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22. The Value of Art and the Art of Evaluation

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Move lips, move minds and make new meanings flare.
(Seamus Heaney, 'Beacons at Bealtaine')

Value and excellence

Most people can tell you their values. Some embrace them, live by them. A few even die for them. Values are ubiquitous, impossible to do without. Even a renunciation of life or the world is based on a value judgement, albeit a negative one. Yet at the same time values, like soap in the bath, are notoriously slippery and hard to pin down. They differ from statements of fact and observation in that values are not inherent in the object that is valued but rather come from the person doing the valuing. This is not to say that all values are down to individual whim (though many would claim, so far as literary and artistic value goes, that beauty is indeed in the eye of the beholder). But it is to suggest that values are a matter of culture not nature, of ideology and not fact, of history not timeless reality. Whilst we may hold our values dear, it is hard to hold them tight. We cannot define, measure and weigh values. We cannot isolate and pinpoint a moral and aesthetic property in the same way as sulphuric acid or the laws of physics. This is to say that, while scientific research is certainly motivated by values of various sorts – the cure for disease, the search for military supremacy – value itself is not a subject on which the hard sciences have much to say. Science tells us about the 'what' and the 'how', but seldom the 'why'. This is the domain, rather, for the humanities whose values lie, self-reflectively, in the articulation of what 'value' means. The humanities, including the subject of English, help elaborate and nurture our ideas of the ethical and the aesthetical, help us arrive at the 'meanings' of things in both senses of that word. On the one hand 'meaning' neutrally indicates a message or a sense which we discern (the 'meaning' of a word, image or metaphor). On the other hand, it touches to the very quick of significance, purpose, moment (something which gives life 'meaning').

The elusiveness of value has many consequences for the value of art and the art of evaluation. But at the same time it makes the area all the more important, all the more in need of interrogation and understanding. There are some basic distinctions that might help. In quite an old, arguably outworn distinction, people sometimes separate so-called 'instrumental' and 'intrinsic' values, those which are good *for* something and those that are good *as* something. Money is instrumental. It is valuable in order

to obtain something else: it is of no use at all on a desert island, except maybe as kindling. By contrast health or human life may be regarded as intrinsically valuable, 'ends' in themselves. Instrumentally valuable actions always depend on obscured but consensual intrinsic values. This is the 'why' that motivates any action, enterprise or goal. So, for instance, few people would hold that economic benefits are good in and of themselves. But, in a just society, prosperity can help achieve those other values which we might regard as coming closer to the 'intrinsic': alleviating poverty, creating employment and opportunities, reducing crime, and helping to secure justice and fairness.

There is much overlap between the instrumental and the intrinsic and, often, when the intrinsic is pressed a bit it starts to look like an instrumental value in disguise. There is no agreed endpoint towards which all actions should aim; not even the utilitarian aim of the greatest happiness for the greatest number commands universal consent. One might agree that increased library opening hours is an instrumental good. It allows one to read more books and become better educated. But is education an intrinsic good? Or is it just another instrumental value on the road to a richer, fuller life? What constitutes such a life anyway? Who decides and on what basis? It is hard to settle on an endpoint or a still centre, an agreed source for value; especially since, as a glance at history will attest, values shift and mutate across the ages. What is self-evident to the drafters of the US Declaration of Independence – that 'all men are created equal' – would not be so to most cultures throughout known history. If we wish to preserve the value of equality, a value which underpins huge swathes of our legislature and civic life, then research into how ideas and values gestate and germinate can help us do so. This is inseparable from investigation into the history of ideas, language, philosophy, culture – the domain of the humanities.

When it comes to the arts and literature the question of values is particularly slippery and befuddled. The arts may well have social and economic benefits but defenders of artistic or educational innovation are often unhappy about understanding artistic value solely in these instrumental terms. There is a lingering notion in our culture that art is, or should be, intrinsic. The point of practical artefacts, from toothbrushes to dishwashers, resides in the extent to which they are good for something. Artistic value is different. Here, at least to some extent, the object is prized not for what it does but for what it is: because it is good as something. The 2008 government report by Sir Brian McMaster, 'Supporting Excellence in the Arts: From Measurement to Judgement' signals a return to the more non-utilitarian emphasis, away from the metrical basis towards one of merit and value (McMaster 2008). State funding, the review proposed, should move away from 'measurable' social benefits, such as audience size and ethnic minority participation, to an emphasis on artistic 'excellence'.

