Introduction: The Value of the Novel

> The ceaseless pursuit of data to quantify the value of any endeavour is catastrophic to true understanding.
>
> Dave Eggers, *The Circle*[1]

We are living now at a critical time in the history of our collective understanding of value. Across cultures, in a number of different, interlocking ways, and at local and international levels, one can see fundamental shifts occurring in the processes by which cultural value is produced and disseminated.

The first of these shifts has to do with the fate of what, in the humanities over the last half century, has been called 'theory'. Somewhere in the middle of the last century our understanding of the role and the purpose of the humanities underwent a revolution, sparked by the emergence of 'theory' as a new critical discourse, which turned many of the assumptions that had driven our response to the arts on their head. Where the spokespersons for the arts in the earlier half of the century saw the humanities as the guardian of a set of (western) cultural values, a new generation of critics that came to prominence in the sixties and seventies (including figures such as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva) developed a much more critical and sceptical approach to the very concept of value itself. For these later critics, the role of art was not to uphold any particular ideology or any given cultural, ethical or moral doctrine or creed; on the contrary, art and literature were valuable precisely insofar as they were able to set value aside. It was the freedom of the critical imagination from ideological prescription,

from any compulsory adherence to commonly held 'values', that granted the arts their extraordinary power. Where influential critics in the earlier decades of the century, such as F.R Leavis, Q.D. Leavis and I.A. Richards, assigned to the arts a moral purpose, charging newly defined university departments in the humanities with the task of preserving a set of cultural values from the perceived threat of decline, the explosion of revolutionary thinking in the 1960s and 1970s drew its energy from a furious rejection of this conservatism. It was the arts which were able, uniquely, to give expression to new cultural possibilities, to decolonise the mind, to loosen the grip of the patriarchal, the heteronormative and the rational in order to explore the non-normative, the transgressive, the dissident; and it was in part the concerted attack on 'value', the overturning of prior conceptions of cultural propriety, that enabled this revolution to take place.

If this struggle between the Leavisites and the new wave of critics committed to 'theory' determined the course of the humanities through the last decades of the twentieth century, however, the first decades of the new century have seen something like a reversal in our conception of value. The 'theory wars', as the struggle was known in the eighties and nineties, were well and truly won by the theorists, and the revolutionary thinking made possible by Derrida, Barthes and Foucault became a new kind of orthodoxy. But with the apparent triumph of theory, and with the reshaping of the humanities that came in its wake, we have seen a curious depletion in the energy that drove the theory wars themselves, and with it a creeping nostalgia for the old spectres of cultural value that had seemed so effectively to have been vanquished. As we move into what has been called a 'post-theory' era, we have seen, across a wide range of cultural fora, the growing desire for a new means of articulating a set of values for our own generation, of staging what Dorothy J. Hale has called a 'new ethical defense of literary value'.[2]

To chart this volte face in one of its many incarnations, one only has to look at the trajectory taken by the career of Terry Eagleton, one of the most prominent Marxist literary critics of his generation.[3] Eagleton's 1983 work *Literary Theory: An Introduction* marks a critical moment in the establishment of 'theory' as an orthodoxy. This was a work that gave one of the most influential accounts of

theory as the privileged prism through which literature should be read – and was one of the first to introduce undergraduates en masse to theory as a foundation of literary thinking. And central to this 'introduction' is the rejection of literary value as a guiding concept. In the opening chapter of the book, entitled 'What Is Literature', Eagleton carefully explains that 'anything can be literature', and conversely that 'anything which is regarded as unalterably and unquestionably literature – Shakespeare for example – can cease to be literature'.[4] To read literature critically, one has to develop a critical understanding of what Eagleton later called the 'ideology of the aesthetic',[5] to develop a thoroughly sceptical attitude to the 'institution' called literature – even to the extent, Eagleton says, that 'when I use the words "literary" and "literature" from here on in this book, I place them under an invisible crossing-out mark' (p. 9). To read 'theoretically', he suggests, is to recognise, contra ideologues such as Q.D. Leavis and I.A. Richards, that 'there is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable *in itself*, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it' (p. 10). It is only when we recognise this, when we see that '"Value" is a transitive term' that 'means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in the light of given purposes' (p. 10), that we can read literature as a *critique* of ideological forces, rather than simply a product of them. Everything that Eagleton goes on to say about theory – in his subsequent trawl through structuralism, poststructuralism and psychoanalysis – follows from this initial act of demystification, this rejection of the principle that literature enshrines value. But thirty years later, in his 2013 book *How to Read Literature*, Eagleton seems to have turned full circle and comes to endorse the principle of literary value – as an antidote to perceived cultural decline – fully as enthusiastically as Leavis and Richards. This later Eagleton, very like Richards in his 1924 work *The Principles of Literary Criticism*, fears that we no longer know how to read literature, that 'like clog dancing, the art of analysing works of literature is almost dead on its feet'.[6] It is no longer our duty to cast doubt on the intrinsic value of literature; rather, our urgent task now, in the wake of theory, is to remind ourselves what literature is, and

