

## Keeping the Faith: The Transformative Autonomy of Literature and the Uniqueness of Literary Discourse

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In 1999 there appeared in *The New York Review of Books* a review by Andrew Delbanco of some seven studies (all but one of them published in the period 1997-99) which included Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature* and Robert Scholes's *The Rise and Fall of English*. On the basis of such titles Delbanco's piece appeared under the heading, 'The Decline and Fall of Literature'.<sup>1</sup> While some years have elapsed since the appearance of the review, and while some of the points made have more relevance to North American than Irish universities, the arguments put forward are still worth revisiting, if only to provide a starting-point for what is, in its very nature, an ongoing debate.

Delbanco reminds us that English has been an established and respected part of the university curriculum for a comparatively short period (thus, the English honours degree was established in Oxford only in 1894: Delbanco, p. 3). One defence against those who tended to dismiss the fledgling subject of English as 'chatter about Shelley' was the one associated most famously with Matthew Arnold—to study literature in English (all the more needful, given that literature in the native language was more readily accessible than literature in Greek and Latin) was to broaden one's cultural awareness (of which more later); but also to acquire an ethical orientation. Culture, said Arnold, 'moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good'.<sup>2</sup> One way of becoming more morally sensitive through the reading of literature was to feel, through empathic identification with character and situation, for the plight of fictional others (or even, to use the more contemporary term, of 'the Other'). That one should develop a heightened moral sense was all the more important in an age in which Christian belief was being steadily eroded, and the norm became either sophisticated agnosticism or religious indifference. This ambition receives programmatic embodiment in the fiction—notably, for example, in *Middlemarch* (1871-72)—of George Eliot, who herself had lost her Christian faith by the time she was twenty-one, and undertook to devote to the ethical the kind of passion hitherto devoted to religious belief. (I shall return at the end of the article to the general question of the possible connection between literature and ethics.)

The Arnoldian programme of broadening one's cultural awareness (to speak of that in more detail) may at times seem culpably vague, but it entailed, in Delbanco's useful summary, the idea of becoming 'aware of the past and restless with the complacencies of the present' (p. 7). This would, then, provide the basis for that passion for improvement in the present state of affairs (Arnold's 'moral and social passion for doing good'). In Arnold's own formula, 'culture is a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know ... the best that has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits...' (*C and A*, 'Preface', p. 7).<sup>3</sup> One should fairly acknowledge that this sense of the transformative power of culture (and of literature) contains a radical dimension; though the radicalism does not seek to embody itself in any defining ideology (indeed, Arnold's repeated emphasis upon the virtue of 'disinterestedness'—as in his essay on 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1864)—acts as a

warning against any *a priori* ideological commitment).<sup>4</sup> One can nonetheless validate, and add some (perhaps much-needed) intellectual respectability to Arnold's radical credentials, by indicating his possible affinity with the views (expressed with a greater degree of theoretical sophistication) of a member of the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse, in pursuit of the argument that art provides an ideal alternative which implicitly acts as a critique of the real, existing social order, holds that the 'affirmative character of art' is *per se* revolutionary in its effect. Art (including imaginative literature), in its imagining of ideal alternatives 'contradicts' the prevalent repressive order, and it does so because it 'subverts the dominant consciousness, the ordinary experience' (recall Arnold on the dispelling of 'stock notions and habits'). In a succinct summary, Marcuse puts it in these terms: 'The autonomy of art [offering its own better 'world' or heterocosm] contains the categorical imperative: "things must change"'.<sup>5</sup>

(Literature has behind it what by now, after many years, amounts to a radical tradition of subversion: a subversive tendency expressed in one of its most telling forms in William Blake's declaration in the Romantic period: 'the Poet is Independent & Wicked; the Philosopher is Dependent & Good'.<sup>6</sup> Probably, if there is one slogan which might unite all, or almost all, of those involved in teaching in English departments (whatever their individual ideological stances), it will be found in those words of Blake; or in some such alternative formula as that which endorses in the critic a suspicion of accepted orthodoxies commensurate with that attributed to the poet/author: 'When in Rome, do as the Greeks'.)