But how do we identify excellence? What criteria do we have for recognizing it? And who decides what constitutes value in the arts? There is considerable blurring between intrinsic and instrumental so far as artistic value is concerned and one of the challenges, for public policymakers and for academics, is to steer a course between the two. On the one side lurks the Scylla of 'practical benefits', on the other the self-Charybdis of 'art-for-art's-sake'. We may agree with the McMaster shift away from measurable quantifiers to the more elusive notion of excellence. But at the same time publicly funded bodies such as museums, theatres and university humanities departments should surely deliver some return, some public value, even if that is not measurable in quantifiable terms. Who decides what constitutes 'public value', a phrase that has become something of a buzzword in political discourse in recent years? (Moore 1995; Crabtree 2004). A 2006 report by the Work Foundation on behalf of the Arts & Humanities Research Council suggests that public value needs to be determined democratically, in consultation with the public. However, the report emphasizes that it should *not* simply follow the diktats of the market place, or uninformed consumerism. Public value should aim for 'responsiveness to refined preferences'. To this end it is necessary to 'harness professional expertise' in order to 'shape and guide' public choices about value (Horner and Bevan 2006).

This notion of 'refinement' is swathed in its own evaluative assumptions and begs the old question: 'Who shall educate the educators?' Nonetheless, the idea that democracy is improved when popular judgement is elevated by education is of a venerable tradition. It is a belief, so far as the arts are concerned, that is a charter for the role of evaluative criticism as traditionally understood: critics have often provided the 'professional expertise' in this area, providing the dialogue with the public that is implied in the notion of 'refined' public responsiveness. Joseph Addison's famous adage that critics are the 'arbiters of taste' comes to mind. In this role of evaluative arbitration, English research in the humanities has a vital part to play. A vibrant humanities research environment, which addresses in an informed and accessible way the values of literature and of the arts, can contribute to a mature and reflective conversation about the creative industries in wider society.

By interpreting, analysing and, not least, evaluating literary works, English studies enrich intellectual life and the reception of culture. This improves the quality of life of the people of Britain. There are also benefits for this country's image abroad and for the sense of belonging and identity of British citizens. Any nation's cultural image, and self-perception, is important to the identity, pride and vibrancy of its people, and the attitudes and assumptions of those who might want to work or invest in it. University English studies act as the custodian of a literary heritage that includes Chaucer, Shakespeare and Woolf. But it

also, crucially, taps into new literary seams, finding neglected literary works and casting new light on those that are already celebrated. English studies are responsible for the literary inheritance of future generations but the discipline is also engaged in a project of critique, evaluation and revaluation, whereby the meanings and merits of literary works past and present are made manifest and articulate.

The word 'heritage' often makes academics and writers cringe. Not least because of its associations with a commodified and sentimentalized view of the past, sepia-tinted and preserved in aspic. But heritage need not be frozen in this way. It can be dynamic and evolving, a literary past that lends itself to continual re-evaluation. The literary and cultural inheritance of future generations is their birthright. Amongst other responsibilities, literary scholars have a duty of care. But their role is not simply curatorial. It is also engaged, active and selective. One of the most important achievements of the last thirty years of English research has been the politically motivated reclamation and rediscovery of unjustly neglected or excluded voices, those of women or of ethnic minorities for instance. Crucially, though, the rise of feminism and postcolonialism broadens the wavebands not just of our political imagination, but of our aesthetic one, too. By this I mean that we have not just rediscovered neglected writers who fit into our canon according to fixed criteria – but rather that the criteria themselves have been challenged and elasticized. We have tuned our ear to the literary qualities of non-standard languages, the creole, the dialect, the demotic. We have learnt to appreciate qualities of previously neglected forms like the letter and the diary, forms that have been brought under scholarly scrutiny as a way of detecting the traces of forgotten peoples, but have in the process tutored our aesthetic sensibilities to new registers.