how to read it, by 'paying close attention to literary form and technique' (p. ix). The liberating idea, so central to *Literary Theory*, that 'anything can be literature', is now, for Eagleton, the tiresome confusion that has to be resolved. Readers today tend to 'set aside the "literariness"' of what they read, and so are unable to appreciate the distinction between 'a poem or play or novel', and 'an account of the incidence of soil erosion in Nebraska'. 'It is true', Eagleton admits,

> that one could always read a report on soil erosion in this 'literary' way. It would simply mean paying close attention to the workings of its language. For some literary theorists, this would be enough to turn it into a work of literature, though probably not one to rival *King Lear*. (pp. 2–3)

Where the 1983 Eagleton is keen to imagine a time when Shakespeare might be drained of literary value, a time when 'Shakespeare would be no more valuable than much present day graffiti' (p. 10), the Eagleton of 2013 holds Shakespeare as an example of literary value that not even the most extreme example of bad reading can challenge. In 1983 the task was to strip reading of pre-existing value judgements; in 2013 it is to find a way of rediscovering precisely these values, as a means of re-educating the public on how to read. Literary works, the 2013 Eagleton writes, 'demand a particularly vigilant kind of reading, one which is alert to tone, mood, pace, genre, syntax, grammar, texture, rhythm, narrative structure, punctuation, ambiguity – in fact to everything that comes under the heading of form' (p. 2). It is these critical principles that we must attend to now, rather than any Marxist debunking of aesthetic ideology, because if we don't the very thing that we are setting out to theorise – literature itself – might melt into air, too effectively neutralised by those 'invisible crossing-out marks' that Eagleton wielded so enthusiastically in the midst of his revolutionary zeal.

This reversal, of course, is a very localised one, to be explained as much by the passage of Eagleton's thinking as by any larger reassertion of value. But nevertheless, the trajectory taken by Eagleton's work does accord with a more general sense that the 'literary' itself, so long repressed by literary theorists as a dubious term laden with ideological baggage, is starting to return. Not only is there a wave of criticism – by a wide and very diverse range of critics such as Dorothy

Hale, Martha Nussbaum, Joshua Landy, Lisa Zunshine, Sianne Ngai, Helen Small, Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan, among others[7] – which sets out to reinvent a critical vocabulary with which to address literary value, but the teaching of literature in the academy itself is undergoing a significant reorganisation. While 'theory' was the dominant force in the Anglo-American academy through the final decades of the last century, the new century has seen an accelerated shift away from 'theory' and towards 'creative writing' as the engine which drives literary thinking. As Mark McGurl demonstrated in his influential book *The Program Era*, the growth of creative writing programmes in the United States throughout the postwar decades has become exponential in recent years, as academia has increasingly set the terms not only of how literature is read, but also of how it is produced.[8] Where 'theory' bred a generation of critics who were sceptical of the validity of literature itself as an object of study, the 'program era' is tilting us in the other direction, towards a situation in which the distinction between creative and critical writing is becoming more difficult to sustain, and in which critical writing itself is becoming increasingly 'literary', increasingly belle-lettristic. Where the last generation practised a thoroughgoing scepticism about the validity of literature as an object of study, the current generation is growing up with a scepticism about the possibility of criticism as an autonomous activity. To address literature now, one is encouraged to produce it, to exercise one's 'creativity' – like the clones in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* – rather than one's critical faculties.

Alongside this shift from theory towards creative writing – from theory to practice – as the guiding principle of critical thought in the academy, we have seen a much larger, more systemic instrumentalisation of the academy itself – an instrumentalisation which is bound up with the renewed emphasis on value as the operative term in critical analysis. If literary critics are finding themselves now reasserting the value of their discipline, so universities throughout the English-speaking world are forced, by ever more stringent forms of government control, to produce evidence of the value of their own modes of inquiry. While the era of high theory in Anglophone universities had its own kind of instrumentality – driven as it was by

