

TERRY EAGLETON

How to

READ LITERATURE



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CHAPTER 5

Value

What is it that makes a work of literature good, bad or indifferent? There have been many answers to this question 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, not to speak of one or two more dubious criteria such as giving voice to the indomitable spirit of the nation, or stepping up the rate of steel production by portraying steel workers as epic heroes.

For some critics, originality counts for a good deal. The more a work can break with tradition and convention, inaugurating something genuinely new, the more likely we are to rate it highly. A number of Romantic poets and philosophers held this view. A moment's reflection, however, is enough to cast doubt on it. Not everything that is new is valuable. Chemical weapons are of recent vintage, but not many people rejoice in them for this reason. Neither is all tradition stuffy and staid. There is more to it than bank managers donning chainmail and re-enacting the battle of Hastings. There are honourable traditions, such as those of the English suffragettes or the American civil rights movement. A

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heritage can be revolutionary as well as backward-looking. Nor are conventions always stiff and artificial. The word 'convention' simply means 'coming together', and without such convergence there could be no social existence, let alone works of art. People make love according to convention. There is no point in spraying oneself with perfume and arranging a candle-lit dinner if one lives in a culture in which this is the customary prelude to a kidnapping.

Eighteenth-century authors like Pope, Fielding and Samuel Johnson treated originality with some suspicion. It struck them as modish, even freakish. Novelty was a kind of eccentricity. The creative imagination was dangerously close to idle fantasy. In any case, innovation was strictly speaking impossible. There could be no new moral truths. It would have been outrageously inconsiderate of God not to have revealed to us from the outset the few, simple precepts necessary for our salvation. It would have been unforgivably remiss of him to forget to tell the ancient Assyrians that adultery was a sin, and then pack them off to hell for it. In the eyes of neo-classicists like Pope and Johnson, what millions of men and women had found true over the centuries was bound to be more worthy of respect than some new-fangled notion. Nothing some wild-eyed genius might dream up at two o'clock in the morning could outweigh the common wisdom of humankind. Human nature was everywhere alike, which meant there could be no genuine advance on the way it was portrayed by Homer and Sophocles.

Science might develop, but art did not. Affinities were more noteworthy than differences, and the common more weighty than the singular. The task of art was to provide us with lively images of what we already knew. The present was for the most part a recycling of the past. It was its fidelity to the past that lent it legitimacy. The past was mostly what the present was made up of, and the future

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would ring a set of minor variations on what had gone before. Change was to be treated sceptically. It was more likely to represent degeneration than progress. It was, of course, inevitable, but the mutability of human affairs was a sign of our fallen condition. There was no alteration in Eden.

If this neo-classical view of the world seems light years from our own, it is partly because romanticism intervened between the two. For the Romantics, men and women are creative spirits with an inexhaustible power to transform their world. Reality is thus dynamic rather than static, and change is mostly to be celebrated rather than feared. Human beings are makers of their own history, and potentially infinite progress lies within their grasp. To embark on this brave new world, they need simply to throw off the forces which shackle them. The creative imagination is a visionary power which can remake the world in the image of our deepest desires. It inspires political revolutions as well as poems. There is a fresh emphasis on individual genius. Human beings are no longer to be seen as frail, flawed creatures, always likely to fall into error and perpetually in need of the smack of firm government. Instead, their roots run down to infinity. Freedom is of their very essence. Yearning and striving are of their nature, and their true home lies in eternity. We should cultivate a generous trust in human capabilities. The passions and affections are mostly benign. Unlike cold-hearted reason, they bind us to Nature and to each other. They should be allowed to flourish free of artificial constraint. The truly just society, as well as the finest work of art, is the one which would allow this to happen. The most cherished artworks are those which transcend tradition and convention. Instead of slavishly imitating the past, they bring to birth something rich and strange.

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Each work of art is a miraculous new creation. It is an echo or repetition of God's act of creating the world. Like the Almighty, the artist conjures his or her work out of nothing. It is the imagination that inspires it, and the imagination is a matter of possibility rather than actuality. It can summon into being things that never existed before, like ancient mariners with hypnotic powers or pieces of pottery given to making philosophical statements. Even so, the artist can never quite get on terms with God, who as far as creation goes has got there first and pulled off a product hard to beat. The poet may imitate the divine act of creation, yet she does so from her restricted situation in time. In any case, this theory is plainly at odds with what writers actually get up to. No work of art springs out of nothing. Coleridge did not invent ancient mariners and Keats did not dream up Grecian urns. Like any other artist, Romantic writers forged their art out of materials which they did not manufacture themselves. In this sense, they are more like bricklayers than minor deities.

The Romantic impulse to make it new is inherited by modernism. The modernist work of art takes a stand against a world in which everything seems standardised, stereotyped and prefabricated. It gestures to a realm beyond this second-hand, ready-made civilisation. It aims to make us see the world afresh – to disrupt our routine perceptions rather than to reinforce them. In its strangeness and specificity, it tries to resist being reduced to just another commodity. Yet if a work of art were absolutely new, we would not be able to identify it at all, rather as the true aliens are not dwarfish and many-limbed but perched invisibly in our laps at this very moment. To be recognisable as art, a work must have some connection with what we categorise as art already, even if it ends up by transforming the category out of all recognition. Even a

revolutionary artwork can be judged as such only by reference to what it has revolutionised.

