

Introduction

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You cannot lead people to what is good; you can only lead them to some place or other. The good is outside the space of facts.¹

In the preface to his 1904 play *John Bull's Other Island*, George Bernard Shaw remarks that a healthy man is unconscious of the working of his bones until he breaks one. Then he thinks of little else but having it set.² In that respect, the recent soul searching and self-scrutiny in the humanities is a symptom of the malaise that afflicts them.³ The humanities have become self-reflexive because they are under threat, blocked, and queried by neoliberal, econometric ideologies of higher education. When the value of something is self-evident and secure, it needs no audit or intellectual justification. We do not have collections of scholarly essays or polemical pamphlets on the importance of research into leukemia or waste-free nuclear fission. But professors in the liberal arts have responded to the cold eye of policy makers, government officials, and prospective students, with books, articles, conferences, and opinion pieces arguing for the contribution that research and teaching in humanities makes to society, or offering jeremiads that this social good is not sufficiently registered by econometric measures.⁴

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. Von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3e.

² George Bernard Shaw, *Collected Plays with Their Prefaces*, ed. Dan Laurence, vol. 2 (London: Bodley Head, 1971), 842.

³ Bill Reading's *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) is a key analysis. See also Cary Nelson, *No University Is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom* (New York: New York University Press, 2010) and Jeffrey R. Di Leo, *Corporate Humanities in Higher Education: Moving beyond the Neoliberal Academy* (London: Palgrave, 2013) and Simon During, "Precariousness, Literature and the Humanities Today," *Australian Humanities Review* 58 (May 2015), 51–6.

⁴ For example, Jonathan Bate, ed., *The Public Value of the Humanities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011) and Peter Brooks and Hilary Jewett, *The Humanities and Public Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

To compete in a global economy, policy makers urge, students need to be prepared for the workforce, well grounded in scientific and technological subjects, if not acquitted in directly vocational or professional degrees. Economies, it seems obvious, will benefit more from research on optic fibers and telecommunications than debates about neoclassical prosody and the modernist novel. Politicians have increasingly been explicit about this preference for “useful” degrees like science and engineering rather than arts or humanities, much to the chagrin of the professors of English or history. When they then protest about how crucial their role is, these academics often speak to external audiences, to policy makers, politicians, or parents. Certainly, extramural communication is essential for all academic disciplines, not least to avoid the danger of narcissism and isolation, and it can be beneficial for any enterprise to take stock of its point and purpose occasionally. Yet the imperative to articulate the value of the humanities in language that is at once clear enough for the nonspecialist and brief enough for the newspaper can push sophisticated scholars into simplistic polemics and apologies. Academics who might be inclined to question and probe beneath assumptions and ideologies – whose contribution to society might lie precisely in analyzing and theorizing the genealogy of our values – have instead found themselves ventriloquizing the idiom of marketing managers and administrators, a language that too often deploys a grammar and codification unable to express novel modes of the good.

Moreover, it is questionable whether the case for the “humanities” is best served by presenting a range of new and old disciplines as a unitary block, sequestered from the main economy-building business of the university proper and grouped as soft, overlapping fields. Individual humanities subjects have their own discursive procedures, formations, histories, and, consequently, justifications. The prospective case for English differs from that which might be made for history or philosophy or music or the fine arts. While everybody on campus, from corporate vice-chancellor to radical sociology lecturer, extols interdisciplinarity in principle, and while alliances across fields are often prudent or strategic, the individual disciplines have been remarkably tenacious, with the venerable societies, journals, and institutions of subjects like history, philosophy, and English still well entrenched. The case for them can be strengthened by plumbing the specific characteristics, priorities, qualities, and traditions of these fields, rather than always defending the value of the humanities or liberal arts as a spurious homogenous whole.