According to Delbanco (pp. 7-8), as long as teachers of literature 'acknowledged their responsibility for transmitting culture' in the sense indicated above, 'they held a dignified position in the university'. But the 'sad news', he adds, 'is that teachers of literature have lost faith in their subject and in themselves' (p. 9: a summary of the state of affairs in English departments which we should acknowledge as limited, but one that may serve to advance the argument for the time being). For this 'lost faith' one may (extrapolating from Delbanco rather than simply summarising his argument) suggest a number of reasons:

- (1) the desire to justify the study of English on scientific/quantitative grounds;
- (2) in a related development, the genesis of a specialist vocabulary which, giving rise to theoretical jargon, threatens to close literature off from the 'naïve' or theoretically untutored reader, *and* from the immediacy of his/her imaginative/emotional response;
- (3) the reluctance or inability to adopt, or appear to adopt, an apolitical stance ('disinterestedness') in the face of palpable injustices and abuses of power (hence the rise of *parti pris* positions, as, for example, in feminism or colonial/postcolonial studies);
- (4) the rise of postmodernism and with it a far-reaching scepticism which, denying foundational truth, calls likewise into question the truth-content of literature.

It may be useful to take each of these in turn.

(1) Delbanco notes (pp. 6-7) that from the outset English professors in the late nineteenth century (an age when scientific positivism and related intellectual attitudes

held sway) chose to defend the subject of English by incorporating what he generally describes as 'literary "science"' (philology, for example, or fact-based biography, or textual scholarship which attempted to establish the 'true' or 'actual' text). The field of English, as Delbanco (p. 14) further notes, has gone on being deeply ambivalent about science: it 'distrusts science, but it yearns to be scientific'; and he refers to the notorious hoax perpetrated by the physicist Alan Sokal, in which Sokal (wickedly) submitted 'a deliberately fraudulent article full of pseudoscientific gibberish to a leading cultural studies journal, which promptly published it' (gibberish and all). Francis Wheen, providing an extended account of the hoax, notes that not only was the spoof article 'littered with scientific howlers and absurdities', but, more to the point, that 'the postmodernists' attempts to discredit Sokal were hampered by the fact that his article ... included dozens of genuine quotations from their own work'.<sup>7</sup> That is to say, the postmodernists, enamoured of the scientific, stand indicted of the reckless use of (pseudo)scientific terms.

(2) It is the ambition of theory to present itself as a 'hard' discipline (like science) that generates an interest in such specialised, quasi-scientific terminology, as was the case with deconstruction. The consequence, as Delbanco notes (p. 11), was that literary studies fell 'into the grip of a peculiarly repellent jargon—repellent in the literal sense of pushing readers away'.<sup>8</sup> The readers here mentioned may be supposed to be lineally descended from Dr Samuel Johnson's 'common reader', famously mentioned in his 'Life of Gray' as the arbiter of whether or not Gray's *Elegy* is a great poem; for 'by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours'.<sup>9</sup> From certain theoretical perspectives, Johnson's views may seem naïve (for example, if by 'common reader' he means to indicate a universally representative one, then the retort might be that he may in fact be guilty of setting up a white European male and dubbing him Everyman); but if we take 'common' to mean 'ordinary', then Johnson does at least deflect any charges of *intellectual elitism*.

