LITERATURE, HISTORY, VALUE
The Case of British Romanticism

WILLIAM CHRISTIE

CRITICAL REVIEWING IN THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

Perhaps the only thing that all the poets of the Romantic period had in common was an anxiety about how they would be received by their contemporaries, in the first instance, then about how (or whether) they would be read by future readers. It related to a more generalised anxiety about the status and function of poetry in what the satirist, Thomas Love Peacock, in his Four Ages of Poetry (1820), called an 'iron age': when intellectual power and intellectual acquisition have turned themselves into other and better channels. Poetry, in Peacock's provocative and only partly comic characterisation, was historically redundant, a hangover from when society thought as a child. The technologico-scientific future glimpsed in the early signs of an industrial revolution, the claims of common sense and logic, and the increasing prevalence of market forces, according to Peacock, would have no place for it. This 'anxiety of reception' (to use Lucy Newlyn's term) explains why so much Romantic and post-Romantic poetry is written about poetry itself, beset by doubts about its own visionary and interpretative powers while yearning to establish a unique epistemology and authority.

The tense relationship between poet and audience in the early nineteenth century is manifest in one of the most resilient of the Romantic myths, of which Percy Bysshe Shelley's rhapsodic pastoral elegy for John Keats, entitled Adonais, is an exalted expression: the myth of the vulnerable poetic sensibility damaged or destroyed by an indifferent, if not openly hostile, world. 'I weep for Adonais—he is dead', mourned Shelley in a poem that was also an historical elegy for poetry itself and a eulogy for fellow poets, real and imagined. From 1802, at the centre of this hostile world, we find the figure of the critical reviewer, the occasion of Shelley's mythologising in Adonais. Shelley's hypersensitive Keats has been destroyed by the brutal forces of the critical establishment:

The genius of the lamented person to whose memory I have dedicated these unworthy verses, was not less delicate and fragile than it was beautiful; and where cankerworms abound, what wonder if its young flower was blighted in the bud? The savage criticism on his Endymion, which appeared in the Quarterly Review, produced the most violent effect on his susceptible mind; the agitation thus originated ended in the rupture of a blood-vessel in the lungs; a rapid consumption ensued, and the succeeding acknowledgements from more candid critics, of the true greatness of his powers, were ineffectual to heal the wound thus wantonly inflicted.

As so often, the story of Adonais turns out to be a myth in both senses of the word: a fabrication, no less than a powerful story expressing a collective insight or (as in this case) a collective anxiety. Far from being naturally ethereal and retiring, Keats before he contracted tuberculosis was athletic, edgy, and prone to belligerence. But the attack on Keats in the periodicals had been real. The frenzy of [Keats's] Poems was bad enough in its way, John Gibson Lockhart had written in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 'but it did not alarm us half so seriously as the calm, settled, imperturbable, drivelling idiocy of Endymion'.

Lockhart was imitating, often exaggerating, a style of literary criticism developed in 1802 by the first of the major Romantic periodicals, the Edinburgh Review, a style best exemplified by the Edinburgh's editor, Francis Jeffrey (fig. 1), in his aggressively critical reviews of William Wordsworth, Walter Scott, Joanna Baillie, John Thelwall, Thomas Moore, Francis Douce, and many others. However exigent the commercial pressures behind the development of book reviewing in the eighteenth century, it was never limited to promoting books as literary or commercial objects. From the beginning, reviewing also engaged in the culture of ideas and ideologies, reflecting and fuelling the political and cultural antagonisms that would become more open and divisive after the French Revolution.

In other words, the big Reviews of the early nineteenth century—the Edinburgh Review and its Tory rival, the Quarterly Review—had barely concealed political priorities: their 'Right leg is politics', as Jeffrey famously insisted. And the severity with which they prosecuted these interests were integral to a process of demystification that was designed (amongst other things) to establish the cultural authority of the reviewer over both the author and the reader. Critical severity had been around long before 1802, of course, but with the Edinburgh Review misrepresentation and severity became especially wilful and especially skilful, politically calculated and, sometimes, vicious and inexcusable. 'Jeffrey, Croker and Hazlitt may not have slain with a review', writes Marilyn Butler, 'but it is not surprising that contemporaries thought them capable of it.'

