

The Uselessness of Poetry and Criticism

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17 November 1992

This text was written in the autumn of 1992, in Japan, and sent as part of a letter to a friend on the 17th of November in that year. It is reproduced here with only minor corrections. Prior to uploading to the libellus.co.uk site (5 January 2017) it has not, as far as I recall, been published in any form.

What we need in the field of literary studies, and perhaps in other humanities, is purpose beyond the furthering of individual careers. We need this partly to justify our continued position in the academy, partly to rescue personal self-esteem. The need is widely though not universally recognized, and there have been many attempts to give the discipline rigour and direction, or at least direction. Very roughly we can say that there are four main strands to this attempt. Literary criticism has been described as:

1. Social engineering (Revolutionary variety). Works are evaluated and recommended in so far as they further whatever version of social change, left or right wing, the critic happens to advocate. Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, John Carey, and even De Man would be representative examples of this vast school. Those using arguments drawn from post-structuralist philosophy also fall into this category.
2. Social engineering (Conservative variety). Literature is described as a store house of morals and customs, the contents of which must be studied in order to keep its ideas in circulation, and its gates carefully guarded to prevent inappropriate admissions. Donald Davie would be a signal example of this kind of critic.
3. The singing of hymns to glorify the name of Art forever. On this view writings are said, paradoxically, to be valuable but without utility. (I suppose one might say that there are theological and atheological versions of this position, but there seems no need to distinguish them.) Critics from the first category frequently complain that this is a disingenuous form of Social Engineering (Conservative variety), and there is some justice in their claim.

Critics of this stamp are common, but not vocal. T. S. Eliot was the last to have much of a name, and his ideas were mixed up with others from my second and fourth types.

4. The servicing of a body of knowledge which has no significant social function, but which is enjoyed by a group of scholars and writers with similar interests. Literature on this view is a selfish pastime. This is an honest, but somewhat abject position, a last resort, possibly.

Oddly enough no one in the academy bothers, or, as far as I am aware, has ever bothered to suggest that critics might be performing a useful function for readers, or the literary culture (if there is such a thing). Presumably it is too absurd to merit even a first let alone a second thought. In addition to those in the groups above there is also a significant number of people who are dubious as to the value of criticism, write as little of it as is compatible with their professional standing, and concentrate their efforts on teaching, believing that although literary critical study is a worthless discipline it is a good education. Since it is difficult to quantify the results of a three year course this belief resists scrutiny. However, in the one area where some precision can be obtained, the question of literacy, it appears to be false. Examiners in English repeatedly complain of the low standard of basic rhetorical competence.

I need not say that no one of the categories has been overwhelmingly successful either within the universities or outside them. The failure to exert influence beyond the library and classroom has been a greater problem for those interested in Social Engineering, hence the bitterness of their internal conflicts and their concentration on matters of somewhat local interest, such as course syllabuses.

The result is that the English speaking world now maintains a large number of people working on a field with dubious educational credentials, suspiciously tenuous claims to be the effective conscience of their societies, and no apparent technological value. In short they appear to be useless, as the more skeptical students often say. The reason for this, I suggest, is related to a feature of the recent development of literature itself.

There has been a consistent trend within the last two-hundred years for literary authors to regard their compositions as something other than instruments of knowledge, or to believe that the knowledge they offer is somehow quite different, and superior, from that of any other thought. The first approach is a mystical one, and not susceptible of discussion. The second position is based on a misunderstanding, sometimes

perpetuated by otherwise very intelligent people who suggest that there is a radical disjunction between two domains, on the one hand scientific and on the other literary culture. It is more accurate to say that literature, in which I would include a good deal of philosophy, has failed to maintain the contact which it once enjoyed with the main currents of human intellectual activity, and has thus been left with a heterogeneous bundle of ideas drawn from old science. The difference, then, is not between Science and Poetry so much as between current knowledge and speculation and the knowledge and speculation of the past. Literary scholars and critics have followed the path beaten by the writers they study and are unwilling to accept any degree of obsolescence in literature, therefore forcing themselves into those sadly untenable claims.