In any case, even the most innovative literary work is made up among other things of the scraps and leavings of countless texts that have come before. The medium of literature is language, and every word we use is shop-soiled, tarnished, worn thin and featureless by billions of previous usages. To exclaim 'My uniquely precious, unspeakably adorable darling' is always in some sense a quotation. Even if this particular sentence has never been uttered before, which is highly unlikely, it is fashioned out of materials that are dreadfully familiar. In this sense, conservative neo-classicists like Pope or Johnson are shrewder than they might seem. There can be no absolute novelty, as some twentieth-century avant-gardists forlornly dreamed. It is difficult to imagine a more stunningly original work than Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Indeed, it is hard at first glance to tell what language it is written in, let alone what it means. In fact, the *Wake* draws on a whole range of well-thumbed words. What is new is the bizarre way it combines them. In this sense, it does more flamboyantly what all literary works do all the time.

This is not to suggest that there can be no novelty at all. If there are no absolute breaks in human affairs, neither are there any absolute continuities. It is true that we are forever recycling our signs. But it is also true, as Noam Chomsky reminds us, that we constantly produce sentences we have never heard or spoken before. And to this extent the Romantics and modernists are in the right of it. Language is a work of astonishing creativity. It is by far the most magnificent artefact humanity has ever come up with. It even surpasses the movies of Mel Gibson in this respect. As for new truths, we discover them all the time. One name for this enquiry is science, which was in its infancy in the age of the neo-classicists.

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But art, too, can innovate as well as inherit. A writer can fashion a new literary form, as Henry Fielding thought he was doing, or as Bertolt Brecht did in the theatre. Such forms have their forerunners, like most other things in human history. But they may also break genuinely new ground. Nothing quite like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* had ever been seen before in the history of literature.

It is with postmodernism that the hunger for novelty begins to fade. Postmodern theory does not rate originality very highly. It has put revolution well behind it. Instead, it embraces a world in which everything is a recycled, translated, parodied or derivative version of something else. This is not to say that everything is a copy. To say so would imply that there was an original around somewhere, which is not the case. Instead, we have simulacra without an original. In the beginning was the imitation. If we were to come across what looked like an original, we could be sure that this, too, would turn out to be a copy, pastiche or piece of mimicry. This is no reason to be despondent, however, since if nothing is authentic, nothing can be fake. It would not be logically possible for everything to be bogus. A signature is the mark of one's uniquely individual presence, but it is authentic only because it looks roughly like one's other signatures. It must be a copy in order to be genuine. Everything at this late, streetwise, rather cynical point in history has been done before; but it can always be done again, and the act of doing it again is what constitutes the novelty. To copy out *Don Quixote* word for word would represent a genuine innovation. All phenomena, including all works of art, are woven out of other phenomena, so that nothing is ever quite new or ever quite the same. To steal a phrase from Joyce, postmodernism is a 'neverchanging ever-changing' culture, rather as late capitalism never stays still for a moment but is never transfigured out of recognition either.

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If good literature is always ground-breaking literature, we would be forced to deny the value of a great many literary works, from ancient pastoral and medieval mystery plays to sonnets and folk ballads. The same is true of the claim that the finest poems, plays and novels are those which recreate the world around us with incomparable truth and immediacy. On this theory, the only good literary texts are realist ones. Everything from the *Odyssey* and the Gothic novel to expressionist drama and science fiction would have to be written off as inferior. Lifelikeness, however, is a ridiculously inadequate yardstick for measuring literary value. Shakespeare's Cordelia, Milton's Satan and Dickens's Fagin are fascinating precisely because we are unlikely to encounter them in Walmart's. There is no particular merit in a literary work being true to life, rather as there is no necessary value in a drawing of a corkscrew that looks exactly like a corkscrew. Perhaps our delight in such resemblances is a survival of mythical or magical thought, which is much taken with affinities and correspondences. For the Romantics and modernists, the point of art is not to imitate life but to transform it.

In any case, what counts as realism is a contentious matter. We generally think of realistic characters as complex, substantial, well-rounded figures who evolve over time, like Shakespeare's Lear or George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver. Yet some of Dickens's characters are realistic precisely by being none of these things. Far from being well rounded, they are grotesque, two-dimensional caricatures of human beings. They are men and women reduced to a few offbeat features or eye-catching physical details. As one critic has pointed out, however, this is just the way we tend to perceive people on busy thoroughfares or crowded street corners. It is a typically urban way of seeing, one which belongs to the city street rather

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than the village green. It is as though characters loom up out of the crowd, allow us a quick, vivid impression of themselves, then disappear for ever into the throng.

In Dickens's world, this serves only to heighten their mysteriousness. Many of his characters appear secretive and inscrutable. They have a cryptic quality about them, as though their inner lives are impenetrable to others. Perhaps they have no inner life at all, being nothing but a set of surfaces. Sometimes they seem more like pieces of furniture than living beings. Or perhaps their true selves are locked away behind their appearances, beyond reach of an observer. Once again, this mode of characterisation reflects life in the city. In the anonymity of the great metropolis, individuals seem shut up in their solitary lives, with little continuous knowledge of or involvement with one another. Human contacts are fleeting and sporadic. People appear as enigmas to each other. So in portraying urban men and women as he does, Dickens is arguably more realistic than showing them in the round.

A literary work may be realist but not realistic. It may present a world which appears familiar, but in a way that is shallow and unconvincing. Slushy romances and third-rate detective stories fall into this category. Or a work may be non-realist but realistic, projecting a world unlike our own but in ways which reveal something true and significant about everyday experience. *Gulliver's Travels* is a case in point. *Hamlet* is non-realist because young men do not usually speak in verse while berating their mothers or running a sword through their prospective fathers-in-law. But the play is realistic in some more subtle sense of the word. Being true to life does not always mean being true to everyday appearances. It might mean taking them apart.