This is an example of that dynamic, evaluative response to literary history. Literary research at university adds to our knowledge about the literary past in a systematic way. But it also continually asks what it is in this past that is valuable. And what it means to ask this question. For if values are often taken for granted as natural and self-evident, cultural presupposition often gravitates most tellingly to them. What is self-evidently valuable to one historical moment or culture is not so to another.

The function of criticism at the present time

The McMaster's report and the attention to public value as a matter of *refined* public preferences might seem to signal a rejuvenated function for evaluative criticism. Yet in the wider culture, the signs for such a role seem inauspicious. In recent years the role of professional literary critic has been challenged and supplanted. Unavoidably, the critic occupies a hierarchical role: someone who knows more about an artform than we do, whose opinion or interpretation is worthy of special regard. This hierarchical aspect has fallen victim to the wider shifts in social relations, away from deference and

authority. We are often told that people nowadays feel able to make their own choices about what they watch or read, without genuflecting to the 'so-called expert'. The proliferation of blogs and internet discussion groups are held up as signs of popular empowerment, whereby consumers of the arts make their own choices and share their own enthusiasms with their peers. The tweedy academic or critic seems, from this point of view, a figure from a more hierarchical era, now going the way of the rag-and-bone man and the bus conductor.

Even without these modern developments, the critic is a figure who has long been reviled. Of those who make their living in the creative industries, critics come pretty close to the bottom of the food chain. They are often seen as parasites, unable to create art themselves. 'Critics are like eunuchs in a harem', Brendan Behan once remarked, 'they know how it is done, they've seen it done every day, but they're unable to do it themselves'.

Yet the critic has performed vital cultural services. The standing of many of the most esteemed writers of the twentieth-century – T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf – is intimately linked to the academic and critical attention they have attracted. In terms of public value, academic critics have helped to refine the public appetites for the surge of alienating and often difficult art that emerged from the social and political turmoil of the past 100 years. So-called 'modernism', a term used to include the most significant and innovative art of the first half of the twentieth century, would have been inconceivable without the criticism that accompanied it, often by modernist writers themselves but also, frequently, by academic critics like Hugh Kenner, Richard Ellmann and Harold Bloom.

The visibility of English dons has evolved over the decades, but public critics have often been university professors, sometimes writing in newspapers or for high-end magazines like the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *London Review of Books*. Some would argue that the specialist theoretical languages and concepts that came into vogue in English studies since the 1970s have eroded this public role. But, nonetheless, the crossover has often been to the benefit of both Ivory Tower and Grub Street. It remains a visible example of how work in the humanities can enrich the cultural and social life of the UK outside the university.¹

Academic criticism is most often read outside specialist fields when it is evaluative (which is not to say that non-evaluative criticism is not important or has no public penetration). Looking over the history of the discipline of English, it is clear that when evaluation was emphasized, by figures like F.R. Leavis or Lionel Trilling, the gap between scholarship and high journalism was narrowest. Equally, the academics of today who emphasize evaluation, disparate figures like Christopher Ricks, Helen Vendler and James Wood, are often those who are most read by non-academics. English dons have historically helped not only to answer the sociological questions about how literary texts can help us understand

society, but also the thornier question: 'What in writing and culture is of merit and why?' English has a public role not only for its cultural analysis but also for its cultural judgements.

'Why should we devote time and energy to reading particular novels or poems?' 'What is it that makes celebrated writers worth the time and effort?' It is not surprising that these are the questions in which the general public might be interested and, hence, a way for academic English to find a non-academic audience. But, like many value judgements, the discernment and identification of literary quality is a deceptively complex and contested business.

It is for this reason that, throughout its history, English has often tended to steer clear of the whole area of value or to render it settled in a permanent canon of great works. Evaluation had the whiff of the personal, the subjective or the impressionistic – not qualities one wants to enshrine in a relatively new academic discipline eager to find rigour and respectability. Often the same critics who renounced evaluative approaches, figures like the Canadian Northrop Frye who dominated the field in the 1950s and 1960s, would nonetheless focus on canonical writers, like the Romantic poets, taking on trust the evaluative decisions of previous generations. Questions of value often have a habit of springing up in literary studies, even when they have been most ardently repressed in the interests of quasi-scientific impartiality.