The final aspect of Romantic periodical reviewing that I want to register is its institutionalisation of criticism as a distinct professional activity. The Edinburgh numbered amongst its contributors a host of original writers whom we would think of as specialist practitioners in their respective fields, and this was part of the success of the Reviews. Walter Scott reviewed literature for the Edinburgh and the Quarterly, for example, as did Thomas Carlyle for the Edinburgh. The Edinburgh occasionally had Lord Grey for politics, the Quarterly the Duke of Wellington. Henry Hallam and Thomas Babington Macaulay reviewed history for the Edinburgh and Thomas Malthus wrote articles on political economy for both the big quarterlies. For mathematics and science, the Edinburgh could boast John Playfair and John Leslie, respectively Professors of Natural Philosophy and of Mathematics at the University of Edinburgh. But along with
this specialisation went generalisation, and the core Edinburgh and Quarterly reviewers were not expert practitioners so much as expert critics. The rise in remuneration and status of nineteenth-century reviewing created the phenomenon of the professional critic and certain reviewers stand out as especially prolific. Between them, Jeffrey and Henry Brougham (and to a lesser extent Sydney Smith) accounted for well over forty per cent of the Edinburgh in its early years; Robert Southey and John Barrow and John Wilson Croker, along with editor William Gifford, performed a similar service for the Quarterly. Their reviews attest to their argumentative competence in an impressive range of pursuits, and it is precisely this, and not an expertise in any specific area, that represents their critical strength.

And no practice highlights this distinction better than that of literary criticism. Jeffrey was known to his period as its greatest literary critic and made a point of reviewing the bulk of the poetry and fiction in the Edinburgh himself (fig. 2). When Jeffrey reviewed Scott, or Swift, or Burns, or Wordsworth, or Baillie, or Southey, or Byron, or Crabbe, or Edgeworth, or Moore, or Hemans for the Edinburgh, or wrote on Classical, or Elizabethan, or Restoration, or Augustan literature, he wrote solely as a critic and consumer. Jeffrey's practical experience as a literary critic was immense. He was extremely widely read in English, as well as in French and Classical literature, and he had written what amounted to thousands of pages of criticism in his late teens and twenties, using the act of writing down his own considered response to everything he read as a personal discipline.

The line from the professional literary reviewer to the modern literary critic working in a university English department is, in this one sense at least, a direct one. Neither needs to be a creative artist in order to assume critical authority.

For the Romantic writer, on the other hand, this separation of powers became part of the problem, and a source of alienation and distrust. The often antagonistic attitude adopted by nineteenth-century reviewers played a crucial role in reinforcing the self-consciousness of imaginative writing in the

Romantic period and a note of desperation can be heard throughout the period protesting that literary life was being misunderstood and undermined by the very institutions that should have been encouraging and ennobling it. Instead of countering the resistance of a new reading public to what was innovative or vitally different, the Reviews were conspiring with the public against selected authors, encouraging the public's complacency and philistinism.

Lord Byron captured this tension in the title of the satire he wrote (or rather rewrote) in response to his own savaging at the hands of the Edinburgh Review—English Bards and Scotch Reviewers—where the antagonism between criticism and creation is expressed in specifically national, even racial terms. "Scotch Reviewers", by reputation and education habituated to the use of their critical skills,
are stigmatised as having developed literary criticism into a sterile, destructive, self-serving exercise. The English artist struggles to conceive and quicken, to imagine that which he knows; the Scottish reviewer/critic murders to dissect. 'Scottishness,' as Stephen Cheeke remarks, 'is represented as essentially mock-heroic, hardened to reality, "unpoetical".'