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Are all major works of literature timeless and universal in their appeal? This, certainly, has been one powerful contention over the centuries. Great poems and novels are those that transcend their age and speak meaningfully to us all. They deal in the permanent, imperishable features of human existence – in joy, suffering, grief, death and sexual passion, rather than in the local and incidental. This is why we can still respond to works like Sophocles' *Antigone* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, even though they date from cultures very different from our own. On this view, there could be a great novel about sexual jealousy (Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, for example), but probably not about the failure of a sewage system in Ohio.

There may be something in this claim, but it raises a number of questions. *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King* have survived for thousands of years. But is the *Antigone* we admire today quite the same piece of drama that the ancient Greeks applauded? Is what we think central to it what they did too? If it is not, or if we cannot be sure, then we should hesitate before we speak of the same work enduring over centuries. Perhaps if we were really to discover what a certain ancient work of art meant to its contemporary audiences, we would cease to rate it so highly or enjoy it so much. Did the Elizabethans and Jacobean get the same things out of Shakespeare's work as we do? No doubt there are important overlaps. But we need to recall that the average Elizabethan or Jacobean approached these plays with a set of beliefs very different from our own. And every interpretation of a literary work is coloured, however unconsciously, by our own cultural values and assumptions. Will our great-grandchildren look on Saul Bellow or Wallace Stevens as we do?

A literary classic, some critics consider, is not so much a work whose value is changeless as one that is able to generate new

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meanings over time. It is, so to speak, a slow-burning affair. It gathers different interpretations as it evolves. Like an ageing rock star, it can adapt itself to new audiences. Even so, we should not assume that such classics are up and running all the time. Like business enterprises, they can close down and start up again. Works may pass in and out of favour according to changing historical circumstances. Some eighteenth-century critics were far less enraptured by Shakespeare or Donne than we are today. Quite a few of them would not have counted drama as literature at all, not even bad literature. They would probably have had similar reservations about the vulgar, upstart, mongrelised form known as the novel. Samuel Johnson wrote of Milton's *Lycidas*, the opening of which we glanced at in the first chapter, that 'the diction is harsh, the rhymes uncertain, and the numbers unpleasing . . . In this poem there is no nature, for there is no truth; there is no art, for there is nothing new. Its form is that of a pastoral, easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting.' Yet Johnson is generally agreed to be a supremely capable critic.

Changes of historical circumstance may result in works falling into disfavour. There could be no valuable Jewish writing for the Nazis. A general shift of sensibility means that we no longer prize didactic writing very highly, though the sermon was once a major genre. There is, in fact, no reason to suppose, as modern readers often do, that literature which tries to teach us something is likely to be tedious. We moderns tend to be averse to 'doctrinal' literature, but *The Divine Comedy* is exactly that. The doctrinal need not be dogmatic. Our own heartfelt convictions may appear like arid doctrines to someone else. Novels and poems may deal with subjects that were of pressing concern when they were written but no longer strike us as of earth-shattering importance. Tennyson's *In*

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Memoriam frets about evolutionary theory, as most of us today do not. There are some problems that are simply no longer problems, even if they have not been adequately resolved. On the other hand, works which have fallen into near-oblivion may be jolted into fresh life by historical developments. In the crisis of Western civilisation that culminated in the First World War, metaphysical poets and Jacobean dramatists who had also lived through a time of social turmoil were suddenly back in favour. With the rise of modern feminism, Gothic novels with persecuted heroines ceased to be regarded as minor curios and acquired a new centrality.

The fact that a work of literature deals in permanent features of the human condition, such as death, suffering or sexuality, does not guarantee it major status. It may deal with these things in a supremely trivial way. In any case, these universal aspects of humanity tend to assume different forms in different cultures. Death for an agnostic age like our own is not quite what it was for St Augustine or Julian of Norwich. Grief and mourning are common to all peoples. Yet a literary work might express them in such a culturally specific form that it fails to engage our interest at all deeply. Anyway, why couldn't there be a great play or novel about the failure of a sewage system in Ohio, which is scarcely a permanent feature of the human condition? Why might it not be of potentially universal interest? After all, the feelings inspired by such a failure – anger, alarm, guilt, remorse, anxiety about human contamination, fear of waste products and so on – are shared by many different civilisations.

In fact, one problem with the case that all great works of literature deal in the universal rather than the local is that very few human emotions are confined to specific cultures. There are, to be sure, some instances of what one might call local emotions. Modern

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Western males are not as touchy about their honour as medieval knights seem to have been. Neither are they much motivated by the laws of chivalry. A modern Western woman would not feel polluted by marrying her deceased husband's first cousin, as might well be the case in a tribal society. For the most part, however, passions and sentiments cross cultural boundaries. One reason for this is that they are bound up with the human body, and the body is what human beings have most fundamentally in common.

What we have in common, however, is not our only concern. We are fascinated by what differs from us as well. It is this that the champions of universality sometimes fail to recognise. We do not generally read travel literature to reassure ourselves that the Tongans or Melanesian islanders feel just the same way about insider trading as we do. Not many fans of the Icelandic sagas claim that they have a bearing on the agricultural policies of the European Union. If we are inspired only by literature that reflects our own interests, all reading becomes a form of narcissism. The point of turning to Rabelais or Aristophanes is as much to get outside our own heads as to delve more deeply into them. People who see themselves everywhere are a bore.

How far a literary work speaks to more than its own historical situation may depend on that situation. If, for example, it springs from a momentous era in human history, one in which men and women are living through some world-shaking transition, it might be animated by this fact to the point where it also appeals to readers in very different times and places. The Renaissance and the Romantic period are obvious examples. Literary works which transcend their historical moment may do so because of the nature of that moment, as well as of the specific way they belong to it. The

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writings of Shakespeare, Milton, Blake and Yeats resonate so deeply of their own times and places that they can echo down the centuries and across the globe.

