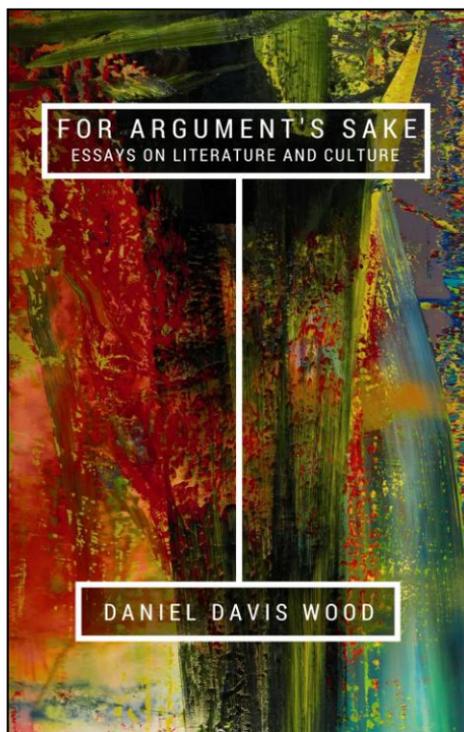


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 121-125.

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WHAT NEED?

This note originally appeared online at *Infinite Patience* (3 April 2012).

IN EARLY 2012, AT THE BLOG OF THE *NEW YORK REVIEW OF Books*, the novelist Tim Parks posted a succession of light-hearted but provocative musings on the norms and nature of reading and writing. In February, he questioned the transformation of writing from a personal vocation into a profession. “[W]hen did being a writer become a career choice,” he asked, “with appropriate degree courses and pecking orders? Does this state of affairs make any difference to what gets written?” (“The Writer’s Job”). In early March, he wondered under what circumstances it becomes acceptable to abandon reading a book. “Is a good book by definition one that we did finish?” he asked. “Or are there occasions when we might choose to leave off a book before the end, or even only half way through, and nevertheless feel that it was good, even excellent, that we were glad we read what we read, but don’t feel the need to finish it?” (“Why Finish Books?”). Then, in late March, Parks set out to “tackle one of the literary set’s favorite orthodoxies head on,” namely the orthodoxy that “the world ‘needs stories’” (“Do We Need Stories?”). To illustrate the power and profile of this orthodoxy, Parks quoted Jonathan Franzen as one of its major proponents. “There is an enormous need,” Franzen has declared, “for long, elaborate, complex stories, such as can only be written by an author concentrating alone, free from the deafening chatter of Twitter.” After unpacking Franzen’s self-serving motivations for expressing such a view, Parks went on to catalogue several variants of the same position and then to offer an anecdote with which to illustrate the institutionalisation of that position:

‘This is an excellent novel,’ I remember a fellow judge for a literary prize repeatedly telling the rest of the jury every time he encouraged us to vote for a book, ‘because it offers complex moral situations that help us get a sense of how to live and behave.’ The argument here is that the world has become immensely complicated and the complex stories of our novels help us to

see our way through it, to shape a trajectory for ourselves in the increasingly fragmented and ill-defined social world we move in. ('Do We Need Stories?')

Surprisingly, and very disappointingly, Parks finally conceded that "[t]here's something to be said for this idea" ('Do We Need Stories?'). But is that really the case? What sort of person would seriously take their moral and social cues from a *novel*? What sort of person would turn to a work of imaginative literature in order to adjust their behaviour in the real world? Of course, the idea that we should do so is only a slight variation on the idea that we should read *any and all literature* for this purpose — but even the most ardent proponents of that idea, like Matthew Arnold and Harold Bloom, are not so myopic as to contend that moral improvement can be better served by novels than by any other type of literature. Parks, however, proceeded to defend the exceptionalism of the novel.

"[T]he political, sports, and crime pages of the newspapers are full of fascinating stories," he wrote, "many of them extremely challenging and complex. [But w]hat the novel offers... is a tale mediated by the individual writer who (alone, away from Facebook and Twitter) works hard to shape it and deliver it in a way that he or she feels is especially attractive, compelling, and right" ('Do We Need Stories?'). As well, he suggested that the best sort of "tale mediated by the individual writer" — and the sort best suited to the artform of the novel — is itself a tale of the intensification of individualism, a tale that allows its readers to "believe more and more strongly in this sovereign self whose essential identity remains unchanged by all vicissitudes." After all, when novels tell stories about how "various characters [stand] in relation to each other, how something started, how it developed, [and] how it ended," they speak to "the way we make up ourselves. They reinforce a process [that] we are engaged in every moment of the day, self creation" ('Do We Need Stories?').

So, if the world does indeed 'need stories,' the need arises within a world of individualists who feel that the world itself threatens their individualism. And, if novels are at all able to address this need, they do so insofar as each novel is itself the product of an

individual consciousness and is designed to tell a complex story that depicts the triumph of individualist sentiments.

This strikes me as a pretty bleak view of what novels should do and why we should read them. Perhaps in an effort to ramp up the provocative nature of his post, Parks issued the last-ditch contention that, after all, “we” don’t actually *need* “this intensification of self that novels provide.” “I love an engaging novel,” he added, “I love a complex novel; but I am quite sure I don’t *need* it” (‘Do We Need Stories?’). At this point, however, what has already been expressed cannot be diluted. What Parks advances is a view of the novel that impoverishes the artform in two ways. First it impoverishes the artform by locating the value of the novel in its capacity to express and celebrate individualism, which entails severely restricting one’s view of the novel’s other capabilities. Then it impoverishes the artform by construing the reading of novels as an impulsive act carried out in the absence of a ‘need’ to read them and in denial of that absence, rather than construing it as an act carried out in awareness of that absence and therefore in firm defiance of it.

No, we don’t *need* to read novels. With the hierarchy of human needs dominated by the imperatives for both material wellbeing and socialisation, the reading of novels must be relegated to the bottom ranks. But the needlessness of reading novels is the essence of reading them. Maybe that’s simply a more elaborate way of arguing the value of art for art’s sake, but I struggle to see any other way of arguing it. No doubt it’s possible to draw moral and social lessons from novels, and no doubt those lessons are elements of many novels, but whatever lessons a novel may provide do not amount to reasons to read it. To read a novel in search of moral and social cues is to strip away its aesthetic particularities and boil it down to nothing more than the dramatisation of a dilemma. It is to discard all the novel’s stylistic details and structural complexities and to elide so much of what makes it a novel that it might as well not be one at all. It is also to adopt a reactionary stance towards the marginalisation of the novel in a culture dominated by economic rationalism — to tacitly concede the minimal economic value of reading novels while casting about for some other sort of value that lies beyond the realm

of economics and that is difficult to tarnish with accusations of self-indulgence. But why is it not enough for a novel to do what *only* a novel is able to do? Why should there be something wanting or insufficient about reading novels for the particular type of experience that the novel as an artform can generate, and for the variations on that experience generated by each individual novel?

Works Cited

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