The Values of Literary Studies: Critical Institutions, Scholarly Agendas is aimed at specialist academics and graduate students and not at an

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audience of policy makers, journalists, or administrators. At the same time, it emerges consciously from a context in which literary studies is called to account in a more outward-facing value gauge. It therefore aspires to inform public attempts to articulate the social value of advanced-level study and research into literary texts without being such an attempt itself. This collection seeks to make explicit contesting values in the academic study of literature for its own practitioners in the academic sphere. But it is not simply an *apologia* or a collection of diverse justifications for the intellectual enterprise of literary study. Some essays do explicitly address what good literary studies has brought or might bring to the world, but most seek to indicate the merits of the field through examining its own contesting principles and priorities. They analyze the goals or ends that literary academics deploy in their criticism and scholarship, a more immanent exercise than an external valuation, but one that does not rely on imposed criteria. This collection proceeds on a conviction that we find the values of literary studies, at least in part, by identifying and articulating the values *in* literary studies. Or, to borrow Aristotle's distinction in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, one way to find the *arete* (virtue/excellence) of literary studies is to delineate its *telos* (purpose/goal).

Of course, literary studies is not one thing and neither are its values. A typical department of English or comparative literature might include one faculty member working on a research-funded project with colleagues from the sciences on neurological dimensions to narrative, another researching the philology of Icelandic quest narratives, another working on performativity and gender in relation to contemporary urban street theater, and another working on neglected social histories of Jacobean chapbooks. All these projects are informed by diverse agendas and methods and would provide widely different accounts of their *raison d'être*. Each might have a different sense of the sort of knowledge acquisition, or "truth," it provides and what good that might bring to society. This plurality of allegiance is especially potent given the tendency of literary studies to ally itself to other disciplines such as history, politics, sociology, philosophy, and cultural studies. A literary historian might base the value of her work in similar terms to her colleagues in the department of history: the importance of understanding the past; a scholar who works in queer theory might see the ultimate value of his work as unlocking gender normativity; and the experimental poetry critic might claim to enhance the cultural penetration of poetry by explaining difficult prosodic forms.

Most colleagues working in literature departments cherish literature for the pleasure and delight it brings them, though, arguably, this love does

not always dare to speak its name. Enthusiasms for quality tend not to sit well with the requirements of sober and systemic academic inquiry. Some literary scholars study the canon, and contribute to the journals and societies that have sprung up around individual authors, periods, or genres. Others will look at nontraditional forms, or seek to contribute to revaluations or highlight neglected authors. World literature, as explored by Debjani Ganguly in this collection, is both urgent and much debated, heralded as breaking down national and Western biases, and indicted for complicity with globalized hegemony. While there has been an abiding discursive notion that literature and the arts provide an alternate space to the utilitarian and economic spheres, it is widely challenged in the essays to follow, including those by Christopher Nealon and Kathleen McLuskie. Some academics write only for their peers, others write for students and the general public. Within this *mélange* there can be little chance of an agreed charter or set of principles on the “values of literary studies.” What we can seek to capture, however, is the variety and dynamism of diverse perspectives to compile a broad sense of the goods that practitioners explicitly or implicitly embrace.

The essays here are written in different registers: some technical, others polemical; some written at an abstract, meta-critical level, others applied to literary texts; some theorized and philosophical, others probing historical movements and discursive formations. This volume offers a selective self-scrutiny of an academic field. A stock take of literary studies must begin by acknowledging that self-scrutiny and self-critique are deeply wired into the discipline already. Its methodologies, assumptions, and procedures have frequently been fair game for its own practitioners, who have often heralded new movements and theories styling them as radical and even revolutionary. New criticism, practical criticism, the “Scrutineers,” genre criticism, structuralism, deconstruction, Marxism, cultural theory, new historicism, and, more recently, genetic criticism, ecocriticism, world literature, cognitive literary studies, and the new formalism have all posed fundamental methodological questions. In the 1970s and 1980s the rise of the unsatisfactorily named “literary theory” revolutionized the discipline. In the 1990s, new (and old) historicism burst its banks in Renaissance studies and became a more generally practiced methodology. At the same time, a more politicized form of critical practice persisted in areas such as postcolonialism, race, and queer studies.

