These days, academic literary critics assert that texts are “autonomous.” They construe and deconstruct them through close readings of the words on the page. They disdain “the biographical fallacy,” the assumption that the beliefs and behavior of a writer illuminates his or her novel. And they evince little interest in the personal response of ordinary readers.

For these reasons, Tim Parks suggests, literary criticism rarely extends its reach beyond college classrooms and university presses.

In “Life & Work,” a collection of 20 beautifully written, imaginative and insightful essays (previously published in The New York Review of Books and the London Review of Books, on authors including Charles Dickens, Anton Chekhov, Samuel Beckett, Colm Tóibín and E.L. James), Parks claims that great writing “initiates a real relationship” that stimulates readers “to think and feel as the author does and to organize our lives accordingly.” At times, Parks writes, “fiction sees life in close detail, but from a safe distance,” allowing authors to explore events and express emotions “they may not wish to disclose.” Even as they talk about cars, cats and canyons, however, their stories also “conjure up dramas” that engage with reality, sweep away complacency, and address questions of love and death.

Parks suggests, for example, that Feodor Dostoevsky, a gambler, may have intended “Notes From The Underground” and “Crime and Punishment” to examine self-control, the ability to indulge, detach oneself and condemn. And Dostoevsky’s readers “may feel some of the same ambiguity about their own engagement with fiction that flaunts negative behavior.” The essence of Thomas Hardy’s vision in Return of the Native, Parks writes, is “an intense melodrama for which nobody and everybody is to blame,” destined to end in distress and defeat, set against a backdrop of a “vast but rather beautiful indifference.”
which may be preferable to “characters, author and reader alike” because it promises “quietude, closure and silence.”

For all its virtues, “Life & Work” will, no doubt, prompt academic critics to ask how Parks knows that Peter Stamm, the author of “On A Day Like This,” will take “as much pleasure” as Andreas, his character, in “empty mornings,” when he stared at an empty courtyard. And whether it really enriches our readings of “Endgame” and “Waiting for Godot” to know whether Samuel Beckett, like his characters, “never seems able to decide whether he wants his pessimistic conviction that communication is impossible to reach his audience” or fears that it can (and it will).

That said, Parks’ book does make a compelling case that informed speculation about whether Thomas Hardy was “brave on paper and cautious in life, always in church though quietly atheist, never actually betraying his wife while constantly planning to do so,” increases the likelihood, probably by a lot, that good literature will stimulate “an immensely rich, rarified and nuanced series of ‘conversations’ or ‘encounters’” in reaction to which readers can and will discover, reconsider, and reconstruct who they are and want to be.

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