No work of literature is literally timeless. They are all products of specific historical conditions. To call some books timeless is just a way of saying that they tend to hang around a lot longer than ID cards or shopping lists. Even then, however, they may not hang around forever. Only on Judgement Day will we know if Virgil or Goethe managed to make it through to the end of time, or whether J.K. Rowling beat Cervantes by a short head. There is also the question of spread in space. If great works of literature are universal, then presumably Stendhal or Baudelaire must in principle speak as relevantly to the Dinka or Dakota as they do to Westerners, or at least to some Westerners. It is true that a Dinka might come to appreciate Jane Austen just as well as a Mancunian. To do so, however, he or she would need to learn the English language, gain some knowledge of the Western novel form, grasp something of the historical background against which Austen's fiction makes sense, and so on. To understand a language is to understand a form of life.

The same would be true of an English reader intent on exploring the riches of Inuit poetry. In both cases, one needs to reach beyond one's own cultural environs to enjoy the art of another civilisation. There is nothing impossible about that. People do it all the time. But there is more to understanding the art of another culture than there is to understanding a theorem produced by its mathematicians. You can grasp a language only by grasping more than a language. Nor is it true that Austen is meaningful to other societies simply because everyone, English, Dinka and Inuit alike, shares the same humanity. Even if they do, it would not be sufficient grounds for them to enjoy *Pride and Prejudice*.

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What does it mean in any case to rank a literary work as great? Almost everyone would assign this distinction to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but this may be more of a nominal judgement than a real one. It might be like seeing that someone is sexually attractive but not feeling sexually attracted to them. For the great majority of modern men and women, Dante's world view is too alien for his poetry to yield them much pleasure or insight. They might still acknowledge that he is a magnificent poet; but they are unlikely to *feel* this to be true, in the way they might feel it to be true of Hopkins or Hart Crane. People may continue to tip their hats to such classics long after they have ceased to mean much to them. Yet if absolutely nobody was enthused by *The Divine Comedy* any more, it would be hard to know how it could still be said to be a great poem.

You can also reap pleasure from a literary work you regard as fairly worthless. There are plenty of action-packed books in airport bookstores which people devour without imagining they are in the presence of great art. Perhaps there are professors of literature who lap up the adventures of Rupert Bear by torchlight under the bedclothes at night. Enjoying a piece of art is not the same as admiring it. You can enjoy books you do not admire and admire books you do not enjoy. Dr Johnson had a high opinion of *Paradise Lost*, but one has the distinct feeling that he would have been reluctant to plough through it again.

Enjoyment is more subjective than evaluation. Whether you prefer peaches to pears is a question of taste, which is not quite true of whether you think Dostoevsky a more accomplished novelist than John Grisham. Dostoevsky is better than Grisham in the sense that Tiger Woods is a better golfer than Lady Gaga. Anyone who understands fiction or golf well enough would be almost bound to

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sign up to such judgements. There comes a point at which not recognising that, say, a certain brand of malt whisky is of world-class quality means not understanding malt whisky. A true knowledge of malts would include the ability to make such discriminations.

Does this then mean that literary judgements are objective? Not in the sense that 'Mount Olympus is taller than Woody Allen' is objective. If literary judgements were objective in that sense there would be no arguing over them, and you can wrangle far into the night over whether Elizabeth Bishop is a finer poet than John Berryman. Yet reality does not divide neatly down the middle between objective and subjective. Meaning is not subjective, in the sense that I cannot just decide that the warning 'Smoking Kills' on a cigarette packet really means 'Nicotine Helps Kids Grow, So Share These Ciggies with your Toddler!' Yet 'Smoking Kills' means what it means only by force of social convention. There may be a language somewhere in the cosmos in which it means a song for several voices, typically unaccompanied and arranged in elaborate counterpoint.

The point is that there are criteria for determining what counts as excellence in golf 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. You have to learn how to handle them by sharing in certain social practices. In the case of literature, these social practices are known as literary criticism. 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 rules of chess will win the game for you. Chess is played not just according to rules, but by the creative application of

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such rules; and the rules themselves will not tell you how to apply them creatively. That is a matter of know-how, intelligence and experience. Knowing what counts as excellence in fiction is likely to decide the issue between Chekhov and Jackie Collins, but not between Chekhov and Turgenev.

Different cultures may have different criteria for deciding what counts as good or bad art. As a foreign onlooker, you might be present at some ceremony in a Himalayan village and say whether you found it boring or exhilarating, high-spirited or stiffly ritualised. What you could not say was whether it was well executed. To judge that would involve having access to the standards of excellence appropriate to that particular activity. The same goes for works of literature. Standards of excellence may also differ from one kind of literary art to another. What makes for a fine piece of pastoral is not what makes for a powerful piece of science fiction.

Works which are deep and complex would seem obvious candidates for literary merit. Yet complexity is not a value in itself. The fact that something is complex does not automatically earn it a place among the immortals. The muscles of the human leg are complex, but those with calf injuries might prefer them not to be. The plot of *Lord of the Rings* is complex, but this is not enough to endear Tolkien's work to those who dislike donnish escapism or medievalist whimsy. The point of some lyrics and ballads is not their complexity but their poignant simplicity. Lear's cry of 'Never, never, never, never, never' is not exactly complex, and is all the finer for it.