the perceived need to redistribute what John Guillory has called (after Pierre Bourdieu) 'cultural capital' – the contemporary university is coming under increasing pressure to adapt its procedures to the demands, and the logic, of the global market place.[9] In recent years, universities across the developed world have undergone some version of what David Lurie, in J.M. Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace*, calls the 'great rationalization'. 'Once a professor of modern languages' at Cape Town University College, Lurie says that, since 'Classics and Modern Languages were closed down', he has been an 'adjunct professor of communications'.[10] 'Like all rationalized personnel', he goes on, Lurie is allowed to teach one course a year on his own specialisation – in this case, romantic poetry – but for the rest of the time 'he teaches Communications 101, "Communication Skills", and Communication 201, "Advanced Communication skills"' (p. 3). This reorganisation, he says, is undertaken in order to put literary knowledge to some kind of practical socioeconomic use. The 'first premise' of 'his new discipline', as 'enunciated in the Communications 101 handbook', is that 'Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other' (pp. 3–4). Anyone working in a literature department in an English-speaking university in the first decades of the new century will recognise this premise – that literature is not to be valued or understood on its own terms, but as part of a wider cultural, social or economic good. As is boasted in the mission statement of a fictional university in Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake*, the aim of the contemporary university is not to open a space for disinterested thought – or for what is now sometimes called, in a rather chilling term, 'blue skies research' – but to teach transferable life skills, to make reading literature the occasion for learning how to be good and productive citizens, who can effectively communicate their intentions to each other. Atwood's university has a high minded motto in Latin, which declares that '*Ars Longa Vita Brevis*', but in case this devotion to the arts might be off-putting to the parents of prospective students, the Latin motto is accompanied by an English one which is both more direct and more practical – 'Our Students Graduate with Employable Skills'.[11]

The contemporary tendency towards a reassertion of literary value – Hale's 'ethical defense' – is, then, bound up with the requirement that universities make themselves 'viable' in the contemporary market place – that, in the terms employed by the UK academy, they demonstrate that their disciplines have verifiable social and economic 'impact'. And, alongside this problematic coupling, the question of value today is determined by a third, even more wide-ranging and systemic development in the production and dissemination of literary knowledge – that is, the emergence of the internet as the new site of public discussion and debate. As Ronan McDonald argues in his important 2007 book *The Death of the Critic*, the spectacular rise of social media has effectively democratised the process of evaluation, meaning that the 'age of the critic as the arbiter for public taste and cultural consumption seems to have passed'.[12] McDonald sees a continuity between the rejection of literary value in the university during the age of theory, and the appearance of the online commentariat – the blogger, the reviewer on Amazon – as a new forum of public criticism. Universities abdicated their role as *evaluators* of culture last century and so now, with the appearance of a vast and uncontainable public sphere in which we are all encouraged to evaluate everything from Chinese takeaways to holiday villas to productions of *King Lear*, the professional literary critic has little or no purchase on the process by which literary value is understood. McDonald's response to this situation is to open another front in that 'defense of literary value' staged by Hale, and to urge the humanities to return to their primary task of evaluating, of weighing and judging the value of literature, thus setting the terms of the public debate again. If, in the best case scenario, the critic is not dead but simply in a deep coma, McDonald argues, the 'first step in reviving him or her is to bring the idea of artistic merit back to the heart of academic criticism' (p. 149). 'If criticism is to be valued', he suggests, 'if it is to reach a wide public, it needs to be evaluative' (p. 149). Dave Eggers' 2013 novel *The Circle* offers a stark picture of the fate of the critic, and of the university, if the logic of communal life inherent in the rise of Google is to go unchecked. In Eggers' novel, it is the headquarters of the global media company *The Circle* (a loose fictionalisation of Google) that

offers itself as 'the campus', and the task of evaluation – not only of the arts but of all forms of public, political and democratic life – has passed to 'the people', through the hands of the giant and all powerful corporation. In this nightmare version of the rise of the public critic, all citizens evaluate and judge at all moments of every day, but of course, with the complete democratisation of the public sphere, with what is imagined as complete 'transparency', comes an utter failure of the critical faculty, a loss of those forms of privacy and critical distance that are essential, in Eggers' terms, to 'true understanding' (p. 485).