Interdisciplinary borders

However important literary criticism has been, the role of English research takes in many other areas, analytical as well as evaluative. The borders between English and the other humanities disciplines are perforated. To an unusual degree, English is enriched and impoverished by the fortunes and troubles of its neighbours. If we are going to identify the public values of history, for instance, the benefits that accrue to society through a better understanding of the past, then some of these will reflect on to English too. Works of literature can provide us with a unique perspective on other societies, a way of accessing other attitudes, values and ideologies in all their contradictions and tensions. One benefit of studying nineteenth-century novels or medieval fabliaux, therefore, is to deepen our understanding of those periods and thereby to cast comparative light on our own condition. The historical method has been a prominent strand in English in recent years, as witnessed in the renewed interest in archival research and the history of the book.

But if literature has a fertile relationship with history, it has also often shared its spoils with sociology, psychology, anthropology and linguistics. The university humanities in recent decades have tended to view interdisciplinary innovations with ecumenical approval. Few would disagree that it refreshes and ventilates a subject to open itself to the methods and insights of another. But if other disciplines sometimes need to bend themselves for this crossover,

it is hard to think of 'English' existing without it. Of its nature, English is one of the most porous and promiscuous of the humanities disciplines. This works both ways and we often see specialists in other disciplines dipping into literature for material. Philosophers since Aristotle have drawn on myths and stories to elaborate on moral dilemmas. But one could nonetheless conceive of the historian and philosopher getting on without the aid of literature. English on the other hand incorporates history and philosophy as part of its warp and weft.

Perhaps by way of compensation, during the history of English as a discipline there have been efforts to close up its borders in the interests of disciplinary integrity and coherence. The most well-known such effort resulted in the so-called 'new criticism', often known as 'practical criticism' in the UK, which became the dominant method in the universities during the 1940s and 1950s. This approach gave valour to close, rigorous literary analysis, striving to cut out all objects of attention other than the words on the page. Historical digression, including into the life of the author, was regarded as an ancillary distraction. But new criticism tended to have a strong evaluative remit, striving to show why it was that poems worked aesthetically. For this reason it had significant cultural penetration outside universities, in magazines and journals aimed at the educated general reader.

The methods and approaches of new criticism have been pushed aside over the last thirty years by the interdisciplinary ethos of literary theory and cultural studies. French linguistic philosophy became the preoccupation during the 1970s and 1980s, as structuralism and post-structuralism gained in their ascendancy. Related to this, various politically accented approaches developed such as feminism, Marxism and, later, postcolonialism. These developments opened the window on literary studies. They routed the idea that literature was separable from its context and that literary value occupied a stable, unchanging and permanent fixture.

The phrase 'literary theory', used by admirers and detractors of these new developments, is a misnomer. As I suggested earlier, an important feature of literary criticism is its habit of considering its own proper agency and purpose, doubling back on itself to ask the question what it is or should be doing. Criticism has theory running through its veins, much more so than many of the refuseniks of 'theory' might like to think. This is one reason why the practice of literary criticism often functions best in proximity to the self-reflectiveness afforded by universities. And why, at its best, it is adept and restless in addressing values, in seeking for the 'why?' as well as 'what?' The closeness between the words 'critic' and 'critique', the latter with its philosophical connotations in the work of Kant and Hegel, indicates this quality of criticism, its double-jointed tendency to question its own purpose and procedure.

So 'literary theory' is not new, and not an abstract intrusion into the proper business of criticism. What is striking, though, is that for all its philosophical

daring and diversity, the different strands of modern theory have tended to have quite a tentative, even hostile, attitude to artistic (if not political) value. Partly, this is because aesthetic values are so culturally contingent. A neoclassicist will praise an artwork for its accordance with pre-given generic forms; a Romantic poet for its originality and intensity of expression; a puritan, if he allows art at all, for its inculcation of virtue and discrediting of vice. There are many reasons for valuing the arts and they evolve with changing social attitudes. As ever, value is not something that can be pinned down permanently and this makes it very difficult to discuss with disciplinary rigour. This is an anxiety that goes back to the origins of English as a university subject.

