Why one starts a thing may have very little to do with why one goes on with it; and why one goes on with it may have equally little to do with whether it's worth going on with. There comes a time, however, in the lives of those whom cynicism, or sloth, have not yet rendered wholly irredeemable, to work out a rationale for their professional behaviour. And since sheer mutability may now be one of the few remaining indices of the functioning spirit, such an assessment could well be made even more profitable by being repeated from time to time. So much for sermonizing.

All the time-honoured arguments for literature fall, with no small mutilation, into one of two conveniently labelled man traps. One of them is called "Literature is for fun." The other, "Literature is for moral uplift." The modern educational world has given us a third, with the official label, "Literature is damn near compulsory" tied securely to its steel teeth with red tape. No earnest seeker after litera scripta can avoid mangling in one at least of these tiresome obstacles. The teacher of literature is occupation-ally scarred by all three. (The nay-saying majority, fortunate fellows, sleep soundly, in fact almost suffocate, in three equally clearly labelled feather beds. "Literature is a pack of lies," "Literature is obsolete," and "Literature
is a useless, feminine luxury." May their dreams be sweet.)

That negligent and ingenuous Roman of the first century, Petronius, Nero's some-time adviser in skilled debauchery, reminds us that works of the literary imagination were never to the popular liking. Describing an unsolicited public recitation of verse by one Eumolpus, he writes:

At this point in Eumolpus' recital, some of the people walking in the colonnade flung stones at him. Familiar with this reception of his genius, he covered his head and fled from the temple.

Such refreshing displays of taste have become unfashionable in these days of endemic gentility. Like the topless dress (which was not uncommon in seventeenth-century England), exuberant honesty is not always à la mode. And in this high summer of the you-beaut country, where integrity is the blistering privilege of the sacrificial few, any poor crud can scuttle into the cool, safe shade of hypocrisy; and many do.

There is a kind of pious reverence for what is called Fine Writing (that means Shakespeare, Milton, and the Bible), and a powerful desire to avoid all contact with it. Our schools encourage this attitude with dedication and vigour. Children naturally, should be subjected to an innocuous smattering of Fine Writing (not too much, mind you, or it'll warp their minds), for it is generally agreed that a sanctimonious ignorance is the optimum state of affairs. To achieve this end, we have the obligatory inclusion of Shakespeare, Milton, et al in Public Examinations. Everyone knows that the average high-school child understands Fine Writing, and that it means something real to him. Indeed, some clever children will even profess to liking it, if they can find no other way to fool their examiners. English Literature, then, is an effective and rigorous training in hypocrisy, pursued with all the high-minded, right-thinking idealism that the faithful and harrassed chalkie can muster to his unenviable task.

It will have been noticed, I hope, that I have not sought to condemn the teaching of English language: nor the teaching
of it frequently, and even mainly, through works of literature. But not Fine Writing. Let us, for heaven's sake, be honest. The highest reaches of art - any art - are not for everybody. And this is not only because they are intellectually too difficult. One needs also to be interested, and one needs to be mature. Rilke's Duino Elegies, Beethoven's late quartets, Rembrandt's drawings cannot be properly appreciated by an adolescent, no matter how intelligent. And yet we expect them to understand, and like, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Milton. Paradoxical as it may sound, this impasse is partially acknowledged. Consequently, only the easier Shakespeare plays, the simpler bits of Wordsworth are dished up. So the real meat just isn't there anyway; or if, by some hazard, there is an interesting bit, as likely as not it's been expurgated, rendered harmless, and in the process, boring.

What is the result of this? Well, except for the genuine addicts, the act of reading a seriously demanding book has become, in the case of the average adult over thirty, somewhat akin to going to church on a week-day. And the idea that great literature (Shakespeare, Milton, and the Bible) is a reverential bore is gradually assumed to be an axiom. So no one reads it. It's left to the addicts; and no addict, of course, will ever be able to understand why everyone isn't addicted. So we have, say, five per cent of the population who are addicts, and ninety-five per cent who aren't.

Does this matter? In one sense, no. As Jean-Paul Sartre said, a couple of years ago, "There remain countless tasks among which literature is in no way privileged." I agree. It is nothing more than pompous cant to insist that literature has some innate, magical superiority to music, painting, philosophy, science, and so on; or that it has some 'higher' value to the average man than his work or his marriage. One of General Wolfe's more memorable obiter dicta runs to the effect that he would rather have written Gray's Elegy than stormed the heights of Quebec. As far as I know, nobody has
ever agreed with him, unless it were Montcalm. Gray could hardly be expected to be pleased. Nevertheless, this droll general has thus supplied us with the classic example of pious nonsense about literature. But enough of this.

