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21. Making Meaning: Literary Research in the Twenty-first Century

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After Arnold

The celebrity scholar is with us. There he is in Dan Brown’s hugely popular *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), and less popular *The Lost Symbol* (2009). Art history has rarely been so intimate with life and death as in the brutal violence of those narratives. In Jennifer Lee Carrell’s blockbuster *The Shakespeare Secret* (2007), it was a literary scholar rather than a Professor of Symbolology who took the stage. Literally. This new star scholar-heroine is on the trail of Shakespeare’s real identity. She is the literary critical answer to Brown’s recognition of the deep cultural attractiveness of the man or woman of letters, in the broadest sense. Serious fiction knows that well. Knowledge of books is alluring, as Dorothea Brooke, the heroine of George Eliot’s great realist novel, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871–2), finds to her cost in marrying the scholarly but unproductive Edward Casaubon. The outcome is disastrous. But the appeal of the scholar is real. George Eliot, the partner of the polymath George Henry Lewes, knew it personally. In Carrell’s lively novel, serious expertise in European Renaissance drama powers a plot of multiple murders, betrayal and the destruction of libraries, which leads to the temporary recovery of Shakespeare’s actual ‘lost’ play *Cardenio*. During the book, a literary scholar saves lives, argues whether Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare, and escapes from burning archives. A real critic’s career this is not. But in imagining the attraction of literary research, Carrell makes a revealing move. She presents Kate Stanley, her savvy heroine, as someone who has given up university work to direct Shakespeare on the stage.² Being a critic, however much at the forefront of literary research, is insufficient.

It is not merely in popular fiction that the work of literary critics is hard to sell. There is genuine and widespread doubtfulness about what it is that literary scholars achieve and why they might be valuable. Even among literary scholars. Of course, that is not new. Indeed, it is one of the small advantages for literary and cultural historians that they know the place of the arts and humanities in national education has been debated before.³ The nineteenth century saw the foundation of English literature as a formal academic discipline. But what use was such a subject, together with disciplines including history or classics, to society? Could it develop skills or civic values? Should it focus on particular sets of knowledge or the formation of particular habits of mind? Did a university train or educate?

These were nineteenth-century questions as much as they are ours. For many Victorians, the disputes were partly articulated through a contest – sometimes more perceived than actual – between ‘arts’ and ‘science’, as the new empirical practices of science established their authority in the formal institutions of learning. Leading intellectuals framed the arguments in support of the educational value of the humanities. In the best-known defence, Matthew Arnold – poet of loss, school inspector, literary critic – thought that they satisfied something within human beings that was ineradicable. Men and women desired knowledge with which they could make human connections. They wanted more than facts or logic from knowledge. Science, Arnold said, provided hard, objective knowledge. But what of the moral or aesthetic faculties, what of a human being’s ‘sense for conduct’ and ‘sense for beauty’? (Arnold 1960–77:63). The arts and humanities, to use the modern labels, addressed the fullest conception of the human being and responded to, and shaped, what ought to be their best desires.

Arnold’s notion has remained consequential for educational theory, and the place of the arts and humanities within it. Indeed, it is hard to shake off Arnold even if one knows his argument will no longer quite do. On the old issue of the relation between the arts and sciences, the debate has certainly moved on (Arnold was hardly describing it accurately in his own day) (Cosslet 1982). Few are now persuaded of the former claims that the sciences offer ‘objective’ knowledge and arts ‘subjective’. But literary criticism, like the humanities in general, has entered a newly intensified relationship with science’s role in culture, broadly defined. Against those branches of the hard sciences with their potential for direct intervention in material life – engineering, medicine, climatology, plant genetics, water management, animal science – such criticism cannot claim the physical relevance, social utility, economic potential, and ability to change material lives that such practices of human research and development can. The challenge for the humanities to articulate themselves in terms of cultural value is greater still when the university is reconceived as a distinctive generator of economic prosperity, and measured in part on its capacity to address through research and skills training the challenges of a fragile planet, a turbulent political world and economic volatility. Where, indeed, can the advanced practice of literary criticism, especially that which is primarily – as in the UK at present – sustained by public funds, begin to have a place amid the buoyant claims of such disciplines?