But there were also political reasons for the turn from literary merit and the canon in the 1970s. The various strands of Marxist theory and cultural studies tended to view the whole notion of the aesthetic with suspicion. It became something to be historically located, unmasked as ideology – at best as mere dilettantism, at worst as complicit in oppressive power structures through its exclusion and silencing of marginal voices. The canon of Great Literary Art was no longer judged in some decontextualized, timeless forum, it was no longer neutrally ‘great’, but rather a selection of works that reinforced prevailing values and, often, political, social and gender hierarchies. In the universities during the 1970s and 1980s the battle against ‘discrimination’ in the negative, racist or sexist sense often had as an early casualty ‘discrimination’ in the sense of evaluative judgement or discernment.

There are signs in recent years of a renewed hospitality to the category of the literary and the aesthetic, and to the idea of cultural value in English literary studies.² English research at university is about more than evaluative criticism. But if one abandons the evaluative dimension altogether then the foundations of its disciplinary integrity start to disappear. If English literature is not distinguished by quality considerations, then why not merge English with sociology or cultural studies? Without recognition of literary merit, then the interdisciplinary proclivities of English make the subject look more like an outpost of history or a handmaiden to politics. The essential question of English, which precedes the analysis of the object of study, is *why* it should be studied in the first place. What does literary quality mean? How do we identify and articulate it?

Returning to value

When we ask what the value of humanities research is we go consciously or unconsciously to the humanities themselves, to subjects like philosophy, history and the arts. But this role of the humanities as a crucible wherein we test and judge values is part of their value, or perhaps more accurately, ‘meta’-value (in the sense of the value of value). The values our society embraces are too important not to be given serious academic investigation

and reflection. This is perhaps most evidently true for ethical values. We rightly involve moral philosophers in applied ethical decisions about such issues as stem-cell research or the use of torture. But behind this very obvious contribution of philosophy to the non-academic context, the work of moral philosophy interrogates the basis for value judgements that, though they may seem self-evident in our culture, are historically variable. It is 'self-evident' to us now that we should no longer burn witches or put the insane on public display. It was not always so. There is a complicated overlap between the ethical and the literary such that many evaluative critics praise the artistic qualities of an artwork precisely because of its moral intelligence. This is most notably true of the novel, where moral dilemmas and situations are embodied in narrative and character. The esteem in which novelists like Jane Austen or Henry James are held is in no small measure down to the finely filamented moral ironies they craft. Literary study can feed the capacity for moral questioning.

However necessary it is to navigate them, these are perilous waters. How values gestate, where they come from, is a highly complex area of philosophical investigation. Everything we do in life, from brushing our teeth to organizing international summits on global warming, is influenced by values of one sort or another. If usually unarticulated or unexamined, they are, nonetheless, inescapable. Academic enquiry is saturated in value judgements, even when it is ostensibly value-free. The decision to be impartial or to dispense with interested analysis is itself an evaluative decision, one which implicitly holds up 'value-free' procedures as *better* than evaluative ones.

Scientific investigation generally seeks to avoid prejudice and subjective viewpoints. It does not seek to prescribe but to describe, using as its cardinal procedure empirical observation. At the same time scientific research takes place within a context that is highly charged with evaluative ends. Those scientists seeking a cure for cancer will use the neutral laboratory techniques of impartial testing but the decision to direct scientific resources towards finding such a cure is clearly not neutral and non-evaluative. But science does not, of itself, inevitably aim at the beneficial and the enlightened. It has been deployed for mass murder as well as medicine. Decisions about its ends (if not its means) occur in a context shot through with ideology, assumptions and values about the good. One word that describes this context is 'culture'.

The aim of the humanities is to analyse and assess this culture, to subject our values to academic and historical consideration. As the philosopher John Gray puts it (significantly in an essay on the novelist Joseph Conrad): 'Human beings use the power of scientific knowledge to assert and defend the values and goals they already have' (Gray 2004: 106). These values and goals are not the subject matter of the sciences; but they are the proper subject of the humanities, pedagogically and in

research terms. Society benefits from having a specialized academy that includes reflection on what constitutes values, including the aesthetic values of its cultural inheritance.

