



Life-Changing Literature

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WHEN I WAS JUST starting to write, in my mid-teens, I wanted to describe things as thoroughly as I could. Pouring milk into tea, I watched the way it bloomed under the surface, and tried to capture this exactly. Was it like a parachute catching the wind? White clouds rolling and puckering in a darkening sky? Neither, and both: I needed to edit and amend until it felt, just through reading the words I'd written, that I was actually *witnessing* milk stir into the cup. Finally I had the best description I could manage, but it was still disappointing — because, I realised, there wasn't any *point* to it. It had no context other than itself; it was merely documentary, and added no value to what I had seen. It granted it no greater depth than what was already there. A storm, truly, in a teacup.

What was the purpose, I wondered, of describing something perfectly when the *experience* of the thing slipped from you even as you tried to pin it down?

In novels, a description of everyday events like this always *meant* something; the dispersal of milk in tea, described in such detail, would point to a character's preoccupation with fate, or the state of the nation, or else the image would be picked up and repeated elsewhere in an echo of the theme. But all I had here was my description; it wasn't part of a novel; and it certainly wasn't a poem, because it worked on no other level than the visual. So much, I thought, for description.

But these days, I often invite creative writing students to write just such



an observation during class exercises. Describe this pencil or feather or paperclip in the most detailed way possible...

So why do I ask them to do it? Hadn't I, at the age of fourteen, sworn off such dutiful recording; am I cynically asking them to perform a task I feel has no value?

No. What happened, between then and now, is that I read a translation of *Anna Karenina*, and the description of Levin drinking from a river during a hot day's work scything a field. It's a very simple passage: 'truly Levin had never drunk any liquor so good as this warm water with green bits floating in it, and a taste of rust from the tin dipper'. The phrasing isn't flashy or laboured; it's low-key, functional almost. But it struck me as one of the most perfect descriptions of *happiness* I'd ever read. It never names the emotion, but it produces the effect. I read those few words; I tasted the warm, rusty water, with those off-putting green 'bits'; and I *felt* Levin's happiness. I felt happy myself.

So: look with a clear eye; describe what's there. It's a start. The emotion, or meaning, or the surprising connection will bloom, slowly, beneath the surface, like — well, like milk in a cup of tea.