There have been robust arguments in the past about the political utility of literary criticism understood in definite terms of protest and resistance. These are not focused answers to the question of why research in the humanities deserves support from public money, but they have been partial formulations of the social or moral gains of literary scholarship. Some literary movements over the past half a century have argued for their significance by emphasizing

that imaginative writing expresses resistance to oppression. Marxist critics, once a real power in university English departments, found literature, for instance, immersed in the debates and struggles of practical life, of class struggle and economic determinacy, and thought literary and critical writing could make a manifest difference when understood as forms of political protest. But they were not able to agree, finally, on *how* literature engaged with political ideas, and certainly not on the relationship between reading and change in the world beyond the page.

Those problems persist for other critics who have remained loyal to the idea that their business is political or moral in its essential nature (that is not to overlook, of course, political change that really is motivated by ideas). Feminist literary historians, recovering female voices from the past and from the margins of modern culture, have perceived themselves as actively resisting contemporary forms of gender oppression. Their writing has sometimes similarly been framed as political in its conflict with societal norms. But how far, and on what scale, resistance has spread beyond the intellectual commitment of the critic has never been easy to say. And now postcolonial critics and theorists pay attention to lives lived under oppression or with the legacies of it. This critical enterprise is grounded in acts of protest, and is, again, committed to giving space to the marginalized. But if the rhetoric is sincere, it is, like a host of literary critical arguments about political intervention into the gritty world of the real, easy to make from the relative comforts of the scholarly community. It is hard to object to such moral claims, but difficult to persuade the actually oppressed of their credibility. It is hard, too, to forget the controversial American professor of English and law, Stanley Fish, who salutes Michael Bérubé's sharp words from 1994: 'it's one thing to realise that intellectual work is political ... it's another thing to think you've conquered hegemony just by talking about it' (Bérubé 1994: 121).

None of this, though, means that literary criticism, in its fullest range, is without real social value that is political in the most enabling, contributive and generous sense. Literary research, at its charismatic best, is not about a monolithic conception of what is culturally worthwhile: it is not about describing the fixed coordinates of a 'civilized' life. Those days are gone. But the intellectual activity of thinking hard about literary production, about the testimonies of other men and women through the imagination, is predicated on values that are implicitly involved in deepening our engagement with the world in which we live, and the men, women, and ideas that surround and define us. Literary research, like other research in the humanities, is an activity predicated on open-mindedness, just as it insists both on how difficult it can be to understand other people and their achievements, and how necessary is the effort is to try to understand. This is not to make a difficult-to-substantiate claim about the role of literature in political protest, in objecting to this or that oppressive political practice. Rather, it is to

argue that a liberal democracy is in part built from values that the literary scholar understands as constitutive of the very act of sensible, informed and purposeful criticism.

Human dialogue

How do the humanities, with such qualities, contact their audiences most influentially? Of course, in part, they do so through publication and print dissemination in 'academic' and 'commercial' presses, through public lectures, journalism, broadcast media and the internet. But the habits of mind nurtured and developed by literary thinking, fundamental in the act of criticism, are communicated primarily through teaching, which is the principal outlet of all endeavours to comprehend the corpus of literary writing and to express and experience the public value of the humanities. One cannot exist without the other. Advanced research is nothing without the seminar room. And teaching literature well in a university is inconceivable without research (though that is not necessarily the same thing as publication). The responsible, tolerant and rigorous patterns of thinking, the bequest of the humanities, are born of the page and the classroom, and reading attentively is the foundation of both.

Advanced literary research is always concerned with understanding better what others say or have said. That research is generous, humane and properly selfless in its primary instincts, however clouded they may sometimes become by individual vanity. Charles Dickens (1812–70) reminded readers of *Great Expectations*, one of the most celebrated novels of growing up in the nineteenth century, that reading was about others when he affectionately described the chaos that results from the opposite assumption. Joe Gargery is the moral centre of the novel (if an uncomfortable one). He cannot read. But he can recognize the two letters that spell out the sound of his own name. Texts for him are, in turn, only the confirmation of what he already knows: how (nearly) to spell his name. "Give me," says Joe, "a good book, or a good newspaper, and sit me down afore a good fire, and I ask no better. Lord!" he continued, after rubbing his knees a little, "when you do come to a J and a O, and says you, 'Here, at last, is a J-O, Joe,' how interesting reading is!" (Dickens 1993: 47)

This is not a scene in which the reader is invited to laugh cruelly at Joe, and Dickens – absorbed by questions of education throughout his life – is too serious a writer for this moment to be less than several things at once. He has, certainly, a sober point to make about books. Joe's idea of them, however charmingly limited, is an oblique confirmation of a reader's responsibility to look beyond themselves, to understand the voice and imagination and presence of others.