The Scottish intellectual effort generally, and the critical effort of the Edinburgh Review in particular, are portrayed by Byron as secondary and parasitic productions in which national inferiority and envy are sublimated as indiscriminate censure:

Each genial influence nurtured to resist,
A land of meanness, sophistry and mist.

(‘The Curse of Minerva,’ lines 137–38)

**COLERIDGE ON THE CRITICAL REVIEWERS**

To distill this discussion of Romantic periodical criticism, I want to select one example from the many howls of protest against contemporary reviewing that were heard throughout the period: the indirect and complex, but for our purposes suggestive critique of Francis Jeffrey and the Edinburgh Review in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*. The twenty first chapter of the *Biographia* climaxes in an elaborate formal analogy involving a conflict of interpretations which Coleridge has with two French army officers over the symbolism of Michelangelo’s famous statue of Moses. Coleridge is recalling a conversation he had with a Prussian friend when he was in Rome visiting the tomb of Julius II (fig. 3), which ‘turned on the horns and beard of the tremendous statue; of the necessity of each to support the other; of the superhuman effect of the former’:

We called to mind the horns of the rising sun, and I repeated the noble passage from Taylor’s Holy Dying. That horns were the emblem of power and sovereignty among the Eastern nations, and are still retained as such in Abyssinia; the Achelous of the ancient Greeks; and the probable ideas and feelings, that originally suggested the mixture of the human and the brute form in the figure, by which they realized the idea of their mysterious Pan, as representing intelligence blended with a darker power, deeper, mightier, and more universal than the conscious intellect of man; than intelligence,—all these thoughts and recollections passed in procession before our minds.

The reflections of Coleridge and his friend focus on the human imagination and the symbolic power of art—on what the sublime sculpture of a Michelangelo can convey beyond ‘the conscious intellect of man.’ The critical question might be what the statue means, but the figure of Moses, with its horns blending the super-human with the sub-human, is about what we mean, and about how, by accessing ‘a darker power,’ we make meaning in art. Interpretation here relies upon a cultural literacy that reaches across time.
and space to Abyssinia, the Orient, and the ancient Greeks—the Etruscan god of waters and rivers, Achelous, considered by some to have been the inspiration for the medieval Green Man, is linked iconographically with 'the mysterious Pan.' Coleridge is modelling a kind of hermeneutics or high criticism, one that relies on extensive erudition and a willed, imaginative receptivity or responsiveness.

With the advent of two French army officers, however, the whole tone of the encounter with Michelangelo's genius sinks. In spite of their apparent 'distinction and rank,' the Frenchmen—'instantly noticing the statue in parts,' says Coleridge, 'without one moment's pause of admiration impressed by the whole' (ii, 117)—are capable only of a smutty misinterpretation. Seeing the horns of Michelangelo's Moses, Coleridge had been reminded of the 'golden horns' of the sun in Jeremy Taylor's The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying, 'like those which decked the browes of Moses when he was forced to wear a vail, because himself had seen the face of God'; the French officers, on the other hand, can think only of 'a HE-GOAT and a CUCKOLD' (ii, 116n, 117). Coleridge contrasts his own, genial criticism—informe, sympathetic, imaginative—with the shallow vulgarity of the philistine Frenchmen. For the Frenchmen, the whole mysterious, hierarchial, signifying universe remains 'a land of darkness, a perfect Anti-Goshen' (i, 242). The Rome in which Coleridge's readers find themselves, guided by his interpretative genius, is the Rome of Ralph Cudworth, of Jeremy Taylor, of Thomas Burnet, of John Milton—the grand Indo-European or 'universal' scholarship and genius of the Christian Renaissance, towards which Coleridge's priorities and authorities and examples direct the reader throughout the pages of the Biographia. This is a powerful nostalgia that at any point can transform the Biographia into an elegy on the passing of a more noble age and culture, one devastated and occupied (as Rome itself was) by French military imperialism, for which French intellectual imperialism—with its want of sympathy and imagination, its reductive scepticism and impious deism—is held responsible. There are more things in heaven and earth than are present in their philosophy.

