

## Who's Afraid of Literature?

Are the arts useful?

People have been worrying about it for over two thousand years, since Plato or earlier, with John Carey's *What Good Are the Arts?* a recent instance – as sceptical as it sounds. The question looks desperate, but I suspect it masks a still deeper fear: that the arts might be downright dangerous. My own view is that they are, at times, should be and are meant to be. There are those who, with good reason, are afraid of literature.

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A cue might be taken from Edward Albee's *Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, an academic satire that has lost nothing with the years. By the end of the play the question is no longer whimsical. 'I am, George,' Martha wails disconsolately to her husband – mindful, as many are, that literature can say the most dreadful things. Its commonplaces can undo everything you are, as Sancho Panza's proverbs undo the learning of his master Don Quixote, who understands less because he reads more. In an institution of education, or anywhere near one, that is a wildly subversive thing to say – the illiterate can get it right and the literate wrong – and the fourth centennial of the book, which began to appear in 1605, had its embarrassing aspects the centuries had done nothing to dim.

Shakespeare had taken the point already, with the pedants in *Love's Labour's Lost* – they have been to a great feast of languages, as someone says, and stolen the scraps; and the four young men who start the play with a rash oath of celibacy are promptly restored to sense not by reading but by meeting nice girls. Hamlet knows he is guilty of thinking too precisely on the event – 'words, words, words' – so a distrust of books has been about for a long time: longer than the present age of the Modern and the Postmodern, and perhaps longer than Plato when he banned poets from his ideal state.

Shakespeare and Cervantes both feared that literature, unless taken in judicious helpings, could make you face the wrong way. Quixote

tilts at windmills, and Hamlet indulges in displacement-activities like putting on a play to unmask his uncle or plotting ingenious deaths for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; and he kills the king at the end of the play not as a duty but on impulse. He does the right thing for the wrong reasons, some would say. But then life is mostly impulse, and who is to blame him? You live not by words but by instinct, much of the time, as a cyclist rides by the seat of his pants.

None the less reading is a temptation, and there is a feeling in and out of the play that study and slow reflection can sometimes be a good idea.

What is a man

If his chief good and market of his time

Be but to sleep and feed?

Hamlet asks rhetorically, musing about the impiety of leaving God-given reason 'to fust in us unused.' To fust is to go mouldy, and you could easily go mouldy without books, which can tell you what you need to know but do not always want to hear. As Samuel Johnson once put it in his provocative way, 'men require more often to be reminded than informed.' It is like the reminder you find on a road-sign when you arrive in Dover: Keep to the Left. It is not that you are expected to have forgotten – just that you can be absent-minded – so this is a case (one among millions) where the obvious can save lives. The case for literature is none the weaker for the fact that it is obvious. Absent-mindedness can cost lives, and there may be moments when you urgently need to be told what you already know but may easily have let slip.

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The fear of literature starts here. What if literature reminds you not just of something that has slipped your memory but of something you are *trying* to forget? Be afraid – be very afraid. It is quite easy to alarm a Shakespeare class by speaking seriously of the Divine Right of Kings or eternal hellfire. Since it is always tempting to think that great writers speak great truth, it is cosier to suppose that hellfire and tyranny were superstitions that had deluded Shakespeare's characters but not him. It is altogether uncomfortable to think that great art can be fallacious, evil or downright indecent, and there are sonnets of Shakespeare (number 138, for example) that I would rather not expound in mixed company or, in some moods, in any company at all.

Religion and politics are no safer. The late Elizabeth Anscombe, a moral philosopher of startling frankness, used to say that if you

interpreted Scripture less and paid more attention to what it said you would be shaken out of your shoes. Moses, or whoever wrote the early books of the Old Testament, was even less cosy than Shakespeare, and the twenty-first chapter of Exodus, which defines the sexual rights of a slave-girl, might well shake any Sunday-morning congregation. (Fortunately the Authorized Version bowdlerizes most of it away). What Dante says about divine grace is enough to bother anyone, and you can find out about sadism without reading pornography. Try the twenty-eighth chapter of Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*. As for politics, few modern socialists (if any) seem to know that the Fabians were extreme colonialists who openly believed in conquering and keeping – far from the scepticism about empire that prevailed within the consensual world of Gladstone or Disraeli; or that John Ruskin, a Victorian socialist earlier than the Fabians, had in his 1870 Oxford inaugural declared England 'a source of light' for all the world and called on her to 'found colonies as fast and as far as she is able' and to plant colonists whose first virtue was to be 'fidelity to their country' in order to 'advance the power of England by land and sea.' Socialism was imperial. So much for the view that the left was always against empire.

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That points to the deepest paradox of the present age, which is moved on the one hand by confident talk of a permissive society and on the other by an aptitude to be shocked that would have astonished our ancestors. The puritanical fervour of the times might have startled John Knox or Oliver Cromwell. We are prudes.

