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5. Custodians and Active Citizens

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On English literature

Britain has over 1,300 years of literary culture from the first arrival of the English in the Celtic archipelago up to the present moment. Not only that, it is exceptional in that its literary culture has been extremely sophisticated for over a thousand years, with writing of the highest international standard manifest from *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the works of Chaucer onwards. The great authors of the past are familiar names the world over: William Shakespeare, John Milton, Lord Byron, William Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot. Nor does our international literary reputation rely on authors of the past. In the last decade, there have been three Nobel Laureates: V.S. Naipaul (2001), Harold Pinter (2005) and Doris Lessing (2007). The fact that one was born in the West Indies of Indian parents, one in London of Jewish immigrant parentage and the third in Southern Africa testifies to the range and variety of contemporary 'English literature'.

The history of English literature is a history of the migrations of peoples and cultures, and the study of English literature is an inescapable engagement with that history. The history of English literature encompasses the Germanic culture of the Anglo-Saxons; the cultural impact of the conquest of Anglo-Saxon England by the Normans, French-speaking Scandinavians; the importation of classical Greek, Latin and contemporary Italian literatures during the Renaissance; the spread of empire and the return flow of art, literature and ideas from India, China and the Arab world; the writings of new immigrants into Britain and the various 'new writings' in English that emerged during and after the age of empire. At the same time, this literature has also been the site of negotiations between the varied constituent cultures of the archipelago – in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, in Walter Scott's Waverley novels, in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, to take just three examples. *Henry V* brings together the Welshman, the Scot and the recently colonized Irishman to fight at Agincourt alongside the English, but registers also the tensions between these groups in a complex exploration of king and subject, colonizer and colonized (Greenblatt 1985). Scott's Waverley novels engage with Scottish politics and Scottish identity after the failure of the 1745 Jacobite Uprising. *Ulysses* is similarly pervaded by the national politics of the time: it is an Irish assault upon England and English culture; a painstaking attempt to locate Irish culture in relation to English colonial rule, a larger European culture and American popular culture; and an engagement with Irish cultural politics

designed to influence the shape of a new Irish identity in the new Irish state (Gibson 2002).

This wealth of literature is both a cultural asset of considerable value and an unparalleled resource for future cultural work. While major literary works, such as Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, do not have a market value in the way that important paintings do, they have a comparable cultural value. While the loss of a painting through sale abroad often makes newspaper headlines, we are much more careless about our literary heritage – sometimes failing to ensure that it stays in print, remains available to readers and is actively read. At the same time, writers remain vividly aware of this inheritance. They are in constant dialogue with the literature of the past. The poetry of the Anglo-Saxon period, for example – in particular 'The Wanderer', 'The Seafarer', 'Wulf and Eadwacer' and *Beowulf* – was repeatedly returned to in the course of the twentieth century by poets as various as Ezra Pound, Bill Griffiths and Seamus Heaney. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has prompted both a recent opera and a new verse translation by Simon Armitage. David Lodge and Colm Tóibín have turned back to Elizabeth Gaskell and Henry James, and there is an entire new genre of neo-Victorian fiction. It hardly needs saying that the novels of Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy and Virginia Woolf are continually being reinterpreted through film. But literature is more than just a source for films. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has been reinterpreted through films, dramatizations, graphic novels and even puppet shows, a *Rhapsodie Nègre* and an oratorio; it has provided a narrative model for travel books and for other novels (from Woolf's *The Voyage Out* to Will Self's *The Butt*); it has also provided a journalistic shorthand for accounts of disasters in Africa or for reviews of V.S. Naipaul's biography. Like all literature, it provides narrative models, metaphors and points of reference by which we can attempt to make sense of contemporary events or the most profound personal experiences.

