

Marcel Duchamp: The Creative Act

"What I have in mind is that art may be bad, good or indifferent, but, whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way as a bad emotion is still an emotion" (137) . . . All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists." (140)

In what ways could a writer perform a similar challenge to dominant ideas of what makes for good writing?

How does the term literature intersect with discussions of the good and the bad? What distinguishes literature from other kinds of writing? Is literature as a term something you would consider carries a value judgement? In short, can there be "bad" literature? Do I call something "literary" as a neutral descriptor or a way of expressing my admiration for it? What might a "Duchamp-ian" challenge to literary taste look like?

When poets and artists today take up questions of value (the good and the bad), they often focus their attention on art itself. Many significant cultural movements in the 20th century, especially those labelled experimental or avant-garde, can be seen as raising questions about what was thought to be good ("classic," established, fine art, literature) and critiquing, parodying, or exceeding its limits in some way. In this unit, we'll look at some challenges from outside the realm of literature (the painter, Duchamp; the composer, Cage), consider literary theoretical questions about value and culture, and then move readings from 21st century writers associated with Flarf and Conceptual Writing. In these works, writers not only raise questions about literariness and originality but attempt to absorb the information overload of net culture, chatter-bots, and artificial intelligence by inventing procedures, adopting constraints, and even employing computer programs in ways that transform writing and reading.

Stephanie Strickland, Born Digital

E-poetry does things rather than says things. To read e-works is to operate or play them (more like an instrument than a game, though some e-works have gamelike elements). . . . E-lit is the mode of literature appropriate to new social conditions. . . . E-poetry is a poetry requiring new reading skills.

Kenny Goldsmith, Language As Material

"There's been a lot of talk the past few years about net neutrality, a concept that argues either for or against assigning different values to the various types of data that flow through our networks. Net neutrality advocates claim that all data on the network be treated as equal, whether it be a piece of spam or a Nobel laureate's speech. . . . Uncreative writing mirrors the ethos of net neutrality advocates, claiming that one way of treating language is materially, focusing on formal qualities as well as communicate ones, viewing it as a substance that moves and morphs through its various states and digital and textual ecosystems."

Kenny Goldsmith, Provisional Language

"In today's digital world, language has become a provisional space, temporary and debased, mere material to be shoveled, reshaped, hoarded, and molded into whatever form is convenient. . . . Notions of the authentic or original are increasingly untraceable. . . . Where once the craft of writing suggesting coming together -- possibly forever -- of words and thoughts, it is now a transient coupling, waiting to be undone; a temporary embrace with a high probability of separation, blasted apart by networked forces; today these words are an essay, tomorrow they've been pasted into a photoshop document, . . . next year they've become a part of a dance mix"

Julian Dodd on Cage's 4'33"

*"A work is a work of **music** only if it is made of sounds organized by the work's composer. . . . It is a necessary condition of a work's being a work of music that its performance can only comprise sounds produced by performers of the work as a result of their following the composer's instructions. [Therefore, a work composed of sounds not produced following the composer's instructions is NOT a piece of music]*

Eagleton, Terry. "Value" How to Read Literature

Literary value.

In this concluding chapter of his accessible book, Terry Eagleton gives a quick survey of changing notions of literary value -- from classicism, to Romanticism, to Postmodernism. Through this survey, he attempts to persuade that while *value* of some sort is central to the making and reception of literature, that the specific *qualities* which are *valued*, have shifted. Originality, realism, moral messages (didacticism), complexity -- Eagleton seems to suggest any particular values may not be universal or timeless. What many agreed was a "great" work of literature often, within a generation, will have fallen into disfavor. **Are you convinced? If not, what qualities, if any, would you argue truly are essential to literature? And if you are convinced, doesn't this seem to make evaluating a literary work pointless?** What do you make of the fact that Eagleton then goes on to offer evaluations of writers ... apparently, Nabokov is better than Updike, Lowell is better than Swinburne, Waugh (whom you may never have heard of) is better than Faulkner.

Eagleton "What is it that makes a work of literature good, bad, or indifference? There have been many answers over the centuries. Depth of insight, truth-to-life, formal unity, universal appeal, moral complexity, verbal inventiveness, imaginative vision: all of these have been proposed at one time or another as marks of literary greatness . . . [Neoclassical] eighteenth-century authors . . . treated originality with suspicion. It struck them as modish, even freakish. . . . In any case, innovation was strictly speaking impossible. There could be no new moral truths. . . . Human nature was everywhere alike . . . For the Romantics, . . . the creative imagination is a visionary power which can remake the world The most cherished artworks are those which transcend tradition and convention [for Romantics]. (175-77).

"The modernist work of art [follows Romanticism] takes a stand against a world in which everything seems standardised, stereotyped, and prefabricated . . . it tries to resist being reduced to yet another commodity. Yet if a work of art were absolutely new, we would not be able to identify it at all To be

recognizable as art, a work must have some connection with what we categorise as art already, even if it ends by transforming the category out of all recognition. Even a revolutionary artwork can be judged as such only by reference to what it has revolutionized." (179)

"You can also reap pleasure from a literary work you regard as fairly worthless." "Enjoyment is more subjective than evaluation." "Does this mean that literary judgements are objective? . . . If [they were,] there would be no arguing over them. . . . The point is that there are criteria for determining what count as excellence in gold or fiction, as there are not for determining whether peaches taste better than pineapples. And these criteria are public, not just a question of what one happens privately to prefer. . . . This still leaves a lot of room for dissent and disagreement. Criteria are guides for how to go about making value judgements. They do not make them for you, any more than following the rule of chess will win the game for you." (189)

Barbara Herrnstein Smith - Value/Evaluation

"When we offer a verbal judgement ... we are always doing so in some *social and/or institutional context*" (182) with tacit assumptions ("we are usually not expressing how we feel about it 'personally' but, rather observing its effects on ourselves and estimating--in effect, predicting--its value for other people: not *all* other people, however, but a limited set of people with certain relevant characteristics --usually, though not necessarily, characteristics that they share with us" (183)

AUTHORS/WORKS: DUCHAMP, COGE, GOLDSMITH, AULT ("HOT AIR"), WYLDE ("STORYLAND"), SHORT ("CALATEA"), JACKSON ("MY BODY"), YOUNG HOE CHONG ("ART OF SLEEP"), STRICKLAND AND MONTFORT ("SEQ AND SPQR BETWEEN"), WILKS ("FITTING THE PATTERN"), PORPENTINE ("WITH THOSE WE LOVE"), KENDALL ("FAITH"), CLIFFORD ("SWEET OLD ETCETERA"), HELDEN ("TEXT EVOLUTION"), DWORKIN ("LEGION"), BANNER ("THE NOM"), DAVIS ("VOICE OVER"), LOMAX ("DISCLOSURE")