What other age, for instance, would agonize about people in public life having secret affairs, whether politicians, actors, football coaches or royals? That an American president should recently have felt constrained to deny a romantic attachment would have bemused and amazed the world of Edward VII or President Kennedy. The age of tolerance is ended, apparently, when private lives were known and not published. Now, in a blame culture, they are known, published and condemned. The permissive society, if it ever existed, died in the 1960s, almost as soon as it was born.

That helps to explain the fashion for suppression. As Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish poet, once remarked, 'the language of literature in the twentieth century has been steeped in unbelief.' That needs to be seen in more ways than one. It is not just that critics nowadays are seldom devout, seldom ideologically inclined. It goes further. Literature cannot be allowed to mean what it says. In my first teaching in the United States, about half a century ago, I was impressed by

the readiness of students, especially the best students, to rattle off reasons for not believing what they read, and in the more expensive institutions it would have been seen as unsophisticated to suppose that the author believed it either. The more fees you paid, I sometimes suspected, the less you thought there was to know. 'It's just a poem, isn't it?'

So Bowdlerism is back, though dressed in new clothes. In 1818 Dr Thomas Bowdler, a Scottish doctor and Fellow of the Royal Society, felt alarmed enough at the thought of the moral damage Shakespeare might do to the young to edit a heavily cut text of the plays in ten volumes, and before he died in 1825 he had performed a similar act of surgery on Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. All that now looks hopelessly archaic, as a technique of censorship. You cannot stop people reading books, and banning only spurs them on. But try telling them it does not mean what it says. That is one easy way of avoiding an issue, whether sexual or political, and it works. It co-exists, not without friction, with a passion for artistic experimentation and vociferous if shortlived cults of the avant-garde. It is certainly a way of denying you ever believed in anything wicked or silly, and no doubt the unique socialist tradition of colonialism can be cheerfully interpreted away in similar style.

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A few techniques of the new Bowdlerism to help the beginner.

*It's all a metaphor.* This can be said of miracles, the immortality of the soul, hellfire and the Last Judgement. The obvious retort – 'What is it a metaphor of?' – is not as effective as it sounds, though it works as a conversation-stopper. If that is all the prophets and messiahs were talking about, let us talk about something interesting. If miracles are merely metaphors of hope, if heaven and hell are no more than figures of speech, there is nothing to do but to smile and change the subject. How dull – and how incredible. Christopher Columbus, after all, had the Mount of Purgatory in his navigational charts, so somebody must have thought it was there.

*Irony.* 'You don't imagine he means to be taken literally?' The honest answer is often Yes, and it is often the right one. But it can take enormous courage to utter it. To perceive irony, or claim to perceive it, is to look sophisticated, to deny it is to risk being thought a redneck: an alarmingly quick way of losing friends and failing to influence people.

*The dramatic speaker.* It can be hard to persuade educated minds that a poem is an account of the poet's mind and not a set of hypotheses on the part of someone who may (or may not) resemble him. The problem of conviction is still more acute with plays and

novels, which have dialogue. How do you know a character is a spokesman for the author – that Mr Knightley speaks for Jane Austen in *Emma*, for example, or Fielding for E.M. Forster in *A Passage to India*?

The answer, which is bound to look inconclusive, is that you know it because you know about their creators – much as you often know what friends and relatives think without asking. ‘My mother wouldn’t like that,’ I once overheard a woman remark in a lending library, pointing to a novel. Her friend did not disagree. After all, they knew mother.

*It’s all ideology.* The word suggests distortion, so the charge is dismissive and probably suggestive of secret power-seeking. But why should it be? General propositions about politics and morality can no doubt be true as well as false. The dismissal can be convenient, however, for anyone who wants to discredit a view on other grounds, like feminists against patriarchy or egalitarians against privilege. You are not supposed to raise the possibility that an ideology might be true.

*Multiculturalism.* If literature is not knowledge, it must be something else. Why not evidence of what other communities believe or once believed? That puts you firmly on the road to multiculturalism: black studies, gay studies, women studies, American studies... Which secretes a contradiction. For if a view is never more than evidence of its source, multiculturalism is no more than that. You believe it because your friends believe it. So it takes its place on the shelf along with the rest. No critic can safely claim immunity from his own dogmas.

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The fear of literature is a fear of what literature has to say, and the new Bowdlerism is a defensive strategy to hold the enemy off or to delay his advance.

Where did that fear begin? There can be no certain answer to that question, even if it is confined to the twentieth century – only signposts that point the way. Wars and depressions shattered the cause of liberty before the century was half out, and the sudden triumph of dictators like Lenin and Hitler stirred advanced opinion into false hope and false despair. In 1942, at the height of the Nazi occupation of France, Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* recorded a moment of supreme hopelessness. The French had inhabited a familiar world in his boyhood, in their lycées and universities; but with the slow decay of religion and the collapse of totalitarian illusions that followed, ‘man feels a stranger’. The triumph of National Socialism in 1940 was a triumph of the Absurd; words and reality had ceased to fit, and man was ‘irremediably an exile deprived of memories of a homeland or of

any promised land to come.'

