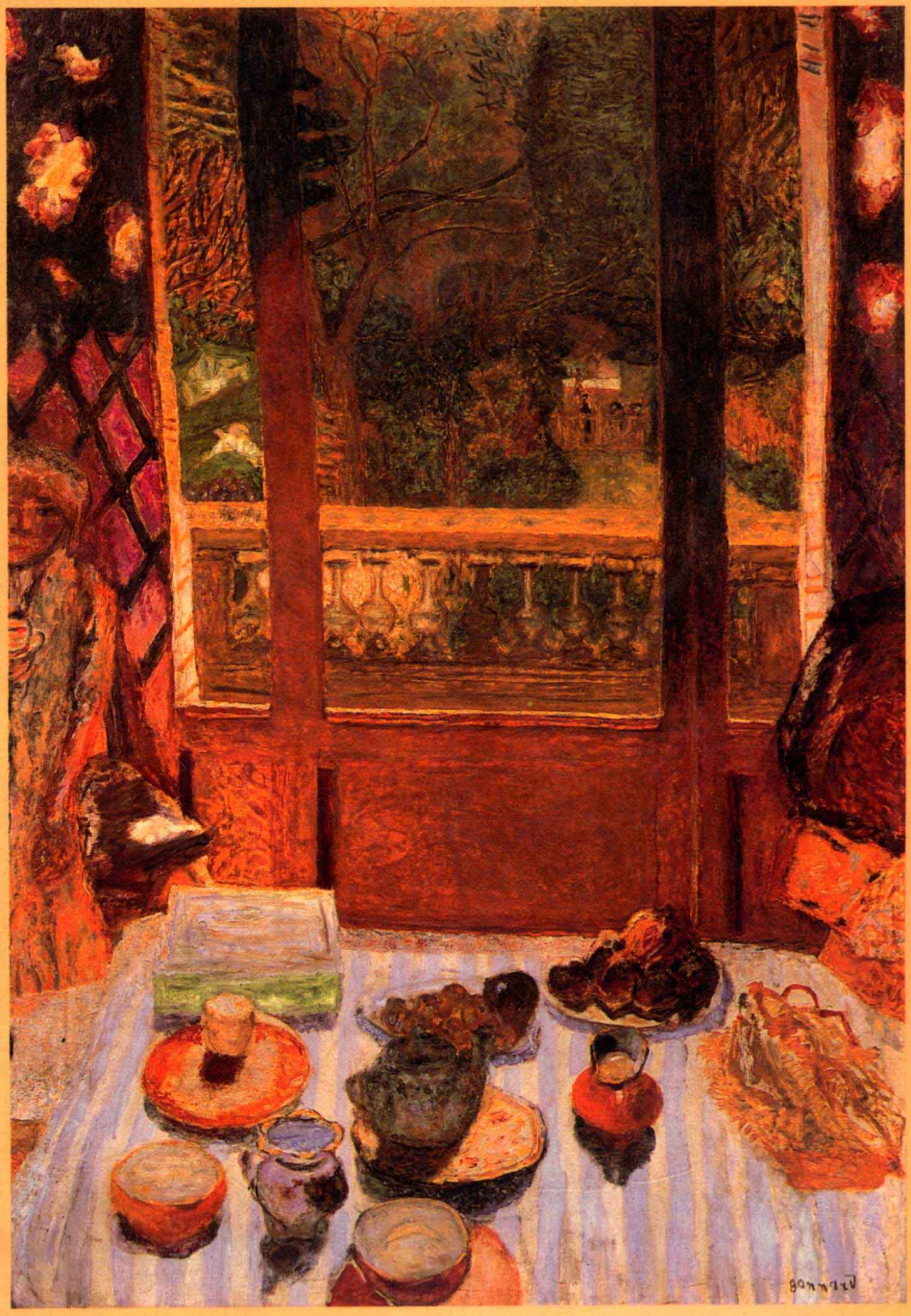
FORMS OF LITERATURE

A WRITER'S COLLECTION

Jacqueline Costello Amy Tucker



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Jacqueline Costello Amy Tucker

both of Queens College of the City University of New York

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PREFACE

Forms of Literature, as the title suggests, explores the multiplicity of shapes and structures a literary work can take. Our selections were guided by the desire to balance the classic and the innovative—to include works commonly included in literary anthologies as well as to give utterance to voices that have not yet found their way into collections of this kind. Here you will encounter chapters on private writing—diaries, notebooks, journals—and on autobiographies and biographies, as well as chapters on short fiction, drama, film, poetry, and essays. We have tried to select works from a range of cultures and nationalities, and from a variety of fields: anthropology, biology, sociology, psychology, history. At the same time, we have included more selections by women writers, whose work has been underrepresented in "traditional" anthologies.

The subtitle of this book is *A Writer's Collection.* Our text is based on the belief that reading and writing are intertwined activities that comment on and enrich each other. And so we invite you to explore the reading process through the act of writing in response to a work of literature. In our introductions to each genre, in the discussion questions and writing exercises you will see in each chapter, you are encouraged to become active readers who participate in the construction of texts and their meaning. Accordingly, in each chapter, including our Appendix on Writing About Literature, we have reprinted writings by students that demonstrate the kind of critical and creative engagement with literature our assignments are designed to foster.

