OPEN BOOK

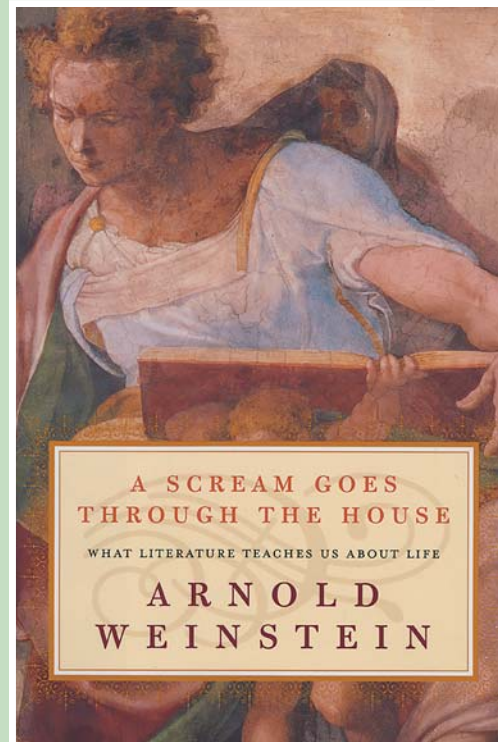
What Do Your Feelings Have to Do with Literature?

"How strange it is…that we are so often locked out of ourselves," writes Arnold Weinstein, Ph.D. '68, in *A Scream Goes through the House: What Literature Teaches Us about Life* (Random House, $29.95). "We have electronic access to the globe, we can go on the most exotic trips, yet we are often exiled to our own surface. The encounter with art offers…a rare form of self-encounter; it enables a voyage into our own depths." The Salomon Distinguished Professor of comparative literature at Brown writes here of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Proust, O'Neill, Burroughs, DeLillo, Tony Kushner, Toni Morrison, and our selves. Once, at the start of a literature course he was teaching, Weinstein asked his students a question that puzzled them.

"How many of you are hurting?" I asked my students. I could have asked, "How many of you are delighted?" and they would have been equally surprised. Feeling—personal pain and personal pleasure—may well be the central currency of our lives, but we do not expect to find such items in a college curriculum. The curriculum, the materials of an education: theirs, mine, yours. Why is feeling absent from the list? My answer is: knowledge, as it is packaged in universities, as it seems packaged in books, is thought to be an affair of reason, consisting of concepts to be mastered and facts to be learned. From kindergarten to university, there seems to be a disconnect between education and the whole person—body, mind, feeling.

Yet, we are somatic creatures, living in bodies, having emotions, bathed by sensations, at times bubbling and simmering, at times dawdling and eddying, hot and cold, nervous and calm, fearful and yearning, hungry and satiated. We are pulsions. Life is feeling. Our lives are affective from the get-go: from infancy to death, from getting out of bed in the morning to getting back in it at night (not to mention the time spent in it, in between). We all know this, yet the knowledge we acquire in school, and are taught is in books, seems not to take into account these home truths.

Sometimes I think that the brave picture we have of humans as rational beings is utterly misleading, a kind of photograph of our surface composure, and thus unreflective of—and unattuned to—the seismic emotional and psychic reality underneath, *our true reality,* one of nerves and visceral traffic that is hard to measure. Art reflects this realm; art takes this measure. Novels and poems and plays are not just "stories." They are, to borrow Dostoevsky's title, *notes from underground,* or, to put it another way, *reports from the front:* our underground, our front. Literature illuminates who "we" are: the repertory of selves we harbor within, the countless feelings we experience but never express or perhaps even acknowledge, the innumerable other lives we could but do not live, all those "inside" lives that are not on show, not included in our résumés. The arts put onto the page or the stage or the canvas or the screen a special portraiture that does justice to our depths.



mented in biographies and memoirs, and Cohen is scrupulous in giving her sources. (In the service of full disclosure, I here gratefully acknowledge her generosity in acknowledging my own work.) She writes beautifully, with clarity, firmness, and steady command of her materials, and she places her characters in dramatic, often emotionally charged encounters with one another. Henry James's phrase for such encounters is "discriminated occasions."

In one familiar but now freshly retold episode, Mark Twain and William Dean Howells meet in the offices of the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1869. As Cohen develops her story, this encounter is the beginning of a friendship, at first formal and slightly edgy but eventually both personal and editorial, that ends four decades later with Howells paying tribute to his old friend, dead and lying in his coffin, as "sole, incomparable, the Lincoln of our literature." In a later chapter Cohen shows Professor William James and an undergraduate psychology student, Gertrude Stein, walking together in Harvard Yard, with James, presumably, initiating the conversation. "When asked to describe his vision of heaven," Cohen writes, William James "once said he imagined it would look a great deal like Harvard Yard."

Fifty pages on we meet Gertrude Stein again, this time with Alice B. Toklas in the near-rioting Paris audience that in 1913 greeted Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring.* "People screamed and whistled, ladies slapped men's faces, canes crashed down on top hats, men exchanged cards for fights later in dark streets, and people leaned out of balconies and cheered their approval. It was an unmitigated success and failure." Stein and Toklas are joined in their box by novelist, photographer, champion of negritude, dance critic, swell dresser, and bon vivant Carl Van Vechten, a man who "barked to show enthusiasm, claimed to be the first person in New York to wear a wristwatch in public, and had been known to bite people whom he liked and didn't like." The instant friendship that bound this odd-couple-plus-one together eventually sprouted a private language. "Dearest Papa Woojums," Toklas cabled Van Vechten when Gertrude died in 1946,