The distinction or indeed conflict between the common or naïve reader, and the theoretically sophisticated one, is perhaps a topic that calls for more extended discussion than it is usually accorded. What is of additional interest is that the conflict can arise, not just between two types of reader, but within the individual. Most teachers of literature will usually, if pressed, admit to such an experience of self-division, even if they do not pause to analyse it. One major critic, however, who has recently pondered the problem at some length, is J. Hillis Miller, himself a reader of the highest critical and theoretical sophistication. He admits that because people 'have a healthy fear of the power literary works have to instill what may be dangerous or unjust assumptions about race, gender, or class', then an interrogative mode of reading is essential, for this can reveal how 'modes of vision, judgement and action', which are 'presented as objectively true', are 'actually ideological'. Yet elsewhere he finds himself obliged to advocate 'an innocent, childlike abandonment to the act of reading, without suspicion, reservation, or interrogation'; for unless 'one has performed that innocent first reading, nothing much exists to resist or criticize'. What worries him is the fear that the book may be 'deprived beforehand, by a principled resistance to literature's power, of much chance to have a significant effect on its readers'.<sup>10</sup> One may take this to mean that the text will not live for the reader (generate a 'power') unless s/he is willing to make a significant

imaginative/emotional investment (in a state of 'childlike abandonment', or what he elsewhere calls 'innocent credulity') in what it has to offer. We are obliged, however, to acknowledge that ever since the formulation, at the height of the 'New Criticism', of the 'affective fallacy' (by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, 1946), the affective appeal of literature, and the validity of the reader's emotional response, have been increasingly relegated to the margins.

(3) The refusal to accept an apolitical stance as seemingly advocated by Arnold (though in fact Arnold is usually found by those who reject his ideal of 'disinterestedness' to be himself ideologically conditioned and limited) has, on the face of it, much that is commendable. As Miller suggests above, apparently 'innocent' texts need to be interrogated so that they reveal their 'dangerous or unjust assumptions'. Both within and outside literature, there are, obviously, abuses of power and imbalances in the distribution of power, that need to be critically exposed in the prevalent culture, whether in gender relations, in the stereotyping or general treatment of homosexuals, in the relations between the developed and the developing worlds, or in the ruthless (if kid-gloved) exploitation of the consumer by global capitalism.

One can argue that cultural theory was an attempt to keep radical, left-wing politics alive in the era of Thatcher and Reagan, the result being that literature, and the critical analyses of it, became 'politics by other means'. To those, however, who adopted such a position it might be retorted that the radical views formulated in the study and articulated on campus or via the campus bookshop are no real substitute for political activism. It would be too dismissive to suggest, on the model of W. H. Auden's famous pronouncement in 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' ('poetry makes nothing happen'), that cultural theory has little or no practical effect; but one might still paraphrase T. S. Eliot's dismissal of Arnold's view of poetry as a substitute for religion and philosophy: 'nothing in this world or the next is a substitute for anything else; and if you find that you must do without something, such as religious faith or philosophic belief [or, we add, an active engagement in politics], then you must just do without it'.<sup>11</sup>

As to just how effective a politicised theory can be, here is Delbanco's damaging assessment (p. 14) of the political orientation that the study of English has recently sought to embody: 'The louder it cries about the high political stakes in its own squabbles, the less resemblance it maintains to anything resembling real politics'. His next sentence is even more damning: 'by failing to promote literature as a means by which students become aware of their unexamined assumptions and glimpse worlds different from their own [according, that is, to the Arnoldian ideal of cultured awareness], the self-consciously radical English department has become a force for conservatism'.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, one should add, it is not only Delbanco who has queried the political effectiveness of theory: in two works published in 1996 and 2003 respectively, the Marx-inspired critic Terry Eagleton has also questioned the radical credentials of cultural theory.<sup>13</sup>

(4) Delbanco's phrase about a 'lost faith', quoted earlier, can be applied only with major qualification to those who sought to embrace political radicalism: their intention, rather, was to replace an outmoded faith (as they saw it) with a more