Nor is it true that all good literature is profound. There can be a superb art of the surface, such as Ben Jonson's comedies, Oscar Wilde's high-society dramas or Evelyn Waugh's satires. (We should beware, however, of the prejudice that comedy is always less deep

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an affair than tragedy. There are some searching comedies and some trite tragedies. Joyce's *Ulysses* is a profound piece of comedy, which is not the same as saying that it is profoundly funny, even though it is.) Surfaces are not always superficial. There are literary forms in which complexity would be out of place. *Paradise Lost* reveals little psychological depth or intricacy, and neither do Robert Burns's lyrics. Blake's 'Tyger' poem is deep and complex, but not psychologically so.

Plenty of critics, as we have seen, insist that good art is coherent art. The most accomplished works of literature are the most harmoniously unified. In an impressive economy of technique, every detail pulls its weight in the overall design. One problem with this claim is that 'Little Bo Peep' is coherent but banal. Besides, many an effective postmodern or avant-garde work is centreless and eclectic, made up of parts that do not slot neatly together. They are not necessarily any the worse for that. There is no virtue in harmony or cohesion as such, as I have suggested already. Some of the great artworks of the Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists are deliberately dissonant. Fragmentation can be more fascinating than unity.

Perhaps what makes a work of literature exceptional is its action and narrative. Certainly Aristotle thought that a solid, well-wrought action was central to at least one species of literary writing (tragedy). Yet nothing much happens in one of the greatest plays of the twentieth century (*Waiting for Godot*), one of the finest novels (*Ulysses*) and one of the most masterly poems (*The Waste Land*). If a sturdy plot and a strong narrative are vital to literary status, Virginia Woolf sinks to a dismally low place in the league tables. We no longer rate a substantial plot as highly as Aristotle did. In fact, we no longer insist on a plot or narrative at all. Unless we are small children, we

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are less enamoured of stories than our ancestors. We also recognise that compelling art can be spun out of meagre materials.

What, then, of linguistic quality? Do all great literary works use language in resourceful and inventive ways? It is surely a virtue of literature that it restores human speech to its true abundance, and in doing so recovers something of our suppressed humanity. A good deal of literary language is copious and exuberant. As such, it can act as a critique of our everyday utterances. Its eloquence can issue a rebuke to a civilisation for which language has become for the most part crudely instrumental. Soundbites, text-speak, managerial jargon, tabloid prose, political cant and bureaucratese can be shown up for the bloodless forms of discourse they are. Hamlet's last words are 'Absent thee from felicity awhile, / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story . . . the rest is silence.' Steve Jobs's last words were 'Oh wow, oh wow, oh wow.' Some might feel that there has been a certain falling-off here. Literature is about the felt experience of language, not just the practical use of it. It can draw our attention to the opulence of a medium that we usually take for granted. Poetry is concerned not just with the meaning of experience, but with the experience of meaning.

Even so, not everything we call literary has a sumptuous way with words. There are literary works that do not use language in particularly eye-catching ways. A good deal of realist and naturalistic fiction employs a plain, sober speech. One would not describe the poetry of Philip Larkin or William Carlos Williams as lushly metaphorical. George Orwell's prose is not exactly luxuriant. There is not much burnished rhetoric in Ernest Hemingway. The eighteenth century valued a lucid, exact, serviceable prose. Works of literature should certainly be well written, but then so should all

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writing, including memos and menus. You do not have to sound like *The Rainbow* or *Romeo and Juliet* to qualify as a reputable piece of literature.

So what makes such works good or bad? We have seen that some common assumptions on this score do not bear much scrutiny. Perhaps, then, we can cast more light on the question by analysing some literary extracts with an eye to how well they do.

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We may begin with a sentence from John Updike's novel *Rabbit at Rest*: 'A shimmery model, skinny as a rail, dimpled and square-jawed like a taller Audrey Hepburn from the *Breakfast at Tiffany* days, steps out of the car, smiling slyly and wearing a racing driver's egg-helmet with her gown made up it seems of ropes of shimmering light.' Apart from one rather careless near-repetition ('shimmery', 'shimmering'), this is a highly accomplished piece of writing. Too accomplished, one might feel. It is too clever and calculated by half. Every word seems to have been meticulously chosen, polished, slotted neatly together with the other words and then smoothed over to give a glossy finish. There is not a hair out of place. The sentence is too *voulu*, too carefully arranged and displayed. It is trying too hard. There is nothing spontaneous about it. It has the air of being over-crafted, as every word is put fastidiously to work, with no loose ends or irregularities. As a result, the piece is artful but lifeless. The adjective 'slick' springs to mind. The passage is meant to be a bit of detailed description, but there is so much going on at the level of language, so many busy adjectives and piled-up clauses, that it is hard for us to concentrate on what is being portrayed. The language draws the reader's admiring attention to its own deftness. Perhaps we are particularly invited to admire the

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way it propels itself through so many sub-clauses, all draped around the main verb 'steps', without for a moment losing its balance.

There is a lot of such stuff in Updike's fiction. Take this portrait of a female character from the same novel:

Pru has broadened without growing heavy in that suety Pennsylvania way. As if invisible pry bars have slightly spread her bones and new calcium been wedged in and the flesh gently stretched to fit, she now presents more front. Her face, once narrow like Judy's, at moments looks like a flattened mask. Always tall, she has in the years of becoming a hardened wife and matron allowed her long straight hair to be cut and teased out into bushy wings a little like the hairdo of the Sphinx.

'Like the hairdo of the Sphinx' is a pleasing imaginative touch. Once again, however, the passage draws discreet attention to its own cleverness in the act of sketching Pru. This is 'fine writing' with a vengeance. The phrase 'in that suety Pennsylvania way' is rather too knowing, and the image of the pry bars is striking but too contrived. 'Contrived', in fact, is a suitable word for this style of writing as a whole, as Pru herself threatens to disappear beneath the density of detail with which she is overlaid. The passage has the effect of describing an object rather than a person. Its style freezes a living woman into a still life.

