"New Interior Spaces": Empathy, Discernment, and Echoes of Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature in Pope Francis's "Letter on the Role of Literature in Formation"

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As a faculty member and chair in the Department of English at a Jesuit university, I greeted Pope Francis's letter on the role of literature in formation with a sense of hope that the papal insights into the value of literature could help to make the case for the specific value of literature to institutions working in the Jesuit tradition, and I was heartened by the ways in which the Pope's arguments for the value of literary study intersected with the defenses of literature undertaken by the nineteenth-century U.S. writers whose work I teach. In this piece, I want to focus on some specific dimensions of the papal letter that I think are particularly valuable for those of us in mission-centered institutions.

Pope Francis's emphasis on the active role of the reader in creating meaning is particularly encouraging, as it seems to me both to be accurate as a description of what reading looks like, and important in terms of suggesting the public as well as private significance of literary reading. Pope Francis writes:

> Readers in some sense rewrite a text, enlarging its scope through their imagination, creating a whole world by bringing into play their skills, their memory, their dreams and their personal history, with all its drama and symbolism. In this way, what emerges is a text quite different from the one the author intended to write. A literary work is thus a living and ever-fruitful text, always capable of speaking in different ways and producing an original synthesis on the part of each of its readers. In our reading, we are enriched by what we receive from the author and this allows us in turn to grow inwardly, so that each new work we read will renew and expand our worldview.[1]

As a professor of early and nineteenth-century American literature, this is particularly resonant, as it resembles conceptually the understanding of the value of books and the act of reading that Ralph Waldo Emerson put forward in "The American Scholar." Emerson argued:

> One must be an inventor to read well. As the proverb says, "He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies." There is then creative reading as well as creative

> writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world.[2]

This moment from Emerson is both germane and problematic. The idea of "the Indies" as a source of wealth of course reflects European colonial extraction in both the Western Hemisphere and South and Southeast Asia. And yet Emerson's understanding of the "wealth of the Indies" is not only a metaphor for material plunder. Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville all shared a profound interest in South Asian philosophical and religious traditions, and they imagined their own thought as developing in dialogue with these traditions.[3] Moreover, Emerson, who found Unitarianism to be too orthodox for his taste, and the Pope, whose task was to define orthodoxy for more than a billion Roman Catholics, are agreed on something fundamental about the nature of reading: the act of reading is important precisely because it is creative. We read in order to learn, but we also read in order to challenge, to question, to create meaning in a kind of collaboration with the author. In this sense, Pope Francis's advocacy for reading resembles that of nineteenth century American Transcendentalists as well as twentieth-century reader-response theorists. It is noteworthy that Emerson arrives at his call for creative reading precisely through an invocation of cultural and geographical difference. The Papal letter likewise is interested in literature as a cross-cultural phenomenon, as when Francis writes:

> Thanks to an evangelical discernment of culture, we can recognize the presence of the Spirit in the variety of human experiences, seeing the seeds of the Spirit's presence *already* planted in the events, sensibilities, desires and profound yearnings present within hearts and in social, cultural and spiritual settings. We can see this, for example, in the approach taken by Paul before the Areopagus, as related in the Acts of the Apostles (17:16-34). In his address, Paul says of God: "'In him we live and move and have our being'; and as some of your own poets have said, 'We too are his offspring.'" (*Acts* 17:28). This verse contains two quotations: one indirect, from the poet Epimenides (sixth century B.C.E.), and the other direct, from the *Phaenomena* of the poet Aratus of Soli (third century B.C.E.), who wrote of the constellations and the signs of good and bad weather. Here, "Paul reveals that he is a 'reader' while also demonstrating his method of approaching the literary text, which is an evangelical discernment of culture.[4]

Here, as Nalini Iyer has also noted in her contribution to this forum, the Pope is interested in how literary texts from different cultures can produce moments of encounter and insight. As a scholar of Herman Melville's work, I was interested to note that the poets Pope Francis referenced are also

noted in Melville's hand in his copy of the New Testament and Psalms. For Melville, religious difference is perhaps the most consistently recurring element across his career, and he reflects directly on the relationship of fiction to truth in his last full-length novel, *The Confidence-Man*:

> And as, in real life, the proprieties will not allow people to act out themselves with that unreserve permitted to the stage; so, in books of fiction, they look not only for more entertainment, but, at bottom, even for more reality, than real life itself can show. Thus, though they want novelty, they want nature, too; but nature unfettered, exhilarated, in effect transformed. In this way of thinking, the people in a fiction, like the people in a play, must dress as nobody exactly dresses, talk as nobody exactly talks, act as nobody exactly acts. It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie.[5]

The paradoxical role of literature in conveying unexpected truths in Melville parallels Francis's sense that literature can be a part of a moral education and that the ability to see and hear in new ways is crucial to the formation that literature provides.

A third element of Francis's invocation of literature that seems strikingly familiar from the standpoint of nineteenth-century American literature has to do with its connection to the ecological concerns that he voiced in *Laudato si'*, which seem to me to have important congruencies with the work of Melville, Whitman, Thoreau, and Dickinson. In *Laudato si'*, Francis argues that:

> If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.[6]

This commitment to renouncing mastery for oneself and opposing it when unjustly exercised by others as a goal echoes some of the most important thematic strands in nineteenth-century American literature. Emerson refers to the poets as "liberating gods," whose use of language is a tool for achieving freedom. Whitman calls for us to revel in the intimate connections between humans and the "leaves of grass" that provide the title for the book of poems he spent half of his life writing and revising. Melville suggests that when the African American cabin boy Pip is nearly swallowed by the sea, he gains a more profound sense of insight into the world than the sailors who are hunting and killing whales can attain, an insight that also appears in

many of Emily Dickinson's sea poems, which consistently call human dominance over the natural world into question. Frederick Douglass's encounter with the words of the Columbian Orator, and particularly with Richard Brinsley Sheridan's speeches on Catholic Emancipation, likewise suggest the ability of literature to effect moral and ethical change: "They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder."[7] Language, as Douglass and Francis both understand, can provide a tool for resistance to unjust forms of power and mastery.

There is a conventional narrative about nineteenth-century American literature that suggests that religion becomes increasingly peripheral to literary production as the century wears on, and recent scholarship has called this narrative into question. The fact that the defense of literary reading in a twenty-first-century papal letter could parallel in such productive ways the visionary cases for literature made by Emerson, Melville, Whitman, Dickinson, and Douglass shows both how significant religious thought is to understanding nineteenth-century American literature, and how valuable nineteenth-century American literature remains to how and why we read, even and especially in transnational, cross-cultural, and multi-religious contexts.

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[1] Pope Francis, "Letter of His Holiness on the Role of Literature in Formation," The Holy See, July 17, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2024/documents/20240717-lettera-ruolo-letteratura-formazione.html.

[2] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, volume 1 of *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), 92–93.

[3] For more on the connection between nineteenth-century U.S. writers and South Asia, see Brian Yothers, "Indo-American Encounters in Melville and Thoreau: Philosophy, Commerce, and Religious Dialogue" in *India in the American Imaginary, 1780s-1880s*, edited by Anupama Arora and Rajender Kaur (New York: Palgrave, 2017), 111–40; and Brian Yothers, *Sacred Uncertainty: Religious Difference and the Shape of Melville's Career* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015).

[4] Francis, "Letter,"

[5] Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man; His Masquerade* (1857), eds. G. Thomas Tanselle, Harrison Hayford, and Hershel Parker (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1984), 183.

[6] Pope Francis, *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home*, The Holy See, May 24, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

[7] Frederick Douglass, *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), ed. Celeste-Marie Bernier (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press 2018), 116.