authentic one. The deepest insecurity, however, experienced by the English teacher (and in other humanities subjects as well) can indeed be correctly described as one that entails a loss of faith; and it is a loss of faith that affects Western culture at large. In this connection, Delbanco (pp. 9-10) traces the development from the 'New Critics' to the emergence of deconstruction whereby what began as a revelling in 'language play', and the recognition that 'words were never quite governed by the author', culminated in a belief that 'the "referentiality" of language to anything outside itself is an illusion'. Thus the possible 'truth-content' of literature, or even its humbler (and long-established) aspiration to *mimesis* (understood as a *rendering* or, less ambitiously, an *imitation* of the real) is rendered suspect. In the summary provided by Terry Eagleton, 'the "real" is undecidable', is 'a paralysing scepticism' which obliges postmodernism to display a 'nervousness about such concepts as truth', and to 'place words like "reality" in scare quotes' (*Illusions*, pp. 27-28). Moreover, as Delbanco notes (pp. 12-13), once 'leading figures in literary studies' began, in a post-structuralist era, to deny to literature 'even the residual aspiration to positive knowledge that structuralism expressed', the very 'idea of rightness or wrongness in any reading was rendered incoherent'. And Delbanco provides (p. 13) a succinct summary, from Louis Menand's *What's Happened to the Humanities?*, of the self-thwarting contradiction in which literary studies found itself: English as a discipline tended to become "'hard" and ironic at the same time', emphasising 'theoretical rigour and simultaneously debunk[ing] all claims to objective knowledge'.

Francis Wheen might well relate such a contradiction to that 'paralysis of reason' which is, for him, part of 'the enfeebling legacy of post-modernism' (*Mumbo-Jumbo*, p. 115). It is, with regard to the denial of the linguistic representation of reality, a paralysis that threatens not just the literary critic/theorist but any author who tries to hold on to the belief that s/he might have something significant to say about the reality of our human situation. No wonder that Julian Barnes felt it necessary in the late eighties to take a stand, and affirm the possibility of access (however qualified) to 'objective truth'. This, he acknowledges, is never fully obtainable; but even while we know this, we must continue to believe 'that objective truth *is* obtainable; or we must believe it is 99 per cent obtainable; or if we can't believe this we must believe that 43 per cent objective truth is better than 41 per cent. We must do so, because if we don't we're lost ...'.<sup>14</sup>

There is, however, no logical compulsion to accept a radical scepticism that denies the possibility of objective knowledge; for, in a self-contradiction most philosophers will be familiar with, a radical sceptic cannot make the affirmation that no objective knowledge is possible, given that the very position he wishes to articulate precludes any such confident assertion. Scepticism, in the words of a commentator on Hegel's comment on the self-contradiction inherent in scepticism, 'is pure negativity', and 'cannot provide itself with any positive position to occupy'.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, it would seem, scepticism would be logically obliged to bind itself, like all the rest of us, to silence; a recipe for the suspension of enquiry and debate. As the author informs us toward the end of Chapter XXII of *Middlemarch*: 'Scepticism, as we know, can never be thoroughly applied, else life would come to a standstill ...'.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as the pragmatist William James was at pains to insist, even if purely objective truth 'is nowhere to be found',<sup>17</sup> yet, as beings who exist in a real and exigent world we are obliged for practical purposes to commit ourselves—*on whatever evidence, limited though it be, that is available*—to real decisions; to act, we might say, as if we are in

fact responding to the truth of a given situation.<sup>18</sup> And 'acting as if we are responding to the truth of a given situation' is a practical habit we can and do carry over into our reading of literature.

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It would be both reactionary and naïve to lament the changes that have occurred in English studies over the past few decades. Delbanco, for example, accepts (p. 12) that much of what happened in the 'the Sixties' (and, we might add, thereafter) was 'salutary'; and he instances the 'healthy' debate over the literary 'canon', and the historicist/cultural materialist analysis of the cultural formation as a locus of suppressive and insidious power. Nor could one regret the many insights arising from feminism (one minor but significant example being the invigorating re-reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which has restored the text to a central position in the writing of the English Romantic era); or the widening of our perspective to accommodate what Delbanco calls (p. 5) 'the global literature of decolonization' (especially as that was encouraged by such an astute critical practitioner as Edward Said).