It is attractive to think that since the problem began with writers who were not professional critics that the remedy might begin there too, and it would certainly be very interesting if poets, in particular, were to begin taking an interest in the extraordinary diversity of contemporary scientific thinking, and writing material which used such thought as its point of departure. The world-view from the laboratory is often presented as being essentially incompatible with that of normal healthy human beings, yet there seems a good a chance that it appears so because we have stopped using the resources of literary genre to find ways of handling the new ideas generated by quantitative researchers. Poets could, with some effort, begin to do this, but perhaps it is more practical to hope that the researchers themselves might adopt this form for speculations, ethical ones for instance, related to, yet not properly published with, their technical papers. In fact popular science books function in rather this way at present, but they suffer from two defects, first of all length, and secondly a crudity of tone ("RNA is like a burger") which has exegetical value but so deadens the language that it prevents rather than fosters further thinking. Dawkins seems to avoid these problems, though I really don't know how he does it.

If literature were to take this route, or be directed into it, then perhaps it would again be an important and valued aspect of intellectual activity, instead of a tolerated but inconsequential preciousness, a snobbish equivalent of flower-arranging. Critics would also find themselves engaged in commentary and discussion close to the centre of contemporary concerns instead of being on the periphery. But this would only settle a very small area of literary studies, that devoted to the present, and the scholarship devoted to the literature of the past would be either abolished entirely, as worthless, or left in chaos. There is nothing, on the face of it, against either of these two options. If the literature of the past is no longer of interest, and current criticism in my discipline

suggests this to be the case, then it hardly matters whether it disappears or is left to collapse in a ramshackle heap. The first of these is not likely, but the second seems a certainty, regardless of whether contemporary writing recovers a connection with the major fields of scientific thought or not. I am inclined to think that this would be a pity. Surely the records of several thousand years of human activity are worth something? The answer is that they are of course worth something, but not in their own terms. For these works to be valuable we need an organizing principle derived not from the premises which underlie them, but from the most sophisticated thought of our own times.

This is not, as you will realize, a suggestion that knowledge of science will enrich the interpretations of literary scholars. We have had a great deal of that kind of approach already, drawing on Freud and others in psychology, from various sources in philosophy, and from the social sciences. It has failed to produce valuable results partly because the disciplines chosen as sources of new blood have been anti-knowledge, like post-structuralist philosophy, and so have confirmed critics in their lassitude, and partly because the disciplines which literary critics can understand well enough to use as interpretative tools are not very far from being literary studies themselves. Psychoanalysis, for example, is at least aiming at understanding, but seems to bring little that was not present in literature already, an indebtedness that Freud famously conceded, and is obvious in any case from his use of Greek myth. Sometimes their propositions are a little more clearly formulated, as with dream theory, the concept of parapraxis, or, less certainly, the unconscious, and one is grateful for these contributions. But against the modest triumphs you have to set the messy terminology and conspicuous failures, such as the Freudian psychic drama of id and ego, which seems simply less adequate in modelling an individual's processes than the dramas it draws upon. The social sciences are similarly dependent on literature for much of their content and method, a good deal of anthropology for example is just travel writing, and so have not brought any coherence of purpose to my field. Indeed, when applied, as they often are, as a method of facilitating interpretation in critical approaches based on Social Engineering (Revolutionary Variety) it has only deepened the sense of futility.

I further suspect that any attempt to use other disciplines as interpretative tools within literary study will not address its fundamental aimlessness. Implicit in such approaches is the suggestion that the literary community is the end consumer. This sense of superiority will lead to essays in which a principle derived from cognitive science, say, is discovered as being already contained in some work of literature, the

conclusion being that the literary mind, as we suspected all along, has nothing to learn from other fields. What such an investigation should, but is unlikely, to address is the fact that these similarities arise not because literature reached the same conclusions first, but because the matters being handled are often the same. The apparent priority of literature will be made an excuse for evading the fact that the propositions of the sciences simply have, in pragmatic terms, higher "cash value", that they are superior means to understanding.