The tremendous prestige science has accrued – through its unprecedented advances not only in knowledge about the universe but also in the applied fields of technology and industry – sometimes obscures this point about values. And it is not to say that the humanities cannot benefit from using scientific methodology. Scholarship in literary studies often relies on the scrupulous, painstaking, objective compilation of evidence and, indeed, on various applied technologies, such as that afforded recently by digital technology. But nonetheless science cannot invent or discover values. In one of the most notorious intellectual controversies in twentieth-century Britain, the so-called ‘two-cultures’ debate, the novelist C.P. Snow claimed in a lecture in 1959 that science should be ranked alongside the arts as the fountainhead of civilized values. In a notably heated exchange the leading literary critic of the age, F.R. Leavis, riposted that distinctions between the provinces of science and art are central so far as values are concerned. Science may, as Snow proclaims, be valuable and beautiful, but it does not reveal these ‘qualities’ in the laboratory or through the microscope. Values are not empirical. This is not to say that they are subjective, but rather that they are nurtured and cultivated through what Leavis called elsewhere the ‘collaboratively created human world’ or, as he puts it here, through the processes of ‘human responsibility’:

Science is obviously of great importance to mankind; it's of great cultural importance. But to say that is to make a value-judgement—a human judgement of value. The criteria of judgements of value and importance are determined by a sense of human nature and human need, and can't be arrived at by science itself; they aren't, and can't be, a product of scientific method, or anything like it. They are an expression of human responsibility. (Leavis 1972: 140)

All the values our society holds dear are not timeless, absolute or innate, but rather gestate within the processes of human civilization, generated by culture. The university humanities are the arena where these values can be reflected upon, analysed and intuited. As part of the sphere of the humanities, English shares in this remit.

A central part of English is the judgement of literary merit. Literary merit cannot be contained within some neat formula or catch-all definition. Like the discernment of all values, it must adopt a dynamic rather than a static measure. The canon is fluid, not fixed, but this is precisely why evaluative literary criticism has a role to play. There has been a renewed hospitality to the concept of the aesthetic and the literary in English studies in recent years, a growth of what has come to be called the ‘new aestheticism’. This

is not a renunciation of the political preoccupations of the past thirty years but rather a development of it. The new interest in aesthetics is theoretically sophisticated and often intimate with the imagining of politics and ethics at the level of form. The advocacy of interpretative tact, the renewed concern with the particular instance rather than the general rule, the allowance that texts might have a literary quality that is ineffable or inexhaustible: these have an implicitly political and progressive dimension in that they curtail the totalizing impulse. There are no strict criteria against which human creativity is held to account. Allowing literary criticism to be free from such controls, attending the particular artwork as well as the general rule, leaves a space for values to mutate and develop. This is a key value that the humanities offer within society: it provides a space in which new values can germinate.

The values tested in university humanities can grow outside the boundaries of the academy and into the ecology of the wider society. To allow this to happen, though, it is vital that the strictures of value are not formulaic. There are, as I have argued above, instrumental values for literary criticism. It has, historically, had a rich connective role with the world of letters outside the academy. It can provide a vital role in the 'refinement' of public preferences that, as we have seen, contribute to the identification of 'public values'. But the humanities also need to keep a privileged intellectual space for the values of which we do not yet know. This is why it is necessary to defend literary and intellectual enquiry, for all its bountiful social benefits, as an end in itself, too.

The deepest benefits might be the ones we cannot put a finger on so easily. There are, to borrow Donald Rumsfeld's distinction, 'known unknowns' and 'unknown unknowns'. It is easy to see the dark areas that the systematic application of established methods can illuminate. It is easy to appreciate how identifiable academic activities can add value, judging by criteria long-established and accepted. But giving our society a space to stumble on the unknown unknowns, the values we have not yet arrived at, may prove the greatest value of all.

Notes

- 1 For a history of the relationship, see *Grub Street and the Ivory Tower: Literary Journalism and Literary Scholarship from Fielding to the Internet* (Treglown and Bennett 1998).
- 2 A symptom of a renewed concern with literary value can be found in enterprises such as the AHRC-funded project at Shakespeare Institute at the University of Birmingham entitled 'Interrogating Cultural Value in the 21st Century: the case of "Shakespeare"'.

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