My own experience at school was much as I have just described. At the age of twenty, when I was busily engaged as a medical student cutting up my fellow humans in the Dissecting Room, my idea of a good book was that it should be either funny or filthy. It wasn't until I succumbed to the charms of a more than usually ample blonde, who would read me bits of Oscar Wilde as we burnt ourselves to a cinder on the beach, that I began to see that there was more to it than that. More, certainly, than I'd been able to take in at school.

After six months of this conditioning, I was a confirmed addict. I had read Somerset Maugham and thought he was a genius. I had developed a liking for some of Ezra Pound's more dubious shorter poems; and a medical student friend from Perth had introduced me, with apt giggles of delight, to Donne's love poetry. I had also failed medicine. It wasn't for another four or five years that I actually tackled the dreaded Bard. But by then, I was quite ready for him.

Far be it from me to suggest that the above is the ideal approach to great literature. I was a very late starter. Yet the principle, I believe, is sound. I read and enjoyed only what I was ready to receive at any particular stage.

So I started teaching it because I like the stuff; and because, due to the above-mentioned reverence, large institutions are willing to pay vast sums for it to be taught. These remain, in large part, the reason for my continuing the attempt to teach English literature.

Most people, however, don't like it, are not addicts, and that includes more than half the students who take it; so one doesn't need to be St. Thomas Aquinas to realise that
this situation runs one into moral difficulties. Either one is a hardened cynic, takes the money, and laughs at the obtuse wastage of human effort; or one is a lazy slob, doesn't really teach anything anyway, and blinds oneself to the ill-applied endeavour of each year's students. Or else, maybe, the thing is worth doing, even despite the obvious fact that far too many students take English, not because they like it, or reap any intrinsic benefit from it, but because they want a degree unit in order to increase their incomes. (And there's nothing wrong with that per se.) I think the answer is that it's worth doing, but we're doing it the wrong way.

I think it's worth doing, not because great literature is a kind of religious panacea, as many eminent people think - it patently isn't - but because literature is one of the valid ways of making us more aware. Aware of what? Well, for a start, ourselves. Literature shows us people alive in the world, as we are. Then, it makes us aware of those great abstract ideas by which we live - fidelity, sacrifice, love, honour of various kinds. Literature can show us these at work in the interaction of complex relationships, in ways which we might not otherwise be able to see them. Aware of the world, the brute, physical world of birth, copulation, and death. Aware of human anguish, of political choice, of evil, lust, fear, and hate. I do not believe that literature should "recommend virtue and discountenance vice." It should simply demonstrate the truth, and allow us to come to our own conclusions, though it may take several writers of different persuasions to bring us this 'truth' through their 'dialogue' with each other. It helps to make us aware, too, not only of the possibilities and resources of our lives, but also of the richness and complexity of our language, and this is almost equally valuable.

"But we get all that just by living anyway," some sharp fellow will say. True, but literature extends our awareness.
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It stretches our experience, and not only of the contemporary world but of the past as far back as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. And six thousand years is no mean extension.

"Why should I be more aware than I am?" our friend will ask. It's a good question; and not answered by the usual haughty dismissal it gets. I cannot answer it except by saying "no one can justly place such an obligation on you, but I believe that living (as distinct from merely existing) implies being as aware as possible of as much as possible — though it can be carried to absurd lengths, e.g. Aldous Huxley's ludicrously uncritical absorption of mere facts by the library-ful. But what is the difference, after all, between those people we call vitally alive, and those who we know are dull? It is in their sensitive awareness of what's happening around them, surely. And not just in their immediate surroundings either. But, I repeat, there's no obligation to be 'alive' in this sense. Many are apparently content to be as dull as dogs."

He will now, perhaps, ask: "But surely there are other ways of becoming more 'alive' as you say, than by reading Shakespeare, Milton, and the Bible?" And I would say, "Sure; but not all that many. You can read the newspapers, watch television, go to the movies, listen to music, look at paintings, read tomes of sociology, psychology, history, philosophy — and, of course, talk to people, or do 5BX exercises."

"Is that all?" "Damn near." Then: "But literature's so dull."

turn the trick." "Are they great literature?" "No, but they're good literature. You've got to walk before you can run." "It's an acquired taste, then?" "Yes. What isn't?"