Researcher as custodian

In the first instance, humanities research in this field has an important custodial role in relation to a valuable cultural asset. This custodial role is most evident in the work of textual scholars, the editors of literary texts and the editors of authors' letters. Research into the development of the text of a literary work – which might be from manuscript to typescript, from typescript to serialized version, from serialization through various editions (with a range of authorial and non-authorial changes) – provides the groundwork for all subsequent reading and criticism. This research might arrive at a definitive edition or it might arrive at ten different, equally valid versions (as in the case of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem 'Frost at Midnight'), but it is important for readers to know the status and authority of the text being read. The first edition of H. Rider Haggard's *King's Solomon's Mines*, for example, features

a solar eclipse; in all subsequent editions, this becomes a lunar eclipse and Haggard's protagonists have an extra half-day of activities while they wait for this event to take place. Wordsworth's *The Prelude* of 1805 is more radical in its politics and less orthodoxly Christian in its religion than *The Prelude* of 1850. To discuss Haggard or 'Frost at Midnight' or *The Prelude*, we thus need to have some sense of the writing and publication history. The annotation of literary texts – the explication of references or the provision of knowledge and information that is no longer current – is also an important service to future readers and critics. Some information about Frederick Selous, Southern African politics and the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, for example, is likely to be useful to readers of *King Solomon's Mines*.

Perhaps equally important is the identification of current knowledge which will be unfamiliar to future readers. The precise nature of Charles Olson's excitement at the graphic possibilities of the typewriter in his 'Projective Verse' manifesto (Olson 1966), for example, already has to be explained to students familiar only with word-processing, while the kitchen range upon which Bloom cooks his breakfast in *Ulysses* is passing out of the experience of all but the oldest readers (Joyce 2000: 15–26). Modern textual scholarship is also often concerned with the contexts in which work is published. For example, our reading of Keats' Odes might be affected by the knowledge that his publisher was awaiting trial for sedition at the time the 1820 volume in which the Odes first appeared was published (McGann 1985: 15–65). Similarly, it might be useful in relation to other poets and fiction writers to know what kind of magazine a work first appeared in, who else was published in the magazine, what kind of readership the magazine was aimed at and what kind of visual material accompanied the text. Electronic media permit the reproduction of such publications and the dissemination of this information, but scholarly research is necessary to locate it and understand its significance.

This also suggests how literary research, too, has a custodial role. Where textual scholarship provides the texts, literary research keeps those texts alive and current. Literary scholarship mediates between the pastness of the text, the text's original production in a quite different culture, and present concerns and interests. Through publication and teaching, literary research also mediates between the pastness of the text and present (and future) readers. It is, in part, through the debates produced by literary research that particular texts are revived and kept in circulation. This can be seen, for example, in the enhanced reputation of Elizabeth Gaskell's work over the last fifty years or the greater prominence of Gothic fiction over the same period. A wide range of women's writing, including that by women of African, Chinese and South Asian descent – and other writing formerly marginalized – has been given a broader readership as a result of literary research. In all these cases, this revival of interest is motivated not simply by an antiquarian interest. These earlier works speak to contemporary concerns. Gaskell's novels about the relations between workers and their employers, the

role of unions, and the gap between rich and poor have an obvious relevance to our own times. The attention to women's writing more generally has contributed to the ongoing interrogation of women's role and identity, and attention to the immigrant and ethnic minority experience, while the interest in the Gothic reflects an increasing awareness of the literary expressions of fears and anxieties – and the reading of literary works as symptomatic of larger cultural anxieties.

Thus, there has recently been an engagement in literary studies with 'literature and terrorism', which aims to contextualize the present through comparison, for example, with nineteenth-century political 'terror'. Equally importantly, it also puts pressure on that word 'terrorism' – on the tendency to lump nationalist struggles and the resistance to occupation indiscriminately under this label together with 'terror' campaigns, or the tendency to focus on the 'low-tech' terror of home-made bombs and ignore the 'high-tech' terror of aerial bombardment. This is not to argue for a full-blown 'presentist' approach to literary studies and research; it is rather to register that literary research is inevitably shaped and nuanced by contemporary concerns. It derives from and returns to current debates within the subject and within the larger society. Similarly, it is not that earlier literature provides the answers to our questions, but rather that literary research provides an historical depth, other perspectives on contemporary issues, and an enrichment of our questioning and understanding.