Literary research reminds a reader of how hard reading is and that we cannot take things too easily. It shows that what texts were thought to mean is sometimes insufficient, incomplete and even wrong. The intentions of

the literary critics are, in this respect, always to clear the air, to pin down better ways of thinking about what was thought to be known; to discern new contexts for knowledge that provides a better understanding of what human verbal expression means and has meant. That is a serious training of the mind, and it nurtures as it develops the quality of public debate itself. Literary research brings readers into contact with ideas and language that challenge because they are different from those readers' own, and because they require readers always to be ready for newer, deeper and fuller acts of comprehension. Such reading is about sympathy and tolerance, about imaginative comprehension of what it is like to see things from someone else's view point. George Eliot was not mistaken in believing in the capacity of reading literature to extend sympathy and understanding, to change the way we comprehend things beyond the page. Eliot spoke neither of uncritical sympathy, nor that which was merely ignorant or naive. But her understanding of the tolerance that serious reading nurtured was a lasting contribution to a modern understanding of the work of the humanities. Some of the dons of the unreformed ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the nineteenth century looked askance at 'research'. The idea of it revealed an unhealthy state of mind, an uncertainty of opinion, a lack of commitment. That was before Mark Pattison (1813–84), Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford, helped create the new, 'research-intensive' don. But, now, openness to the new and readiness for difference are what criticism celebrates.

Intellectually flexible, analytical and articulate, students of the humanities are ready to think about things afresh in the world of words in which men and women live. Serious literary study is, certainly, a continual invitation to compare the world within the page alongside that without. It has always that dimension of the potentially political in the sharpest sense. Whether ancient or modern, from one's own culture or another's, literary writing always invites its reader to make a comparison, to take the meanings found in writing out into the world beyond that writing. Texts travel, and they take their readers with them. In the friction between the two worlds, the imagined and the real, are always new possibilities for change, development, reconfiguration and realization. Utopian and dystopian writing allows such comparisons most obviously. But all literary writing refuses to be bound merely by its historical moment and prompts assessment, however delicate or provisional, of that which is beyond the page: ourselves and the world in which we live. Literature may need to be read with a sense of its historical context (though not *always*, not every time). Yet it is never, if it is of any substance, merely confined by or to the aspic of history. In the creative interrelation between text and world, between words and self, is a bracing source of intellectual energy, of drivers for innovative conceptualization and new realization, of difficult but stimulating inquiry, of the freshest perceptions of our own lives and those of others. Here is a contest with

familiarity, even a struggle with what Stefan Collini, the historian of the British intellectual, neatly describes as that 'deeply entrenched cultural prejudice that we already know the answer and know that it is not very interesting' (Collini 2006: 502). Literary research is not unique in laying claim to these habits of mind. But those qualities are intimately part of its identity all the same.

The necessity of difficulty

Literary criticism need not forget, or keep to itself, what is tough to communicate or difficult to understand in words. It should not give up asking questions that are, plainly, difficult. Because an idea cannot always be explained in straightforward terms, or takes some time to be articulated, does not mean that its place in a culture is of necessity dispensable or suspect. Criticism should certainly not disinherit readers from the fullest understanding of the written text by avoiding the challenge of speaking about, of trying to get to the bottom of, complicated matters that are sometimes almost too complicated for words. This willingness to brave the difficult can lead to dismissive bafflement or to ridicule, and sometimes that ridicule is justified. Literary critics have been caught out by imposture or empty rhetoric more often than they care to admit. But there is vibrancy and confidence in a culture that allows itself to be confronted by ideas that are too large or complex for easy summary or generalization. There is resilience and determination in a culture that permits itself to know that important things cannot always be dealt with in a few words.

The North American scholar Caroline Levine has reiterated the point that literature's long-standing commitment to pluralism and the representation of marginal voices has made it a sure-footed antagonist to the oppressive practices of non-democratic states (Levine 2007; Carey 2005). Her focus is on the avantgarde and that which stirs actual legal controversy about censorship. Such an argument might well seem oppressive itself in the forms of art practice that it values and the patterns of reading it requires. But there is no trouble in perceiving the value of a practice of thinking that endeavours to grapple with the greatest complexity of verbal conceptions and, through teaching, to embolden us to be doubtful of the sufficiency of simplicity – and to think harder. And this is all the more valuable in a culture that has, like ours, become persuaded by the adequacy of the briefest accounts of difficult issues, the sound-bite, the newspaper summary, the thirty-second media digest, however deft and witty. Literary critics do not cease to communicate an assumption that we should be analytical, thoughtful and questioning in our lives as well as in our reading, and that the best ways of developing and meeting the challenges of modern existence come from real knowledge and proper thought, without fear and without favour, and without the disabling errors of over-simplification.