Thirty years before the current attempt to assess or articulate the value of literary studies, the discipline was undergoing intense self-questioning, convulsed with various battles around the canon, aesthetic value, and the

ideological stakes of reading. There were many predictions that “English” as a university discipline, and the value-laden category of “literature,” was about to be swept away by a new interdisciplinary mix of sociology, rhetoric, and cultural studies.⁵ The new skepticism about the ground of values and evaluation encouraged politically minded critics of this period to question, unveil, and demythologize existing hierarchies and assumptions around ideas of art and the aesthetic.⁶ In literary studies, this led to a tendency to critique canonical literature in order to expose noxious power structures and oppressive ideologies lurking therein. This approach, which has become known as the “hermeneutic of suspicion,” or “symptomatic criticism,” sees the critic’s role as unveiling idioms of mystery or the residual ideas of the sacred in high art. The contribution of the literary academic in this respect is a sort of cultural health inspector, one who seeks to debunk and expose a culture contaminated with the exclusionary and oppressive political ideology in which patriarchy, racism, and imperialism flourished. Ideas of aesthetic value have therefore been treated skeptically by this tendency, in contrast to older generations of critics on an Arnoldian mission to disseminate the life-enhancing attributes or edifying power of high culture. Indeed, the word *literature* was often picked up with safety tongs in the 1980s: the implication that some sorts of writing and cultural production should be treated as special or intrinsically more worthy of study was widely contested. This allied itself with the questioning of the existing literary canon or the very idea of canonicity. The canon began to appear as a product of privilege and often obscured persecution, buoyed by cultural capital rather than intrinsic merit or supposedly universal insights to the human condition.

A pervasive ethos embedded in many of the literary movements in the last decades of the twentieth century, then, is that value, particularly the aesthetic kind, should be scrutinized skeptically or at least unveiled as a product of culture rather than universal and timeless. This applied to inherited ideas of what constituted great literature and high culture as well as to more general normative values, morals, and ethics. There was widespread recognition that value claims were contingent, conditional, and social rather than existing in some absolute, timeless, or transcendent realm. Does this compel us to admit that ultimately values are simply

⁵ See, for example, the concluding chapter of Terry Eagleton’s widely read *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 169–89.

⁶ Terry Eagleton’s *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) argues for the historical and social contingency of the philosophical idea of the aesthetic.

devised on a whim and there is no reason why we cannot invent new ones to suit ourselves or, more particularly, myself? It is one thing to say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but what if morality is too? In philosophy, and in the cognate debates that occurred in literary studies, there was an incentive to articulate an antifoundationalist theory of value that would not subside into a merely subjective ethics. One of the most influential attempts to achieve this end was Barbara Herrnstein Smith's 1988 study *Contingencies of Value*. For Smith all values – moral, ethical, aesthetic, literary – come from shifting social, economic, cultural, and political contexts. They are contingent and conditional, but not simply whimsical or impressionistic. Smith elaborates a neopragmatic theory of value, repudiating both objectivist and subjectivist models, by locating the origin of value in cultural cooperation, irredeemably contextual.⁷ In his *Theory and Cultural Value*, Steven Connor reignited the problem, arguing that the paradox between absolute and relative value positions could not be settled. For Connor, Smith's position relies on obscured assumptions of a stable value system in that it favors (or values) a diversity of values. Why is the pragmatism that allows for diverse values itself valuable? "Smith's subtle analysis remains alienated from its own evaluative force," according to Connor.⁸ The imperative to value confounds our categorical distinctions of universal and relative: that paradox has never, can never, be permanently settled.

This is one reason why the arts and literature have such a crucial role to play in how valuation occurs. Philosophical or abstract thinking cannot solve the value conundrum; it demands other modes of knowing, including the affective, identificatory, and imaginative. Value judgments rely on recognition as much as justification, and the stories and expressive artifacts of human culture are a crucible in which these valuations emerge. This is why the question of the value of literary studies is inevitably circular. It is within literature – considered as a synecdoche of human culture and imagination – that values are summoned. If a more immanent, phenomenological sense of value and valuation emerges in some essays in this volume, it is symptomatic of the move away from the axiological concerns of literary studies in the late twentieth century toward a recognition that value cannot be worked through as a theoretical or conceptual problem. The operation of values and valuation are not mechanisms from which

⁷ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1988).

⁸ Steven Connor, *Theory and Cultural Value* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 28.

we can always obtain critical distance. Even our critiques of value are shot through with other value judgments. These judgments emerge in collaborative networks, meshes of meaning in which we are inextricably involved.