The French soldiers turn out to be an elaborate analogy for Francis Jeffrey, the anecdote designed to disqualify Jeffrey as a critic and cultural legislator. The association implicit in the analogy is of the Scottish with the French Enlightenment. The allegiance of the Edinburgh to philosophes like Turgot, Mirabeau, Quesnay, and Condorcet was on record at a time when even liberal opinion despaired of finding anything valuable in French thought and culture.10 (The Biographia was composed in 1815, the year the British and allied forces finally routed the French army at Waterloo.) The world of art and of metaphysics is posited as so far beyond the limits of Jeffrey's Gallic consciousness as to expose his critical quibbling and contempt as a form of ignorance, impotence, and imaginative impoverishment. On Mt Sinai, Coleridge as Moses knows no such geographical or imaginative limits, enforcing his self-elected role as genius and cultural lawyer.

PUBLIC HUMANITIES

What I am concerned with in this paper is the business of criticism as it applies to literature in the first instance, but also to the humanities more generally—I am concerned with what is expected of the humanities in their role as public interpreters and cultural legislators, and with what they expect of themselves. To explore this issue, I have chosen to use the antagonism between creative and critical activity in Romantic literary culture to reflect on some of the changes literary studies have undergone since 1980 and to throw light on some of the assumptions and strategies of the dominant contemporary form of ideological criticism, asking how well we are positioned to manage the re-engagement with the non-university sector represented by the idea (and practice) of public humanities.

The very idea of 'public humanities' has to be understood as either paradoxical or tautological, opposed as it is not to a private humanities but to a scholarly or professional humanities, carried on within the confines of a university. As a group of academic
disciplines taking as the primary objects of their enquiry human actions, ideas, institutions, and values, the humanities urge us to examine our personal and social lives. For that reason, however, they can never be confined to universities or, within universities, to specific disciplines. The humanities are something that, simply by virtue of our being human, we are all doing all of the time. Ideas of truth, beauty, equity, and justice are no less important—and no less controversial—for a banker than they are for us. More to the point, the kind of analytical and creative thinking that characterises the humanities is no less important for the banker than it is for us.

So we come back to the question of what, if anything, is distinctive about public humanities, and whether it does or should differ from university humanities? Do we reserve a mode of argumentation or a special language for sharing ideas and issues and sensations with a public audience, a language or an argument that is different from the one we might use with undergraduates, say, or the one we use with our academic peers? Have I said anything so far in this article that I could not or would not share with an interested member of the public not necessarily educated in university humanities? I will not try to answer these questions for other disciplines, but will say of my own—of literary studies—that in the course of my career I have witnessed the alienation of two key audiences for the work we do as university literary critics: readers and writers. And I take the belated development of an oxymoronic ‘public humanities’ as implicitly recognising just that.

What should be clear by now is that, by ‘the public’, I do not mean ‘the dim-witted bourgeoisie’ or ‘the credulous masses’, to quote Rita Felski in another context, to be used and abused as ‘a source of symbolic advantage, a guarantee to oppositional purity or redemptive politics, shoring up the certitude of one’s own advanced consciousness’. Having said that, I hasten to add that the whole issue of our obligations and relations to the public is much more complex than the sentimental or utopian version that I am implying might suggest, with interesting theoretical and practical ramifications, some of which I will reflect on by way of concluding this essay.