Contrast Updike's prose with this extract from Evelyn Waugh's short story 'Tactical Exercise':

They arrived on a gusty April afternoon after a train journey of normal discomfort. A taxi drove them eight miles from the

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station, through deep Cornish lanes, past granite cottages and disused, archaic tin-workings. They reached the village which gave the house its postal address, passed through it and out along a track which suddenly emerged from its high banks into open grazing land on the cliff's edge, high, swift clouds and sea-birds wheeling overhead, the turf at their feet alive with fluttering wild flowers, salt in the air, below them the roar of the Atlantic breaking on the rocks, a middle-distance of indigo and white tumbled waters and beyond it the serene arc of the horizon. Here was the house.

It is not a passage that leaps from the page. It has none of the self-conscious sculpturedness of the Updike piece, and is surely all the better for it. Waugh's prose is crisp, pure and economical. It is reticent and unshowy, as though unaware of the skill with which, for example, it manages to steer a single sentence from 'They reached the village' to 'the serene arc of the horizon' through so many sub-clauses with no sense of strain or artifice. This sense of expansiveness, of both syntax and landscape, is counterpointed by the terse 'Here was the house', which signals a halt both in the story and in the way it is being delivered. 'A train journey of normal discomfort' is a pleasantly sardonic touch. 'Archaic' might be an adjective too far, but the rhythmic balance of the lines is deeply admirable. There is an air of quiet efficiency about the whole extract. The landscape is portrayed in a set of quick, deft strokes which brings it alive without cluttering the text with too much detail.

Waugh's prose has an honesty and hard-edged realism about it which show up well in contrast to Updike. They also compare well in this respect with the following extract from William Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!*:

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In the overcoat buttoned awry over the bathrobe he looked huge and shapeless like a dishevelled bear as he stared at Quentin (the Southerner, whose blood ran quick to cool, more supple to compensate for violent changes in temperature perhaps, perhaps merely nearer the surface) who sat hunched in his chair, his hands thrust into his pockets as if he were trying to hug himself warm between his arms, looking somehow fragile and even wan in the lamplight, the rosy glow which now had nothing of warmth, coziness, in it, while both their breathing vaporized faintly in the cold room where there was now not two of them but four, the two who breathed not individuals now yet something both more and less than twins, the heart and blood of youth. Shreve was nineteen, a few months younger than Quentin. He looked exactly nineteen; he was one of those people whose correct age you never know because they look exactly that and so you tell yourself that he or she cannot possibly be that because he or she looks too exactly that not to take advantage of the appearance: so you never believe implicitly that he or she is either that age which they claim or that which in sheer desperation they agree to or which someone else reports them to be.

This kind of prose, much favoured by some American creative writing courses, has an air of spontaneity about it which is almost entirely fabricated. Despite its casual way with order and convention, it is as artificial as a Petrarchan sonnet. There is something fussy and affected about the way it strives to sound natural. Its air of artlessness is too self-regarding. What is really a kind of clumsiness ('where there was now not two of them') is passed off as having the rough edge of real experience. An attempt at impressive intricacy in the final lines comes through as pedantic cleverness.

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The lines know nothing of tact and reticence. They sacrifice elegance, rhythm and economy to a kind of writing which (as someone once remarked of history) is just one damn thing after another. The passage is too garrulous by half. This is the kind of author whom it would be ferociously hard to shut up. And how on earth can one look exactly nineteen?

It is possible for a style to be 'literary' and effective at the same time, as this passage from Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, in which the hero's car is being tailed by a private detective, may illustrate:

The driver behind me, with his stuffed shoulders and Trappish moustache, looked like a display dummy, and his convertible seemed to move only because an invisible rope of silent silk connected it with our own shabby vehicle. We were many times weaker than his splendid, lacquered machine, so that I did not even attempt to outspeed him. *O lente currite noctis equi!* O softly run, nightmares! We climbed long grades and rolled downhill again, and heeded speed limits, and spared slow children and reproduced in sweeping terms the black wiggles of curves on their yellow shields, and no matter how and where we drove, the enchanted interspace slid on intact, mathematical, mirage-like, the viatic counter-part of a magic carpet.

At first glance, this may strike the reader as not all that remote from the Updike passage. It has a similar literary self-consciousness, as well as the same artful, fastidious attention to detail. Like Updike, too, Nabokov writes with a vigilant ear for the sound pattern of his prose. The difference lies partly in Nabokov's air of playfulness, as if the passage is amusedly aware of its own over-civilised quality. There is a faint sense that the narrator,

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Humbert Humbert, is sending himself up. The ridiculous name Humbert Humbert is itself a joke at his own expense. The playfulness is there in the idea that the car 'reproduced in sweeping terms the black wiggles of curves on their yellow shields,' meaning that it followed the curves in the road represented by the wiggles on the yellow roadsigns, but on a larger scale than the wiggles themselves. There is also some subtle wordplay in Humbert's creative mistranslation of Ovid's '*noctis equi* (horses of the night)' as 'nightmares'.

There is a comic discrepancy in the passage between the everyday act of driving on a US freeway and the kid-gloved, high-toned language ('invisible rope of silent silk', 'splendid, lacquered machine') in which it is described. It is a precious style of writing, meaning one which is affectedly elegant or over-refined; but the passage gets away with it partly because it is mildly amusing, partly because it is ironically self-aware, and partly because it comes through as the speaker's rather poignant way of compensating for the somewhat sordid predicament in which he finds himself, driving along with a teenage girl who is the object of his middle-aged lust and whom he has effectively hijacked. The freeway becomes an 'enchanted interspace . . . the viatic counter-part of a magic carpet' ('viatic' comes from the Latin word for 'road'). One notes how the *c* and *p* of 'counter-part' are echoed in the word 'carpet'. This highly wrought, slightly camp literary language really belongs to Humbert Humbert, the cultivated, old-fashioned narrator of the book. It marks his ironic distance from the landscape of everyday American culture through which he is moving, dragged there in his sexual pursuit of Lolita. He is fully aware of the pathetic, humiliated, out-of-place figure he cuts, as a high-minded European scholar adrift in a desert of hamburger joints and cheap

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motels. And this tension between him and his surroundings is reflected in the prose style.