My suggestion, then, is that literary scholars, and perhaps workers in many departments in the humanities, would be well advised to stop thinking of their disciplines as self-sufficient ends, and to recognize that they must play a part in a larger project directed towards an understanding of human behaviour. There should be no question of literary departments having to "take orders" from human behavioural science, so there need be no humiliation, though it might enforce some healthy humility. Scholars in these fields would have to begin by sorting out their fields so that they can be used by other disciplines investigating human activities. I have only the dimmest idea of what this might entail, but a first guess suggests that literature might yield material under the following main headings.

A. Writing is a record of one particular aspect of one particular form of human behaviour, linguistic behaviour. Literary scholars can prepare and make available to researchers in language studies a vast body of data concerning language use. In fact this is one of the very few areas in which literary scholars, the much despised philologists, paleographers, editors, and lexicographers, have already prepared their discipline for collaboration with the sciences.

B. Writing is a human behaviour concerned with problem-solving, description, and information storage. An understanding of the previous forms of these activities may go a long way to assisting an abstract study of human activity and behaviour.

C. Literature contains voluminous records of human behaviour, and should be an exceedingly valuable data source for those working towards abstract descriptions of man.

D. Stylistic studies could, and should, provide guidance for those wishing to write today by analysing the practices of past writers.

This makes the future of the literary academic sound like that of a librarian, schoolmaster, and historian combined, and apart from the fact that such scholars would

have to acquire a working knowledge of many scientific disciplines, it would indeed be rather like the nineteenth century conception of the professor of literature. Academics would find this idea quite demeaning and insensitive to the complexities of thought, and but I can see no other way out of the impasse, and do not in fact feel there to be any considerable problem with turning the study of past literature into an honourable part of the study of human behaviour. If contemporary literature were also to reform along the lines I have suggested then there would be plenty of opportunity for literary discussion, but it would be of an urgent, public and lively kind, not the nugatory and private perambulations we are familiar with today.

The question of course arises as to what a worker in the literary humanities can do towards such an ideal. A sensible plan might include all or some of the following:

1. Broader interests. It is plainly essential that humanities workers take an interest in the activities of other fields, particularly those with which they will probably co-operate frequently in the future, such as evolutionary biology. I don't know whether this needs to be bound into course requirements for graduates, or whether it would do much good even if it was. The experience of the American system suggests that the effects would be minimal.
2. Reform of contemporary writing. Rather than paying lip-service to the vacuities of contemporary writing critics and poets might begin to point out the intellectual weaknesses of today's prose and verse, and provide some specimens of writing which recovers literature as a vehicle of sophisticated speculation. They might also encourage rather than exclude literary writing by those professionally committed to other fields.
3. Reform of contemporary literary scholarship. The example of the relationship between philology and linguistics suggests that other departments of literary study could well prepare themselves by improving the rigour of their scholarship. At present many literary academics are not only ignorant of the broader field of literature, which is forgivable, but also of their supposed area of special competence. It is surprising to find how few scholars consult doctoral dissertations on their subject, or use the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index*, and other similar reference sources, to keep track of current work in their area. Given the quality of much of the published criticism this is also understandable, but the principle is not a good one. Undergraduates and graduates are often left without instruction in investigative methodology, particularly in bibliography, and are made to feel that their "ideas" are much more important than their

spade work, and as a result most so-called research is little more than a recapitulation of facts already published, and commonplace observation. We talk of "contributions to knowledge" but take very little trouble to find out what has in fact accumulated. The remedy for this is an increasing stress on thorough bibliography and literary history, both areas which have suffered a considerable loss of prestige as a result of the "critical" hegemony. This is perhaps a personal gripe; my own publications are almost all historical or editorial.

A related matter is the use of machines. Most literary academics now use computers, as writing tools, which is good, but even amongst younger scholars there is little understanding of the power of electronic data storage and handling.

4. Exploratory studies. We have no clear idea of how our material might be handled to prepare it for submission to the behavioural sciences, and at this stage we are perhaps justified in perpetrating highly speculative essays using quite inadequate understanding of those sciences. This might have a twofold result. Firstly we might ourselves discover methods that are productive, secondly the behavioural sciences might be sufficiently interested by our failures to regard the humanities as worth attention. The stress in such studies would be, as I have said above, on the interpretation and handling the literature of the past as data for a larger programme of scientific knowledge, and not as an end in it itself. The difficulties of this should not be underestimated, and even those sympathetic to such a project would undoubtedly find that old habits die hard.