ROMANTIC CRITICISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the meantime, let me sketch the case of British Romantic Literature. The Romantic literature that I inherited in the 1970s had
begun in 1798: Wordsworth was its creative centre, Coleridge its critical centre (figs 4 and 5). Confirmation of Wordsworth's centrality could be found, not only in Coleridge—Wordsworth was Coleridge's greatest work, we were told—but in a number of other influential critical gestures by illustrious contemporaries: Hazlitt's awestruck if querulous exaltation of Wordsworth as 'a pure emanation of the Spirit of the Age', for example; Keats's troubled characterisation of 'the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime'; Shelley's manifest anxiety about Wordsworth (in Harold Bloom's sense), returning obsessively to the Wordsworthian precedent or 'presence' throughout his career. The Victorian canonisation of Shelley and Keats as part of a second generation of what the early twentieth century would settle on as six major Romantic poets served only to confirm the existence and indeed priority of the first generation.

THE OLD CANON

William BLAKE 1757–1827
William WORDSWORTH 1770–1850
Samuel Taylor COLERIDGE 1772–1834
George Gordon, Lord BYRON 1788–1824
Percy Bysshe SHELLEY 1792–1822
John KEATS 1795–1821

Wordsworth's reputation managed to survive critical theories that were otherwise nominally anti-Romantic—the high culturalism of Matthew Arnold, for example, the Anglo-Catholicism of T. S. Eliot, the narrow vitalism of F. R. Leavis, the close reading of the New Criticism—to be taken up again in the 1960s by theories that were sympathetic to Romanticism and themselves Romantic, like the Freudian agon of Harold Bloom and the Hegelian or apocalyptic historicism of M. H. Abrams. One way and another, English literary history had come to fulfil Wordsworth's prophetic determination to create the taste by which he could be enjoyed. Thanks largely to Wordsworth and Coleridge, poetry or imaginative literature, now defined as the sublimation of the immediate and the quotidian, enjoyed a cultural supremacy and the quasi-spiritual status conferred upon it by Arnold. 'More and more,' wrote Arnold, we will 'turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us,' and time and again the Victorians had found salvation of one form or another in the poetry of William Wordsworth. By the 1980s, however, this Wordsworth-centred reading of Romanticism was being seriously and repeatedly challenged by a collective 'return of history', which was also at the same time a return to politics. In the wake of the revisionary enterprise begun by Jerome McGann in the early 1970s and given a manifesto in his The Romantic Ideology in 1983, and in the wake of the revisionary history of Marilyn Butler's Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries in 1981, the majority of analyses of Romantic literature took up a position in wilful and explicit contrast to what they saw as a two-hundred-year-old tendency to play right into the hands of a Wordsworth-centred Romanticism by uncritically accepting its rapt privacies and spiritual hierarchies, along with its concomitant suppression of the historical and political temporality of the text (fig. 6).

'Criticism of Romanticism has frequently been theoretically more Romantic, and certainly more partial, than English Romantic writing
itself, complained Marilyn Butler. Criticism of Romanticism, in other words, has been uncritical.

From that moment, various forms of critical historicism prevailed as various forms of scepticism. In literary studies today, to quote Herbert Lindenberger in the late 1980s, 'history serves not so much as a backdrop or even as an object of enquiry than as a special way of thinking—a way that assumes, for instance, that phenomena long taken to be timeless or grounded in nature are rooted in particular times and places, indeed, that these roots are often ignored or suppressed in the interest of making these phenomena appear to be timeless and natural.' The cultural and ideological continuity between the Romantic enterprise and our own—a continuity, explicit in the celebration of a Romantic theology in Abrams, for example, and in the will to individuation in Bloom—became for many a source of critical embarrassment, indeed a form of false consciousness. This false consciousness needed to be recognised, it was said, if Romanticism was to receive the criticism, or rather critique, that it deserved. Where Abrams had sought to recover a high-minded, creative optimism, historicism discovered an often self-defeating evasiveness. The blindnesses, absences, and contradictions so central to the deconstructive enterprise were for the New Historicism specifically historical and political ones—the most heinous of all being, of course, 'the denial of history itself.'