The custodial role played by editors, annotators and critics has an obvious importance for other scholars and for other literary critics, but it also has important national and international functions. At its crudest, this can be seen in the heritage industry. It is often said that Wordsworth's poetry created the Lake District as a tourist destination. Certainly, Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, the Brontës and Woolf – to name just a few – have an important role in relation to internal and international tourism. Tourists are more likely to come to visit the houses of dead writers than the houses of dead politicians. Many British writers are extremely popular overseas among academics, teachers and ordinary readers – Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, Woolf and Thomas Hardy, for example, all have large followings in Japan. When I took my seat on a country bus in rural Bengal, I was drawn into a conversation with my neighbour about the comparative merits of Shakespeare and Tagore. Our literary heritage still wins friends for us overseas, and our writers are important cultural ambassadors. This is too often overlooked in an attempt to promote the contemporary at the expense of the past. Dickens might seem off-message to politicians keen to promote the United Kingdom as a 'young country', but Dickens' work will remain alive long after that political rhetoric will be beyond resuscitation.

Vital connections

Our literary heritage also has an important domestic role. The more than a thousand years of literary culture can be seen, as I have suggested,

to constitute a continuous negotiation of national identity. It thus also constitutes an overlooked cultural resource for the current attempts to define 'Englishness'. Rather than demanding allegiance to a cricket team, a flag or a single family – a feudal notion at odds with European citizenship and in conflict with the republican traditions of many new citizens – our politicians might consider the resources of our literary culture. As Martin Kettle has argued, there are 'some potent English traditions that have nothing to do with flags and everything to do with the tradition of Shakespeare, Bunyan, Blake, Shelley, Morris and Orwell'. Kettle is arguing for a specific tradition of 'Englishness', which he sums up as a vision of 'a free, shared and inspired England that has never existed but remains, in the Albion of the imagination, the England many of us desire' (Kettle 2008: 31).

Nevertheless, what his argument shows is the value of literature as a cultural resource. We might begin to take as much pride in this literary heritage as the Germans do in Goethe or the Bengalis of West Bengal in Tagore. Professional politicians have come up with narrow, rigid and one-dimensional notions of 'Englishness'. Our literary heritage is the heritage of all of us: it constitutes a rich common culture which has the potential to provide more subtle, informed and nuanced engagements with 'Englishness', and it has this potential precisely because it has been a site of negotiation, where 'Englishness' is a text constantly being written, rewritten, interpreted and reinterpreted within a long history of the migrations of peoples and cultures.

While professional politicians have come up with impoverished notions of 'Englishness', they have also failed to articulate a national vision beyond celebrity and the accumulation of wealth. The Beckhams became the cultural icons of the 1990s, and footballers and their wives have been set up as aspirational figures. At the same time, there has been ever-increasing evidence that these values of celebrity and wealth have not produced a healthy society at ease with itself but rather a culture of debt, depression, alcohol and substance abuse, mental health problems, and a widening gap between super-rich and poor. Again, our literary heritage has the potential to provide more ambitious versions of human aspiration than our politicians currently offer.

However, one obstacle to be overcome is the disenfranchisement of the working classes here as in many areas of contemporary society. Jonathan Rose has provided a valuable account of the working-class movement for self-education, a movement which would have been familiar with the authors invoked by Martin Kettle. Rose notes the importance of the canon of 'great books' to this working-class movement: 'If the classics offered artistic excellence, psychological insights, and penetrating philosophy to the governing classes ... then the politics of equality must begin by redistributing this knowledge to the governed classes' (Rose 2001: 7). Where such works provided their working-class readers with epiphanic visions of new possibilities, non-canonical literature, by reason of its formulaic nature,

'by and large did not perform the same function for proletarian readers' but operated instead as an 'escapist narcotic' (Rose 2001: 8). Where earlier generations of working-class readers were told that 'great books' were not for them but only for their social superiors, more recent working-class readers have been told that such works are elitist – and, therefore, not for them. Whatever the intention, the effect has been to exclude working-class readers from precisely those works which earlier generations found socially liberating and, self-fulfillingly, to cordon off 'elitist' literature as the preserve of an elite. Research in literature provides a constant tending and renewal of the national heritage, but changes have to be made elsewhere in the system for the working classes to receive their share of this heritage.