It was a moment to hail the meaningless. A dozen years later Samuel Beckett, a detribalized Irishman living in Paris, wrote *Waiting for Godot*, a play where the waiting was symbolically endless. All you can do is to pass the time, though (as one of the characters cheerfully remarks) 'it would have passed in any case.' Debate is a sport; the search for significance, like a slow bicycle-race, no more than a competition to spin out whatever time is left. 'We're not beginning to *mean* something,' asks a character anxiously in *Endgame*, and he is promptly reassured: 'Mean something? You and I *mean* something?'

The mood of despair spread like an epidemic through the 1970s and after, as an intelligentsia that had lost faith first in humanism, then in socialism, cast about for a new terminology to play with. You may no longer believe in anything, but you still have to go on talking. There was always a lot that was French about that mood, especially in its assumption that all knowledge is verbal. Nor was its proud title *La Nouvelle Critique* altogether misleading. It was new to those who first heard it, at all events, even if much of it would have sounded familiar to Mallarmé or Proust. It spoke up boldly for a place and a time.

French as it was, it exported with surprising ease into the English-speaking world, though it defied ordinary observation and ordinary experience. To taste food or fall in love is to challenge the assumption that knowledge is always the same as account-giving. Who could say how food tastes? Another technique of the new Bowdlerism – 'It's all conditioning, isn't it?' – could not easily be reconciled, in any case, with revolutionary fervour, at least as a universal principle. Nobody (I imagine) believes Karl Marx thought as he did because he had been socially conditioned into thinking it, so the argument self-destructed with great rapidity. It was rather like an experimental piece of siege-machinery – as dangerous to those who use it as to anyone else. You try that argument once, in vigilant company, and never again.

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Something deeper, however, lay behind the cult of the meaningless.

It lay in the happy prospect that no one could ever say you were wrong. No judgement could count as false unless the criteria of judgement were first stated and then agreed, and it was notorious they could not be stated or agreed. All that reduced judgement to an act of self-declaration: no grades, no set texts, no exams, just endless talk over endless cups of coffee. 'I think criticism is all a load of crap,' I once overheard a girl remark in a campus canteen in Berkeley, California, about to help a friend write a term-paper by recommending a critical book. Criticism meant going through the motions, nothing

more. It was a brief Nirvana, only threatened by trying to find someone to pay for it – to be defeated, in the end, not by argument but by inflation and the lure of a consumer-society. There really was an economic base, after all, and it struck hard at those who talked most about the economic base. Coffee is not enough, or sleeping on the floor, when the garden-suburb beckons with designer-clothes and Mediterranean shores.

It was a world that feared evidence, and with reason. Its idols like Lenin and Mao had been shattered. Public ownership did not favour the poor but a privileged nomenklatura, in the event, and nationalization with compensation commonly enriched investors by driving stockmarkets up. Even more embarrassingly, the early socialists (if you troubled to read them) had advocated genocide since Marx and practised it since Stalin. Fabians like H.G. Wells and Beatrice Webb had publicly backed European domination in Afro-Asia and called for more of it, like Ruskin before them, and (most shattering of all) the claim of National Socialism to be socialist had not always in its day been doubted or denied. And the first history of socialism in any language, Alfred Sudre's *Histoire du Socialisme*, which appeared in Paris in 1849, an extensive study by a radical French lawyer, had called socialism a reactionary doctrine on credible grounds and had been crowned with a prize by the French Academy. So socialism had not always been thought left-wing. All that made a lot of people reluctant to read. 'We always knew there was some funny stuff in there,' a member of the central committee of the British Communist Party once remarked to me sadly, soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Revisionists are a pitiless lot, and as the Soviet empire collapsed they did their job and showed no pity.

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Some years ago Tom Stoppard, in a public lecture at the height of the Cold War, imagined a six-year-old being told that socialism favoured the poor and that the poor, in their millions, were risking their lives to escape from it. 'A child can see there is something the matter with that, and I write plays to make it harder for adults to believe it.' That is what literature, at its greatest, is for. That is the good of literature. It tells you what you know and did not dare to look at, and when it does it can be something to resist and resent. Criticism can be perverted into a way of resisting it. 'He doesn't really mean it, does he?' That is to acknowledge the imposing truth that literature can hurt, if you let it. But a critic is at his greatest when he lets it hurt. 'I am glad that I have ended my revival of this dreadful scene,' Samuel Johnson concludes his notes to *Othello*. 'It

is not to be endured.' Literature is not easily endured. It can do damage. No wonder people have been afraid of it, for two millennia and more. No wonder if some still are.

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