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What gave New Historicism most of its polemical charge, in other words, was a suspicion that derived ultimately from the historical materialism of Marxism and the kind of cultural critique practised by Louis Althusser, Pierre Macherey, and Frederic Jameson, alert for 'signs of contradictions (historically determined)', to quote Macherey and Étienne Balibar, 'which appear as unevenly resolved conflicts.' Unimpressed by what Lindberger (after Walter Benjamin) calls 'the aura that has customarily surrounded romantic poetry', Marxist and non-Marxist historians alike attempted to get behind Romantic ideology to 'the actual historical processes by which this aura has come to glorify particular poets.' The Romantic idea of art that we saw modelled in Coleridge's deliberately reactionary encounter with Michelangelo's Moses, with its intimations of immortality, now had to be understood as a socio-economic product, and for 'the Genius of Poetry' that Keats believed 'must work out its own salvation in a man' were substituted the genii of time and place, production and reception.

As well as having no illusions about the Romantic pieties, New Historicism denounced those pieties as evidence of the poet's complicity with conservative, usually oppressive forces in society—utilising what Rita Felski calls 'the well-oiled machine of ideology critique, the x-ray gaze of symptomatic reading, the smoothly rehearsed moves that add up to a hermeneutics of suspicion.' What interests us in all of this is the way in which these critical wars re-enact the antagonisms we discussed at the opening of this essay, what McGann himself calls 'the civil wars of the romantic movement itself'—between critic and poet; Enlightenment and Romanticism; Whig and Tory; Scotland and England. Those literary historians who took their cue from McGann and Butler and began in self-conscious and explicit resistance to Wordsworth, and to what they saw as the willful imposition of a Wordsworth-centred Romanticism, were doing exactly what Francis Jeffrey did when he began his critical enterprise back in October of 1802 with an attack on Wordsworth's 'anti-social principles, and distempered sensibility', his discontent with the present constitution of society—his paradoxical morality, and his perpetual hankering after some unattainable state of voluptuous virtue and perfection.

Not only was politics the 'Right leg' of the Edinburgh Review, it also had a way of thinking and writing historically. Indeed, the 'notions of historical relativism and the
historical determination of politics’—notions that late twentieth-century criticism takes for granted—would have seemed commonplace in the Edinburgh of Dugald Stewart and John Millar, as J.W. Burrow has said. Moreover, recent criticism and Scottish historicism both make a priority of economic exigencies, what Thomas Carlyle famously stigmatised as the cash-payment nexus.\(^{16}\)

The best way to sum up the reputation of Scottish critical thinking is to look at Jeffrey’s cleverly ambiguous portrait of the protosociologist, John Millar, as corresponding ‘pretty nearly with the abstract idea that the learned of England entertain of a Scottish [sic] philosopher’:

He wondered at nothing; and has done more to repress the ignorant admiration of others, than most of his contemporaries. It was the leading principle, indeed, of all his speculations on law, morality, government, language, the arts, sciences, and manners—that there was nothing produced by arbitrary or accidental causes; that no great change, institution, custom, or occurrence, could be ascribed to the character or exertions of an individual, to the temperament of an individual or a nation, to occasional policy, or peculiar wisdom or folly: everything, on the contrary, he held, arose spontaneously from the situation of the society, and was suggested or imposed irresistibly by the opportunities or necessities of their condition.\(^{29}\)

The same caricature of Scottish philosophy imputed here to ‘the learned of England’ was recycled in an altogether darker or demonic form by Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria*, as we saw, and directed at the *Edinburgh Review* itself. It would become the leitmotif of Carlyle’s portrait of Francis Jeffrey in his *Reminiscences*: ‘To my regret’, writes Carlyle, Jeffrey ‘seemed bent on, first of all, converting me from what he called my “German mysticism,” back merely, as I could perceive, into dead Edinburgh Whiggism, scepticism, and materialism.’\(^{30}\) The interest for our purposes lies in the fact that the same ‘scepticism’ and ‘materialism’ characterises the work of modern ideological critics, who like their *Edinburgh* precursors work within an historical materialist tradition and adopt a self-conscious critical methodology, wondering at nothing and exerting themselves ‘to repress the ignorant admiration of others’. ‘The negative’, to quote Rita Felski, ‘has become inescapably, overbearingly, normative.’\(^{31}\)