It is in the context of these mutations in our understanding of value that this book sets out to rethink the value of the novel. To ask what the value of the novel is today – to seek to reassess and redefine why we read novels, and what they are for – is to engage this set of often contradictory imperatives. It is to join a group of thinkers who see that now, in the wake of the theoretical developments of the last century, and with the decline of postmodernism as a cultural dominant, it becomes not only timely but also necessary to produce a new means of understanding what kind of a thing literature is – how it differs from other forms of representation, how it makes meaning, how literary form allows us to imagine and represent the cultures in which we live. As the energy that drove the theoretical terms in which these questions were couched in recent decades has dwindled, we enter into a transitional period in the history of both literature and criticism in which it is necessary to pose them once again, to rethink the paradigms and the cultural forms in which we frame our sense of literary value, our sense of why and how literature matters. The revolutionary literary thinking that flourished in the second half of the last century harnessed the earlier discoveries of Darwin, Marx and Freud to produce a truly transformative understanding of the world-making potential of the arts; but if the legacy of that revolution is to extend meaningfully into the new century – and into what has (somewhat regrettably) been called the post-postmodern moment – we now need to develop a new set of critical languages with which to articulate the enduring power of literature and the arts to invent for us an idea of the world, to 'shape', as one of Don DeLillo's narrators puts

it, 'the way we think and see'.[13] But if the legacy of 'theory' pushes us in this direction, the danger is that, in doing so, we are led also, as Eagleton was in 2013, to cancel that very scepticism about the ideology of value that drove theory in the first place. To enter now into the discourse of value is to risk aligning oneself with those forces that are 'rationalising' the university, that are requiring the humanities to 'account' for themselves, to make claims about their social and economic value that are comically at odds with their own disinterestedness, their own critical detachment from the commodity, the market place, the whole question, indeed, of value. The challenge that faces those who would measure, now, the value of the arts, is how to capture and articulate the ethical force of the literary, without resurrecting a conservative, Leavisite critical language in which to express it; how to produce an adequately rich account of the democratic power of the literary imagination, its capacity to continually remake the world in which we live, without returning to a prior model of the critic as 'arbiter of public taste'; how to inherit the legacy of theory, without betraying its spirit.

Indeed, the attempt to bring the language of value to the novel now might risk a kind of rebuff from the fictions themselves, from novels which are written in the teeth of a contemporary culture which ruthlessly commodifies the author, relentlessly driving him or her to adopt a persona and a genre which can be readily marketed and monetised. Coetzee's David Lurie makes a typically melancholic, muted complaint against the forces which marshal both critic and novelist into communication when he quietly but rather devastatingly rejects the terms of his own courses, 'Communications 101 and 102': 'Although he devotes hours of each day to his new discipline', he says, he finds its premise, that humans create language to communicate with one another, 'preposterous'. 'His own opinion', he goes on, 'which he does not air, is that the origins of speech lie in song, and the origins of song in the need to fill out with sound the overlarge and rather empty human soul' (p. 4). Lurie, and perhaps Coetzee, chooses a kind of empty sound over the requirement that language should be briskly effective, fit for purpose. And if Coetzee's response to this requirement is a typical blend of the stately and the

melancholic, then Philip Roth's is typically intemperate, furious, scattershot: 'There was a time', the deranged critic Amy Bellette writes in Roth's 2007 novel *Exit Ghost*, 'when intelligent people used literature to think'; but, she goes on, 'that time is coming to an end'.[14] The culture of accountability, the culture of the rationalised university, forces literature into a utilitarianism which means that it can no longer help one to think, can only imprison one more narrowly in the way things are. 'The predominant uses to which literature is now put', Bellette writes with growing fury,

> in the culture pages of the enlightened newspapers and in university English departments are so destructively at odds with the aims of imaginative writing, as well as with the rewards that literature offers an open-minded reader, that it would be better if literature were no longer put to any public use. (p. 182)

If one sets out to judge the novel, to put it to good use, to ask how it might serve an ethical function or have a cultural value, one might find oneself incurring the wrath of Roth, or the lofty disdain of Coetzee. The novel now has, and perhaps has always had, a streak of steely resistance to those who would evaluate it – to its readers, who one of Samuel Beckett's narrators refers to, at a memorable moment, as 'cunts like you'.[15] But if the process of reading, of evaluating, risks encountering this kind of resistance, this is absolutely not a reason to stop pushing at the novel, to stop asking why and how it matters, in the full expectation of a satisfactory answer. Indeed, it is a central premise of this book that the novel's particular resistance to reading, its perennial refusal of the conventions within which we might seek to evaluate it, is one of its greatest gifts, and a source of its own ethical thinking, its uniquely powerful capacity to critique the cultures from which it emerges and within which it is read. This is not of course to deny that the novel has a positive cultural function, or that it offers itself to readers as a means of imagining modes of collective life. The novel, more than any other art form or mode of representation, has provided, since its emergence in its modern form in the eighteenth century, the forms with which we have fashioned our cultural communities.[16] However 'preposterous' it might seem, to Lurie, to suggest that literature might have some kind of social