In the Preface to his *Mixed Essays*, Matthew Arnold asserted that 'Whoever seriously occupies himself with literature, will soon perceive its vital connexion with other agencies' (Arnold 1954: 545). Research in English literature, as Arnold suggests, involves also an engagement with those various vital connections. Recent research in literary studies into gender, post-colonialism, ethics, the spatial and economics, for example, all contributes to the exploration and understanding of our contemporary situation. This research, and the teaching based on it, feed into the public discussion of important contemporary issues. Literary research contributes to public debate through its own work and through the dissemination of that work through teaching. English literature programmes produce students with transferable skills in writing, research, organization of time, organization of material and oral presentation, but, more importantly, they also produce active citizens through their training of students to be critical and active readers, and through their varied engagements with literature's vital connections. Ronald Barnett argued long ago that 'A higher education organised around skills is no higher education' (Barnett 1994: 61). As Barnett pointed out, an emphasis on skills assumes a prior knowledge of the necessary skills and a prior judgement about the kinds of situation in which those skills are to be used. It assumes that businessmen, businesswomen and politicians are the best people to make these judgements. It ignores the short-termism that has characterized the decision-making of both business and politicians. It also assumes that the function of universities is to produce obedient employees rather than innovative, creative thinkers and critical, active citizens. The teaching of literature, by comparison, as Ben Knights has argued, engages in and fosters 'the conversations that livable societies need' (Knights 2008: 5).¹

Beyond the immediate short-term needs of business in terms of specific skill-sets, which these programmes can supply, are other skills, less comfortable for business and politicians, which are important for the long-term health of the society in which we live: imagination and vision; a practice of critical reading attentive to language and its implications; an understanding of the narratives, myths and symbols with which we make sense of our lives or by which others try to persuade us; and the ability

to bring wider temporal and cultural perspectives to bear on the present. Literary research, and the teaching that is based upon it, can thus produce citizens equipped to engage in the debates about values and social choices that should be part of a healthy democratic society.

However, above all, literature is an aesthetic experience. It derives from basic human activities such as creating and listening to stories, or taking pleasure in playing with the sounds, textures and rhythms of language. We create stories in order to make sense of the world we live in, but we play with the sound, texture and rhythm of language as part of our primary physical engagement with that world. The stories that we create and read give meaning to experience, offer models for and practice in such production of meaning, sustain memory and provide imaginative training in engagement with the unknown. They supply, in Ben Knights' words, 'a space for encounters with the unexpected' and 'mental maps for navigating complexity'. Play with the physical qualities of language is a much more basic part of our species equipment: what might be seen as the purely aesthetic dimension of literary experience. For Herbert Marcuse, the achievement of aesthetic form was the revelation of repressed dimensions of reality: 'a feast of sensuousness which shatters everyday experience and anticipates a different reality principle' (Marcuse 1978: 19). We might also see this primary physical engagement with the concrete elements of language as offering a more profound satisfaction than celebrity and the accumulation of wealth. Research in literature contributes to enhancing both our understanding of the stories that we tell and our sensual appreciation of the world, our pleasure in our senses and in aesthetic experiences. There is more to life than the market, more to life than the cycle of production and consumption. Beyond the training in transferable skills, or even the creation of active citizens, there is this understanding and enriching of what it means to be human.

Note

- 1 I am indebted to Professor Knights' discussion paper here and elsewhere in this essay and to Professor Kiernan Ryan.

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