



Literature and Human Equality (Rethinking Theory)

Stewart Justman

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When Achilles dons his armor, gods and readers alike know the outcome, as does the hero himself. But when the commoner becomes the hero, when, as Dr. Johnson remarked in 1750, the heroes of modern fiction are "leveled with the rest of the world"--now that's a different story. In this ambitious work, Stewart Justman ranges across Western literature from the Iliad and the Odyssey through Cervantes and Shakespeare to Dickens, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky to show how such a leveling not only changed the appearance of literature, but made possible new ways of constructing a tale.

Only when influenced by the principle of equality does a narrative deliberately deny readers knowledge beyond those they are reading about--privileged knowledge. This book argues that such a turn, in the hands of masters of the novel, changed narrative itself into an exploration of the limits of knowledge; that the portrayal of persons unknown to history transformed the novel into an investigation of the unknown. If the novel is the literary form of limited knowledge, the fullest expression of that form is found in the great fictional experiments of the nineteenth century, the age when the social question--the question of human equality--broke upon the world. Justman looks into some of those experiments for their own sake, but also for the light they cast on the nature and history of the novel. Focusing on *Great Expectations*, *War and Peace*, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*, Justman explores what happens when we, as readers, are denied knowledge not only for the sake of suspense, but because ignorance belongs to what we have in common, the human condition.

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