucault, “Preface,” 339 (584). The phrase is equally enigmatic in French.