In the latter fourth group I am myself attempting to use part of my historical work on Wyndham Lewis, a misanthropic satirist, to think about the ways that human beings estimate the value of those around them. I suspect that much literature provides evidence of human evaluatory mechanisms in action, particularly the difficulties experienced by people in urban situations of high density when those who are proximate to us physically are not necessarily either kin or co-operators. The stages of my hypothesis run something like this:

A. A great deal of human literature, at least from the West, is about finding good reasons for not feeling guilty about hating other people. For example certain doctrines of the religions, the writings of satirists, and the strictures of the moralists all attempt to provide good reasons for sorting sheep from goats.

B. Equally, a large part of human literature seems concerned to provide good reasons for not hating other people at all. The religions again provide examples,

and the literature of brotherliness and concord is found everywhere and is socially approved.

C. I suggest that these two kinds of writing are both attempting to address the results of a tendency to place a low valuation on those around individuals in situations of high density. My guess, for what it is worth, is that humans have evolved mechanisms to enable the estimation of the value of other human beings with whom the individual finds itself grouped. The details of this would be Game Theory, I suppose, and beyond me, but I imagine that it would be related to the size of the group (those very distant in a co-operative network not being of great value but possibly being significant competitors), the frequency of interactions, and so on. Below a certain threshold of value the group would not be serving the interests of the individual, and that individual would be likely to split off from the group. I also hypothesize a mechanism inducing co-operation (we are after all very co-operative creatures) which would regulate the evaluatory mechanism by ensuring that departure from a group did not occur without a sufficiently large number of companions. These mechanisms would probably be useful for those in small groups living in large areas of territory. When the valuation fell below a certain threshold the group might factionalize and split, one or all moving off into new territories. But in the situations of high density familiar to us we are unable to assemble viable factions, and would not of course be so silly as to flee on our own. Hence, in a situation where the evaluatory mechanism is saying "You are surrounded by enemies, defend yourself and flee", the co-operative mechanism may be saying "You haven't enough co-operators, make friends." Subjectively this is the feeling, familiar enough surely, of both loathing other people, and feeling that you belong to them. Thus far it probably resembles exactly what would have happened in smaller groups. The difference is that it is very difficult in urban areas to assemble a faction, and even if you can it is next to impossible to flee. Thus many urbanites live permanently in a situation where they are simultaneously extremely hostile and extremely co-operative towards those around them. Subjectively speaking, we don't like people very much but feel guilty about it.

The results of these mechanisms would be expected to show up in all sorts of behaviour. I am merely suggesting that they are observable in literature, and very far from saying that it is necessarily the best place to observe them, though access to such a broad historical sweep is probably extremely useful.

D. It seems to me that the history of literature, particularly that of satire, records a number of efforts to transform this inner conflict into a more explicit form. (Perhaps in situations where unconscious processing jams or fails to produce a resolution the matter is referred to consciousness, whatever that is.) None of these attempts is entirely successful. I suspect that one of the reasons for this is that the adequate transfer to consciousness requires the organism to face its own selfishness, and there are probably strong barriers in the way of this, as Trivers has suggested. Lewis's career shows a man with a highly developed sense of hostility making several different attempts to handle his misanthropy consciously and without guilt, that is to say to face his dislike and neutralize the desire for public sanction (the desire for a supportive faction). (Philanthropic writers do the opposite.) In fact I suspect that all his art and philosophy can be seen as gyrating around the question of the value of other human beings. During the course of his life he seems to have tried several guilt neutralizing positions, ending up after some very near passes with self-knowledge, in some kind of absolutist religion, which enabled him to punish other human beings through the agency of God, who functions rather like a semi-permeable membrane through which Lewis's hatred could pass in one direction without any guilt coming back in the other.

The flaws and the vagueness of the psychodynamics outlined here are obvious, and it doesn't seem likely that literary scholars will be able to do very much with their own data for quite some time. I merely hope to make that data sound worth attention, and to offer a reliable guide to it.