Stanley Fish remarked with what have become notorious words in 2008:

To the question 'of what use are the humanities?', the only honest answer is none whatsoever. And it is an answer that brings honor to its subject. Justification, after all, confers value on an activity from a perspective outside its performance. An activity that cannot be justified is an activity that refuses to regard itself as instrumental to some larger good. The humanities are their own good. There is nothing more to say, and anything that is said ... diminishes the object of its supposed praise. (Fish 2008)

That was a blunt version of his *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (Fish 1995). Yet, for all its commitment to value, it is hard to see this as an argument at all. 'The humanities are their own good' is an empty statement. For the humanities play many valuable roles and the largest good, the greatest of their roles, could hardly be further away from that stark misjudgement, 'none whatsoever'. Literary criticism cannot cure the sick, but it can open up texts that can change us. Like the humanities at large, the serious understanding of literary writing allows men and women to make more of life. That is significance almost too capacious to grasp. Literary criticism, the fullest understanding of imaginative writing itself, has a role to play in the formation and reformation of minds and lives. Like the humanities in general, such criticism proposes a way of deepening the preciousness, the value, of existence itself.⁴ Real ambition is required to think, in political contexts, about more things than mere survival. But literary interpretation always resists a desire to think only of the minimal requirements, and invites men and women to experience a deeper sense of meaning in the world that we inhabit not only as bodies with distinctive needs, but as sensitive, feeling, thoughtful beings with other forms of need, too.

Literary criticism concerns itself with the meaning of words, including those meanings that cannot always be expressed in the language of reason or logic or explanation. That is most obviously true in endeavours to 'explain' and understand human beings themselves. Memoirs, said the modernist novelist Virginia Woolf in 1939, often 'leave out the person to whom things happened ... they say "This is what happened"; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened' (Woolf 1978: 75). That is a perpetual challenge, but not merely for memoirists or memoir readers. Literary writing, in its whole gigantic imaginative reach, deals with meanings that slip away from other forms of expression or are lost behind them. It addresses meanings that are consequential in part because they are deeper than merely logical explanations. Art, says Robert Browning at the end of his detective-novel-in-verse, *The Ring and the Book* (1868–9), 'may tell a truth/Obliquely' (Browning 1971: Book XII, lines 859–60). And sometimes only the distinctive repertoire of literary art to communicate sense beyond merely straightforward and

rationally explicable statements can approach the most significant forms of sense and value that shape us and give purpose amid what Amanda Anderson, studying the different ways in which contemporary disciplines and professions describe and analyse the world, calls 'the way we argue now' (Anderson 2005).⁵

A resource for living

Properly understood, the subject of the literary critic is a life resource not a recreation, it is enriching not decorative and it is not merely one for spare moments, for the privileged wealthy, or for those with large amounts of free time on their hands. Part of the responsibility of the scholar working in English literature is to make that literature more widely available, better understood and more intellectually, emotionally and imaginatively productive. This is no easy question, and it is not difficult to underestimate the challenges of communicating with a broader audience, of engaging meaningfully with reading communities beyond the academy, let alone of fulfilling the role of a 'public intellectual', whatever precisely that means (Small 2002: 1–39).⁶ But for all this, it is true that literary criticism acts unwisely if it turns only inwards. Certainly, it jeopardizes some of its purposes if it puts up unnecessary barriers between readers and the texts that might amply offer sustenance and inspiration. That is not to say that literary criticism should cease to struggle with the complicated, or to listen to meanings that are difficult to put into words, or somehow give up on the 'canon'.⁷ However, it should renew its commitment to sense and human experience, and to the determining and transformative meanings of aesthetic forms in their fullest and most rewarding powers.⁸

The case for the value of the humanities is more than a faith position, but it needs to be believed in by its practitioners as well as by others. And good arguments are not good if they are merely a veil for self-interest. Many humanities scholars first took up their profession because they had been intellectually and emotionally rewarded by their activities. That is a respectable starting point. It might seem that few have begun with a strong sense of the *public* value of what they were beginning to do as researchers, but research without teaching is barren, and teaching is always a vocation, an act of commitment to others, a statement that there are others with needs, desires and ambitions apart from oneself. The fullest force, though, of the public arguments about the values of serious literary thought, the shared understanding of a scholarly community about what it offers to the world, develops further with practice, reflection and engagement. For those who have spent some significant portion of their lives in literary study, in seminar rooms and lecture theatres as well as in libraries and in front of computer screens, the public value of literary criticism becomes most meaningful after its transformative power has been seen and seen again.