Despite his high-mindedness, Humbert ends up pumping bullets into Quilty, a sexual rival of his, and killing him. The scene is stunning enough to be worth quoting at length:

My next bullet caught him somewhere in the side, and he rose from his chair higher and higher, like old, grey, mad Nijinski, like Old Faithful, like some old nightmare of mine, to a phenomenal altitude, or so it seemed – as he rent the air – still shaking with the rich black music – head thrown back in a howl, hand pressed to his brow, and with his other hand clutching his armpit as if stung by a hornet, down he came on his heels and, again a normal robed man, scurried out into the hall . . .

Suddenly dignified, and somewhat morose, he started to walk up the broad stairs, and, shifting my position, but not actually following him up the stairs, I fired three or four times in quick succession, wounding him at every blaze; and every time I did it to him, that horrible thing to him, his face would twitch in an absurd clownish manner, as if he were exaggerating the pain; he slowed down, rolled his eyes half closing them and made a feminine ‘ah!’ and he shivered every time a bullet hit him as if I were tickling him, and every time I got him with those slow, clumsy, blind bullets of mine, he would say under his breath, with a phoney British accent – all the while dreadfully twitching, shivering, smirking, but withal talking in a curiously detached and even amiable manner: ‘Ah, that hurts, sir, enough! Ah, that hurts atrociously, my dear fellow. I pray you, desist. Ah, very painful, very painful indeed . . .’

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It is not quite the gunfight at the OK Corral. On the contrary, it is one of the most disturbingly quirky descriptions of a murder in the history of English literature. What makes it so grotesque is the tension between the shooting itself and the absurdly prissy way in which the victim reacts to it. It is as though Quilty is performing for an audience, rather as the novel itself is doing. He is able to assume a British accent even while his blood leaks on to the stairs. Just as Nabokov's own style in the previous passage detaches itself with ironic amusement from what it is describing, so Quilty persists with his smirking and courteously archaic phrases ('I pray you, desist') even as the narrator's bullets rip him apart. In both cases, there is a discrepancy between the reality and how it is presented.

The narrator's style in this passage is as dissociated from the bloody event as the victim himself. There is a shocking contrast between the fury and despair which drive him to murder and the primly abstract language ('to a phenomenal altitude') in which he portrays the incident. Even as he is pumping bullet after bullet into his antagonist, he cannot resist a cultural allusion to a renowned Russian dancer ('like old, grey, mad Nijinski'). The way Quilty is thrown through the air by the impact of the shot is wittily converted into a graceful leap in ballet, rather as the extract itself converts a squalid slaying into art of the highest order. One notes the beautifully, comically understated touch 'somewhat morose', as though Quilty's reaction to being filled with lead is to feel a bit down in the mouth. 'as if I were tickling him' is another splendid piece of understatement. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the whole passage is that it was written by an author whose first language was not English.

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Nabokov's writing is full-bloodedly 'literary' without being cluttered or claustrophobic. The American author Carol Shields can write an equally 'literary' prose, but in more subdued vein. Take this passage from her novel *The Republic of Love*, whose heroine Fay McLeod is a feminist scholar researching into mermaids:

A few years ago a man called Morris Kroger gave Fay a small Inuit carving, a mermaid figure, fattish and cheerful, lying on her side propped up by her own thick muscled elbow. It is made of highly polished gray soapstone, and its rather stunted tail curls upward in an insolent flick . . .

In the matter of mermaid tails there is enormous variation. Tails may start well above the waist, flow out of the hips, or extend in a double set from the legs themselves. They're silvery with scales or dimpled with what looks like a watery form of cellulite. A mermaid's tail can be perfunctory or hugely long and coiled, suggesting a dragon's tail, or a serpent's, or a ferociously writhing penis. These tails are packed, muscular, impenetrable, and give powerful thrust to the whole of the body. Mermaid bodies are hard, rubbery, and indestructible, whereas human bodies are as easily shattered as meringues.

This is superlative literary art, but it does not draw undue attention to itself. It manages to be poetic and colloquial at the same time. This is partly because the imagery is strikingly well wrought, while the tone is fairly casual and downbeat. 'They're silvery with scales or dimpled with what looks like a watery form of cellulite' is full of fine imaginative touches, not least the word 'dimpled' and the inventive cellulite image. In a mischievous stroke, the idea that

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mermaids might have cellulite tugs these mysterious creatures down to our own unglamorous level. 'Fattish and cheerful' is another such piece of brisk irreverence. Yet one could imagine the sentence about cellulite being spoken in everyday conversation (note the colloquial 'They're'), though perhaps more in a senior common room than in a bowling alley.