To guide you further in reading and writing about literature, we have worked to make our anthology intertextual: Many of the selections work well when read alongside selections from other chapters. To take one example of how intertextuality works, an essay reprinted in Chapter 7 entitled "Emotional Prodigality," written by the 19th-century physician Charles Fayette Taylor, sheds light on the narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (in Chapter 4). In addition, reading excerpts from Alice James's diary reprinted in Chapter 2 will doubtless help you to understand the experience of the protagonist in Gilman's story. Throughout this anthology, you will find many such examples of literary works that comment on each other and enhance your reading of a given text.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank our students, who have influenced our choices in compiling this anthology, who have let us publish their writing, and who have helped us immeasurably with our own reading of literature. We are especially grateful to the people at Random House for seeing us through this project: Steve Pensinger and Lauren Shafer for their excellent suggestions and supervision, and Cynthia Ward for her judgment, perseverance, and good humor. Our thanks to our copy editor, Jeannine Ciliotta, as well as to our reviewers: Carl Brucker, Arkansas Tech University; Arlene Kuhner, Anchorage Community College; Rae Rosenthal, University of Maryland, College Park; Mike Vivion, University of Missouri.

Special thanks must go to our colleague and friend David Richter for making suggestions in each chapter of the manuscript, and for sharing so generously his ideas about poetry—without him the notes for Chapter 6 could not have been written. Other colleagues at Queens College have made contributions to this anthology: Nancy Comley, Robert Lyons, Edmund Epstein, Sue and Sid Shanker, and Moira Maynard—whose writing suggestions and students' responses are found at the conclusion of Chapter 6.

We want to thank our families for their encouragement, and most of all Ken and Steve, to whom we dedicate this book, for all the help and support they have given us over the years.

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1

How Should One Read a Book?

Think back for a moment: Do you remember the first time you were able to look at a word on a page and translate that group of letters into a mental picture of something you knew? We recently asked a group of students to free-associate on paper about their earliest memories of learning to read. Here are a few of their responses:

> Reading books dogs people Hamlet Scarlet Letter toys fables I read book little Daddy bedtime nice stories, playing furry books animals—wild lions. What do I like about books—horror stories, romances gothic novels *The Shining.* Shining TV soap operas, bedroom floor quiet peaceful, school late dark by the closet, TV in the living room, books on my desk, Daddy friends card games, school, boring, grades little fun, X-rated books why?
>
> *Hayley Greenberg*

> When I was very young I wanted to be like my parents and older brothers and sisters. Before I started school I began to open up books and pretend I was reading, though really I was just explaining the pictures. After my parents read a book to me several times, I became familiar with a few words. When I entered school, I learned the alphabet and each letter's appropriate sound. We were taught how to put the sounds together to form words; usually the teacher showed us a picture with the word to reinforce the idea of the word. But how did I internalize these words?
>
> *Rosann Costa*

> I don't remember when I first learned to read Spanish—it seems as if I was born reading. I do remember learning to read in English. I had this bumper sticker hanging up in my room which said, "POWs never have

a nice day." When I was younger, I read the first word as "pow" (rhymes with "now"). Suddenly one day I understood what the letters stood for: Prisoners of War. After that, I would laugh, remembering how I had pronounced the word.

Zully Cano

We seem to begin reading with a sudden flash of recognition, when the printed sign becomes inseparable from a sound and an object or idea. Somehow, we progress from the tentative word-by-word decoding of the beginner to an understanding of how individual words combine to deliver a message, paint an impression, create a meaning. But most of us would be hard-pressed to describe exactly how this process came about, or even how we read as adults, much less how one *should* read. Perhaps we take the process for granted; perhaps it's simply too complex—or magical—for us to capture. Whatever the reason, reading is an elusive activity—solitary, personal, mysterious.

What all good readers seem to have in common, though, is that they have never *stopped* learning to read. Here, for example, author William Gass contrasts the way he read in his youth, *for speed,* with the way he reads now, *recursively,* going back over words and sentences he's just read to linger over sound and meaning:

Yes, in those early word-drunk years, I would down a book or two a day as though they were gins. I read for adventure, excitement, to sample the exotic and the strange, for climax and resolution, to participate in otherwise forbidden passions. I forgot what it was to be under my own power, under my own steam. I was, like so many adolescents, as eager to leap from my ordinary life as the salmon is to get upstream. I sought a replacement for the world. With a surreptitious lamp lit, I stayed awake to dream. I grew reckless. I read for speed.

When you read for speed you do not read recursively, looping along the line like a sewing machine, stitching something together—say the panel of a bodice to a sleeve—linking a pair of terms, the contents of a clause, closing a seam by following the internal directions of the sentence so that the word *you* is first fastened to the word *read,* and then the phrase *for speed* is attached to both in order that the entire expression can be finally fronted by a grandly capitalized *When* . . . while all of that, in turn, is gathered up to await the completion of the later segment that begins *you do not read recursively.* You can hear how long it seems to take—this patient process—and how confusing it can become. Nor do you linger over language, repeating some especially pleasant little passage, in the enjoyment, perhaps, of a modest rhyme (for example, the small clause, *when you read for speed*), or a particularly apt turn of phrase. . . .