The peril of the economist is to confuse 'should' with 'will': to anticipate or theorize human behaviour through assumptions about how men and women should behave rather than how they do. That, said John Ruskin, the Victorian art and social critic, in 1860, was like designing a theory of gymnastics that began with the assumption that human beings had no skeletons: it was a science perfectly coherent and, he said, waspishly, 'deficient only in applicability' (Ruskin 1902–13: 26). Economists have been wrestling with the unruly disinclination of human beings to conform to models for centuries. And in thinking about the value of literary research, it is worth not overlooking that. For whatever else is compelling about the value of literary thinking and the transformative powers of literary criticism, it would be to fashion another science of boneless bodies to assume that human beings should or will stop caring for books, or that they should or will stop hoping to understand them better. Literary criticism will remain keenly valued, and a source of value, until mere survival *is* the best for which we can hope.

Yet we should not be tempted to rest too contentedly in such a thought. Or, rather, we should take from the ineradicable persistence of reading and desire to understand better one other pointer to the largest role of literary understanding in the shaping of our fragile lives and futures. We live, in real and meaningful ways, in and through language, in what Anthony Grafton aptly calls 'worlds made by words' (Grafton 2009). We make our meanings through words, and literature is a form of meaning in words. Serious consideration of worthwhile writing is, in turn, one of the best allies for us all as thinking and feeling creatures endeavouring to live in societies, as men and women with troubles and a capacity for joy, as human beings with inner lives and with the ambition to live responsibly and well. And, if science and technology in the industrial world may help provide some solutions to the problems we face, it is primarily with changed human behaviour and altered human values that the future of human society in the face of contemporary problems lies. It is easy to think that science and engineering offer us the promise that we can live into the future in the same manner as we live now, simply with different and more sophisticated technology. But that is a mistake. Transformed human behaviour, assisted by technology, is our only chance. And such a transformation can only come with a shifted sense of what is important, a redefined sense of what is meaningful in and from life.

Thinking of that kind of change is to enter the world of values which, especially for those without religious conviction, is quintessentially the domain of the humanities. Despite the exceptions, despite the evidence that reminds us of murderers and tyrants who were enthusiastic about literature or music or painting, the humanities are the precious help in a secular world, and vital in reminding religious thinkers of ways in which meaning is made and felt among conscious beings here and now. As verbal creatures, we can only have a limited sense of 'living' on this planet without the humanities, as we can only have a limited definition of 'health' from those

who think exclusively of the body. In such times as the present, when altered values, reoriented priorities and principles, are needed more than ever, the humanities have a chance of being, in no merely metaphorical or foolishly indulgent sense, human practices that help save us from our current values and their devastating consequences on a precarious world. It is hard to envisage a better sense of public value than that.

Notes

- 1 Sincere thanks to Professor Dinah Birch, Professor Tony McEnery and Dr Katherine Mullin for their invaluable contributions to this essay.
- 2 Stanley's career echoes something of Carrell's (<http://www.jenniferleecarrell.com/Bio.htm>). The celebrity critic is sometimes the victim. See, for instance, Bartholomew Gill's *The Death of a Joyce Scholar* (Gill, 1989).
- 3 For the most recent argument about the relation of Victorian arguments about the value of the arts in education, see Dinah Birch, *Our Victorian Education* (Birch, 2008).
- 4 The history of such a claim is long. In recent history, it was formulated as a self-declared non-ethical understanding of art through the Aesthetic Movement in the second half of the nineteenth century but the notion of art providing intense meaning for human lives is an ethical claim. Other re-statements in explicitly ethical terms include 'What is Valuable?', in *Poetries and Sciences: A Reissue with a Commentary of 'Science and Poetry' (1926, 1935)* (Richards 1970: 35–46).
- 5 In relation to literature, see Helen Small's response in 'On Conflict' (Small 2010).
- 6 On this difficult concept, see also Chapter 14 of Grafton's *Worlds Made by Words* (Grafton 2009) and Collini's *Common Reading* (Collini 2008).
- 7 There is a long history to this argument which, only twenty years ago, was conceived as an opposition to 'theory'. See, for instance, Frank Kermode (Kermode 1989). Now, one is more likely to hear it expressed through assumptions about readers' class and educational background.
- 8 There is no more stimulating book on this subject than Rónán McDonald's *The Death of the Critic* (McDonald 2007).

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