Since the turn of the century, there has been increasing turn against the hermeneutic of suspicion, a dissatisfaction with dominance of critique and symptomatic reading, and a renewed interest in affective and phenomenological responses to the literary.⁹ If this collection emphasizes the *literary* aspects of literary studies, it is because literature as an aesthetic category has received renewed hospitality and attention in recent years, a subject and concept of academic and philosophical attention in its own right, a special or distinct form of writing, singular and marked out from other texts and linguistic forms. This theoretically aware approach to the literary is at some remove from humanist concepts of moral edification and universal truths, and wedded to the phenomenology of reading together with a strong sense of history and situatedness. The ebbing of critique has led to rearticulation of the idea of literary value or a renovated notion of the aesthetic, no longer caught in self-reflexive agonies about the foundations of value or the perils of canonicity. While in the 1980s and 1990s, the prominent defenders of “literary value” – figures such as Saul Bellow and Harold Bloom – tended to be cultural conservative and opponents of dreaded “theory,” in the new century we have seen the aesthetic and the literary swing away from the politics of reaction. Indeed many of those who have recently argued for artistic and literary value (a value intimate with rather than opposed to radical political thought) have been prominent advocates of literary theory and continental philosophy in the Anglophone world.¹⁰ A generation ago formalism was seen as an ideologically naïve approach to literary studies and close textual study the preferred method of the reactionary criticism that occluded the politics and exclusionary discourses of written texts. Now diverse scholars are

⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51; Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (Winter 2004), 225–48; Rita Felski, *The Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

¹⁰ See Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004) and John J. Loughlin and Simon Malpas, eds., *The New Aestheticism* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003). For a polemical account of the role of evaluative criticism in the academy and beyond, see Rónán McDonald, *The Death of the Critic* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007). The academic interest in new articulations of literary value was also manifest in a revival of the critically evaluative essay. See Ray Ryan and Liam McIlvanney, *The Good of the Novel* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011).

challenging the antagonism traditionally asserted between historicism and formalism.¹¹ There has been much talk of a new aestheticism, a new formalism, a new, often value-laden attempt not simply to look at literary writing as cultural or historical document, but rather to attend to what it does that is distinct from other language acts or modes of the written word. Often, as in the work of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière or the literary academic Derek Attridge, the value of literary language lies in its reaching toward alternative possibilities or epistemologies, affording an intimacy with alterity that is always political. Certainly, we find that the question of the value of literature, and by extension the value of literary studies, has become a central preoccupation of this strand of critical activity.

Equally, the threatened discipline of “Eng Lit,” despite predictions of its imminent demise in the 1980s, has proved remarkably resilient. It still thrives as one of the more popular humanities disciplines for students, despite the fearful annual prognostications of the Modern Language Association (MLA). MLA conferences fill the largest hotels of major American cities, and the canon, while more inclusive, self-reflexive, and politically aware than it might have been a few decades ago, still runs along a familiar route from Chaucer to Morrison, via Shakespeare and Austen. There has been an upsurge of historically orientated scholarship since the 1990s, marked by professional specialism and scholarly rigor. In one respect this historicism is a legacy of theory in its antiformalist manifestation, a receptivity to material culture that recognizes that literary works need to be understood as part of a historical context, rather than as isolated and elevated artworks. But if new historicism is from one perspective an effect of theory, from another it marks a resistance to the abstraction or deracination of some elements of the linguistic turn in the 1970s and 1980s. The interest in archival and cultural materialist research affords empirical and systematic methods. In that respect it accords with some of the other recent trends in literary studies – the “history of the book,” genetic criticism, literary Darwinism, cognitive criticism – which also seem to promise the firm, verifiable procedures of the sciences. These tendencies chime with a recognizable if diverse efforts in the history of academic literary criticism, from I. A. Richards to Northrop Frye, that sought to scientize the field, to rescue it from the dilettantism and impressionism of the amateur critic.