I shall spare any chance reader the rambling conclusions of this tedious dialogue, and go on to say that learning and teaching literature at university level is a shade more demanding than I have indicated so far. One has to be prepared to acknowledge one's failure to be fully and sensitively aware, one's deficiencies in that depth of imaginative understanding which the greatest literature demands. At the highest level, the adequate response to works of genius requires a very considerable discipline of mind. And that discipline is what we poor clods of academics are trying to encourage.

I have used the phrase 'discipline of mind.' To those who already have it (few, really, in the end), the phrase has a disappointing, academic ring. It brings to mind the dreary exercises of the classroom. And yet, taking the wide view, what else can you call it? The true appreciation of an art is a subtle, complex reaction which calls upon wide areas of the personality. And it simply doesn't exist without a long apprenticeship. For most people, ordinary human life does not provide the leisure or the stimulus for the cultivation of these sensibilities. But a university course can.

Furthermore, a man in the act of appreciation is not conscious of anything but joy, freedom, delight. It is only the teacher who has to come back, again and again, to the true foundation of this delight - the attuned mind, the mind whose discipline is so familiar that it has become unconscious, reflex, natural. Only the teacher can know how very very rare such attuned, appreciative, disciplined minds are.

It's true, as Geoffrey Dutton remarked not long ago, that "no amount of academic piddle can put out the bushfire of genius." But that's not the point when you're trying to
teach it. The discipline of mind I mentioned just now is not, as is sometimes thought, an endless capacity to be pleased with sonnets and enraptured by twee descriptions of nature: it's an acquired skill which not only demands the rigour of philosophical argument (often distressingly absent in even the best critics), not only a very comprehensive knowledge of mankind and the world (hard to come by), but also - and this is the core of it, very rarely achieved in full - the flexibility of a sympathetic and widely tolerant imagination. It asks people, in other words, to be much more alive than they usually are.

I believe we're teaching it wrongly. We're demanding too much too soon, and consequently killing the joy and delight that literature can yield. And we're concentrating too rigidly on poetry, plays, and novels. There are many other kinds. Biography, diaries, autobiography, letters, journals, and travelbooks are a vast, almost untapped source of good, valuable enjoyable literature. We're too often grading our three degree-years by chronology instead of by difficulty - thus giving the added maturity of third-year students nothing more demanding to chew on than they had in first year; and breaking the teeth of first-year students on stuff that's too difficult or too pointless to interest them. (I speak for the average student here.) We're giving students inappropriate 3-hour essay-type examinations which do not always test their developing awareness, or their ability to articulate it, but frequently only their capacity to swot deadening facts. There is a great value in other kinds of assessment, in more frequent oral tests, for instance. Talking intelligently, after all, is a far more useful attribute than the silent knack of writing essays. How many mature articulate people spend their leisure hours writing essays?

In making these suggestions, I am not saying anything original. Many of these improvements are at present being tried in many universities. Flinders University, in South Australia, is one of them.
But I want to end on another note. I like to think that in teaching English literature, I am helping, in a very small way, to make our society more viable, more responsive, more aware of itself; and in saying this I am very conscious of my own limitations as a teacher. But I am also conscious of the independent value of literature itself to its readers - and I have tried to indicate this value as I see it.

The philistine's idea that literature is for those effeminate introverts who haven't the stomach for booze, sex, and football, is one of the more dismal myths Australians labour under. And that makes it hard for those who love this country, and who would like to see it develop a rather more integral and lively identity than is earned by crawling to America, or winning the Davis Cup.

POSTSCRIPT

Reading this article again, after the lapse of some time, I see that it is no good. It has exactly that tone of impotent moral persuasion I would wish to avoid. It puffs and pants hopelessly. It attempts to skate over the facts, despite its air of honest reasoning. It ignores, for instance, the fact that an ordinary B.A. graduate is a child of nineteen or twenty with no knowledge of the world to speak of; it evades the fact that an arts degree is not, and cannot be, a course in English literature: it can only be a sketchy introduction to such an undertaking: and, worse than this, it, too, attempts what it purports to be against, i.e., the imposition on a justifiably unimpressed majority of the often pumped-up taste of a so-called cultivated minority. Hence, I believe, its false ring.

It is true that cultivated and civilized societies have always delighted in the arts. But it does not necessarily follow that a forced injection of the arts will result in a cultivated and civilized society: it may even act as an inoculation against it. The thing has to occur naturally,
in each individual, or it doesn't really happen at all. And where this leaves the teacher of English literature, I hesitate, for the moment, to think.