THE CHALLENGE FOR A PUBLIC HUMANITIES

Not only is ‘a rigorously political reading...a closed, monothematic reading’, writes M. H. Abram, ‘it is also joyless’\(^{32}\) —joyless, and often knowing and self-righteous. As with the omniscience of Romantic periodical criticism attacking what they saw as the ‘drivelling idiocy’ of their contemporaries, the process of contextualisation and demystification practised by ideological criticism is used to establish the cultural authority of the critic over the author and the reader, often looking down on the self-deluded author from the moral high ground. The same protest that was heard throughout the Romantic period—that literature was being misunderstood and undermined by the very institutions that should have been encouraging and ennobling it—could be heard from the writers of the 1980s and 1990s, when a whole genre of poems sprang up to assert that, *contra* Roland Barthes, authors were still very much alive, and to defend themselves and their work from the arrogations of critical theory. ‘Both criticism and “critique”,’ to quote Helen Small, ‘whatever their particular valency, omit a great deal. The work of the humanities is frequently descriptive, or appreciative, or imaginative, or provocative, or speculative, more than it is critical.’\(^{33}\)

This is one of a number of issues that have to be carefully negotiated when sharing humanities with the public, which is usually inclined to give the author the benefit of the doubt when it comes to meaning, style, and motive force. Predisposed to admire where they feel a writer is doing something they could not do nearly so well themselves, members of the public also usually subscribe to a canonical approach to literature. Though
perfectly content to hear about the fluctuations of fortune undergone by the reputations of writers, and indeed fascinated by historical change and the realisation that ‘all our notions [are] husked in the phantasms of time and place’, as Coleridge put it, the public still wants to believe that, however history had played out, Shakespeare would always have been recognised as a great playwright, and that certain writers are to be cherished and preserved because they ‘make glow with significance what is usually unseen, and unspoken too’, to quote David Malouf: ‘that, when it occurs, is what binds us all, since it speaks out of the centre of each one of us, giving shape to what we too have experienced and did not till then have words for, though as soon as they are spoken we know them as our own’.

And the public is stubborn in its conviction that the characters in novels are like real people and susceptible to the same gossip as their neighbours—though the truth is, of course, we know some novelist characters far better than we are ever likely to know our neighbours. Under pressure, most readers are likely to concede that fictional characters do not share the same ontological status as human beings, but that does not mean what happens to them does not matter. We are moved by literature, according to Dr Johnson, not because we confuse it with reality, but because it brings reality to mind. Little Nell may be a fiction but the good and the young die prematurely, now no less than in the Victorian period, challenging our instinctive sense of social and cosmic justice. Whatever we may think about the ontological status of a work of art, however, public humanities is never going to work unless we bring critical thinking back into conversation with common reading and common understanding—not to talk down to the public, but to talk with them about the things that matter to us all: the humanities.

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14. ‘[E]very Author, as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed, in his Essay Supplementary to the Preface (1815), in Wordsworth’s Poetry and Prose, ed. by Nicholas Halmi (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), p. 522.


22. Lindenberger, The History in Literature, p. 32.

23. In a letter to J. A. Hazlitt, 8 October 1818, Letters of John Keats, ed. by Gittings, p. 156.


31. Felski, Uses of Literature, p. 3.


34. ‘[A]ll our notions’, Coleridge wrote, were ‘husbanded in the phantasm of Time & Place, that still escape the finest sieve & most searching Winnow of our Reason & Abstraction’, Coleridge’s Notebooks: A Selection, ed. by Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 27.