¹¹ Verena Theile and Linda Tredennick, eds., *New Formalisms and Literary Theory* (Basingstoke, UK, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

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This new attempt to engage with the literary as a category, while also retaining faith with the inextricability of literary works from historical formations, is a key motivation of this book. Taken together, these essays refuse the hoary notion that literature and theory are in opposition to one another. A number of these essays seek to capture some of this new orientation toward the literary, while remaining attuned to other value agendas in the field: ethical, political, psychological, and the unavoidable economic. The essays attempt a meta-critical assessment of some of the ends of literary studies, while also engaging in implicit dialogue with each other on the relationship of literary and economic value, form and context, impressionism and psychology, the singularity of the text, and the idea of a literary commons. Several of the essays touch on the way Kantian thought has been revisited and reworked in a range of conceptualizations of aesthetics and value. The essays here describe and prescribe, tracing tendencies and agendas, while often pointing out new paths and possibilities. Cumulatively, and with strategic indirection, the collection seeks to offer possible answers to the “so what?” question about literary research, without being an apologia, manifesto or charter. It gives a sense of where the discipline of literary studies is now and what avenues that it might take from here.

The essays in this collection, by leading experts in the field, take diverse approaches and perspectives to the problem of value in literary studies. They stand as self-contained interventions, but resonate and connect with each other in myriad overt and unexpected ways. To enhance the possibility of crossover and pollination, the essays are not sequestered into sections or subtopics. However, the sequence in which they are ordered does bespeak possible clusters and shared interests. The first four essays explore interfaces between philosophy and literature, raising questions of medium specificity, taste, subjectivism, phenomenology, time, and ethics. Anthony Cascardi proposes an alternative to prevailing accounts of the value of literary criticism by concentrating on the example of modernism, arguing that literary modernism pursued the critical aims that enabled it to connect questions about its medium with questions about subjectivity and took on many of the functions that exogenous “criticism” served. Helen Small deals with the venerable question of subjectivism in aesthetic judgment, which produces some well-recognized problems for philosophy of value, not least Hume’s observation that “the taste of all individuals is not upon an equal footing.” Her essay considers how far criticism today admits individual “caprice” in judgment, distinguishing empiricist from idealist tendencies in descriptions of aesthetic subjectivism. Charles Altieri

explores the possibility of appreciating literary texts by attempting to align imaginatively with how they produce processes of valuation. Altieri distinguishes “valuations,” registerings of what is accomplished by the manner of writing, with “values,” more established features of how agents establish identities. Valuations matter because we can identify provisionally with core features of how values get established and can define the appreciation accompanying such valuing as an important social contribution of literary texts. Alan Singer’s “Literature *Is* History: Aesthetic Time and the Ethics of the Literary Will,” argues that historicist criticism has paid insufficient attention to the temporality of reading. The essay proposes that the “historical” agency inherent to the act of reading is a significant mode of historical production. By entertaining a rationalistic notion of the literary event that is carefully distinguished from orthodox formalist accounts of the literary text and orthodox historicist accounts of existential eventfulness, the essay reveals resources of human agency that have significant ethical portent.

The three following chapters take on the economic dimensions of literary value, and the relationship between capital, modalities of exchange, and intellectual activity. Kathleen McLuskie’s “Dead on Arrival: Time and the Value of Old Books” explores the role of time in the creation of literary value with particular attention to the alleged “timeless” value of Shakespeare and the universally “human” value of the humanities. She critically investigates the proxies that sustain the discursive relationship between the literary object and its valuers, including literary studies. Christopher Nealon’s essay argues that adventuresome literary-critical acts of comparison, especially those that disrupt received periodizations, can help us rethink both theoretical and literary ideas about value, especially if we focus on the places where value in its broadest moral sense shades over into value in its economic senses. Julian Murphet also addresses this parallel, arguing that the language of value is fraught with complications owing to what it shares with the language of the economy. Therefore literary criticism has not always, and perhaps should not inevitably, seek to speak value. The work of Paul de Man and Maurice Blanchot are exemplary of a literary critical language that “makes nothing happen” at the heart of literary experience.

Simon During also begins his essay by questioning the appropriateness of value discourse and abstract criteria. He examines a strand in literary critical history that was committed to immanence, finding worth inductively on grounds supplied by the literary heritage. During offers an account both of the conditions of emergence and the failure of Leavisism