

LOVING LITERATURE AND RECOVERING EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LITERARY INSTRUMENTALISM

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For Lynch, the common notion that we should love literature intimately, even as literary professionals, is neither natural nor inevitable; it has been learned and transmitted through Anglo-American culture and shared institutional practice. Lynch dates the beginning of this notion of literary appreciation to the mid-eighteenth century, when idealization of literary “genius” licensed approaches to authors as objects of affection and English canon building was simultaneously emerging as a marketing strategy and a cloistered academic pursuit. Samuel Johnson (1709–84) and Thomas Warton (1728–90) appear as twin Januses at the origins of our modern notion of literary love. The grumpy-but-public-minded Johnson “throw[s] cold water on other readers’ ardors” while his *Lives* invites a newfound appreciation of authorial personalities (p. 46); the bookish Warton, losing himself in Spenserian romance in the Bodleian Library, loves literature a little too much, becoming so emotionally invested in the intricacies of his work that he is unable to transmit knowledge to others. Johnson, with his equivocal critical biographies, and Warton, with his Popean critiques and his notion of “true poetry,” demarcate an important historical transition between a bygone, utilitarian view of literature that “presupposes its implementation in a domain of practice beyond reading’s paper world” and a new, modern idea of literature as a “love object” (p. 27).

At the same time, *Loving Literature* provides an impetus for regarding with new attention literature that may seem “wrongheaded” in light of our modern expectations of loving literature (p. 25). One of the avenues for reflection opened up by Lynch’s broad historical argument is the recognition that wistfully loving literature is not necessarily the only appropriate affective response to reading a work of imaginative fiction or poetry. There were, of course, historically important and sometimes sophisticated precursors to Lynch’s history of literary love in the ubiquitous instrumentalist notion, articulated most famously by Horace, that literature “pleases” and “instructs,” or instructs *by* pleasing. For example, Dryden theorized satirical poetry as a genre that could reform vice and folly pleasurably; for Addison, the georgic communicated “truths” pleasurably. Lynch’s study opens the door to investigating these instrumentalist notions of poetry on their own terms, and to recognizing that they can incorporate both sophisticated ideas about readerly experience and sophisticated notions of the ways that readerly affect facilitates complex forms of instruction, meditation, and prolonged connection to texts (if not authorial personalities). By recognizing our own aesthetic expectations as such, we can provisionally set them aside to imagine alternative ways of loving literature and understanding the social obligations that it enables.