'Its rather stunted tail curls upward in an insolent flick' is a beautifully economical phrase, one in which every word pulls its full weight. 'Insolent' in particular is delightfully unexpected. Perhaps the mermaid is giving the tail, as humans beings are said to give the finger. Or perhaps the tail is insolent because it casually disrespects our expectation that it will be fuller and longer. Comparing some mermaids' tails to a ferociously writhing penis sounds like a piece of insolence on the novel's own part, as it describes these feminine bodies by reference to the male member. 'Packed', 'muscular', 'hard' and 'powerful thrust' do this too, but 'impenetrable' comes as a surprise. We are presented with the paradox of an impenetrable organ of penetration. Mermaids are females with penis-like tails, but because their tails are like penetrating organs, they themselves are sexually impenetrable. The novel goes on to speak of them as asexual, 'there being no feminine passage designed for ingress and egress'. (The clinical language of this phrase reflects the fact that Fay writes scholarly papers on mermaids. One might come across such words written, but hardly spoken.) Because mermaids have 'hard, rubbery, and indestructible' bodies, they offer an image of strong women. One might claim that the difference between mermaids and some radical feminists is that the former cannot be penetrated while the latter do not care to be. Yet women are human, and human bodies are 'as easily shattered as meringues', so women are fragile as well as powerful. The meringue image is

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another splendidly imaginative stroke. Bodies, like meringues, are sweet but brittle. They can crumble to pieces in your hands. Human beings are precious, but break as easily as things of little value. Fay herself is both vital and vulnerable.

* * *

Let us turn for a moment from prose to poetry. Here is a verse from Algernon Charles Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*:

*The full streams feed on flower of rushes,
Ripe grasses trammel a travelling foot,
The faint fresh flame of the young year flushes
From leaf to flower and flower to fruit;
And fruit and leaf are as gold and fire,
And the oat is heard above the lyre,
And the hooped heel of a satyr crushes
The chestnut-husk at the chestnut-root.*

There is a certain breathless beauty about this, but it comes from not seeing anything very clearly. The lines are the verbal equivalent of a visual blur. Everything is too sweet, too lyrical and too cloying. Nothing can be seen with exactness because everything is remorselessly sacrificed to sound effect. The verse is clogged with repetition and alliteration, which rises to a peak of absurdity in 'The faint fresh flame of the young year flushes'. The description exists mostly for the sake of creating a sonorous musical texture. Every phrase is self-consciously 'poetic'. 'Ripe grasses trammel a travelling foot' is just a fancy way of saying that your foot gets caught in the grass as you walk. The tone is too rhapsodic, and the language too monotone. There is a shimmering sheen to the lines, but beneath it they

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are brittle. The slightest gust of reality, one feels, would bring this brittle literary creation toppling to the earth.

Despite the fervour of the feeling, Swinburne's language is notably abstract. He uses general nouns like 'leaf', 'flower', 'fruit' and 'fire'. Nothing is seen in close-up. Contrast this with a verse from Amy Lowell's poem 'The Weather-Cock Points South':

*White flower,
Flower of wax, of jade, of unstreaked agate;
Flower with surfaces of ice,
With shadows faintly crimson.
Where in all the garden is there such a flower?
The stars crowd through the lilac leaves
To look at you.
The low moon brightens you with silver.*

The poet's eye here is steadily on the object. The lines resonate with wonder and admiration, but their emotions are kept in check by the demands of precise description. The poem allows itself a minor flight of fancy with 'The stars crowd through the lilac leaves / To look at you', but otherwise it subordinates the imaginative to the real. 'The low moon brightens you with silver' makes it sound as though the moon is paying homage to the flower, but if this is fanciful it is also a statement of fact. Swinburne's poem is full of hypnotically repetitive rhythms, stringing together phrases with too many syllables in them, whereas the rhythms of Lowell's piece are taut and restrained. There is a control and economy about her language. Though she is moved by the beauty of the flower, she refuses to lose her cool. Swinburne's lines tumble hectically along, while Lowell weighs and balances every phrase.

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We may end with a poet whose status is not in doubt. In fact, there is well-nigh universal agreement on the value of his work. So much so, indeed, that it is doubtful that his memory will ever fade. Much anthologised, he has a seat among the immortals as secure as Rimbaud or Pushkin, and his reputation has never suffered the ups and downs of some fellow writers. I am referring to the nineteenth-century Scottish poet William McGonagall, by common consent one of the most atrocious writers ever to set pen to paper. Here is an extract from his 'Railway Bridge of the Silvery Tay':

*Beautiful new railway bridge of the silvery Tay,
With your strong brick piers and buttresses in so grand array;
And your thirteen central girders, which seem to my eye,
Strong enough all windy storms to defy.*

*And as I gaze at thee my heart feels gay,
Because thou art the greatest railway bridge of the present day;
And can be seen from miles away,
From north, south, east, or west of the Tay . . .*

*Beautiful new railway bridge of the silvery Tay,
With your beautiful side screens along your railway;
Which would be a great protection on a windy day,
So as the railway carriages won't be blown away . . .*

The world is stuffed with mediocre poets, but it takes a certain sublime ineptitude to rival McGonagall's astonishing achievement. To be so unforgettably awful is a privilege bestowed on only a few. With magnificent consistency, he never deviates from the most abysmal standards. Indeed, he can justly boast of never having

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penned an indifferent or unremarkable line. It is idle to ask whether someone could write like this yet be aware of how dreadful he was. Like the less competent performers on TV talent shows, the fact that he does not know how bad he is is part of his badness.

Yet a nagging question remains. Imagine some community, perhaps in the far-flung future, in which the English language was still in use, but its resonances and conventions, maybe because of some momentous historical transformation, were very different from the English of today. Perhaps phrases like 'And can be seen from miles away' would not sound particularly lame; rhymes like 'Tay', 'railway', 'day' and 'away' would not appear absurdly repetitive; and the flat literalism and rhythmical clumsiness of 'With your strong brick piers and buttresses in so grand array' might come through as rather charming. If Samuel Johnson could complain about some of Shakespeare's most inventive imagery, is it entirely out of the question that one day McGonagall might be hailed as a major poet?