Without seeking, however, to return to the older beliefs and attitudes of Matthew Arnold or, say, the 'New Critics' (with their sensitivity to the specifically 'poetic' organisation of the text), one may still, with some validity, regret the loss of certain traditional emphases in the study of English. One of the chief fears is (and perhaps ought to be) that students will lose both the appetite and ability to engage with the specifics (stylistic and, in a broad sense, rhetorical) of the literary text. The tendency in some critical quarters to collapse the distinction between *poiesis*, that which is avowedly *literary*, and writing as a whole (including critical writing), subsuming everything under the all-inclusive category of 'discourse', has done no favours to the high aesthetic claims of the poetic/metaphorical. Thus Patricia Waugh, dealing with 'postmodern textuality', states that 'theory' cannot be seen to occupy a radically different order of discourse from that occupied by 'fiction', and quotes from Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight* the view that a text can operate equally through 'declarative statement or poetic ... inference', and that a 'discursive, critical or philosophic text that does this by means of statements is not therefore more or less literary than a poetic text that would avoid direct statement ...'.<sup>19</sup> We are invited, then, to regard the writing of, say, the late Henry James as no more 'literary' than the jargon-laden effusions of the critical theorist. Thus is the way prepared for the eunuchs to take over the *seraglio*. More seriously, once English studies fails to insist on the essential distinction between poetic/literary discourse and other kinds of discourse, the unique appeal of the literary is lost; more damagingly still, the entire *raison d'être* of English studies as a separate, stand-alone discipline, operating within parameters proper to itself, is put in jeopardy.

Delbanco concludes (p. 15) on an upbeat note by referring to some 'hopeful signs': among them, 'talk of "defending the literary", and the return of beauty as a legitimate subject for analysis and appreciation'. Among those who have consistently refused to surrender the difference between literary or poetic discourse, and what one is tempted to call *merely* propositional discourse, is the superlative Murray Krieger. The literary work, he insists, must be seen to possess a special complexity or multi-dimensionality because of 'the manipulations worked upon ordinary language to make it function as

extraordinarily as it does in our best literature'. Indeed, he adds, it is this 'manifold complexity' that always threatens to reveal 'the potential inadequacy of theory'.<sup>20</sup> Such an empowering of the literary text—crucial to the health of literary studies—may well have to come about, it seems, at the expense of an overweening critical theory.

But one of the strongest defences of the specifically literary derives from a source that will perhaps seem, on the face of it, surprising: the moral philosopher and classicist, Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum, however, possesses not only a passionate interest in imaginative literature, but a particular fascination with, and sensitivity to, the fiction of Henry James. At one point, dismissing 'a criticism that simply mines the [literary] work for a set of propositional clauses' (a reductive manoeuvre to which the ideologically motivated critic should remain continually alert), she calls for 'an investigation of that which is expressed and "claimed" by the shape of the sentences themselves, by images and cadences and pauses themselves, by the forms of the traditional genres, by narrativity, themselves'.<sup>21</sup>

This kind of thorough recognition of the specifically literary, however, constitutes only a part (and that a subordinate one) of Nussbaum's larger argument; and that larger argument leads us to (or back to) the question of the deeply significant connection between literature and ethics. One reason that Nussbaum so admires James is that she finds, enacted or dramatised in his fiction, the kind of particularised treatment of morality which is not covered by ethical generalisation. In this she sees James as continuous with Aristotle, who in the *Nicomachean Ethics* recognised that there are some things 'about which it is not possible to pronounce rightly in general terms', and that thus the law is 'defective on account of its generality'.<sup>22</sup> It is the requirement of particularisation that leads to the acknowledgement of the literary finesse of James; for what we need from an ethical point of view are 'texts which display to us the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer *difficulty* of moral choice', and which show us, in addition, 'the refusal of life involved in fixing everything in advance according to some system of inviolable rules'. What is required, then, is a style which can 'convey the way in which "the matter of the practical" appears before the agent in all its bewildering complexity, without its morally salient features stamped upon its face' (*Love's Knowledge*, pp. 141-42). It is for that reason that we shall need to turn to 'texts no less elaborate, no less linguistically fine-tuned, concrete and intensely focused, no less metaphorically resourceful' than James's *The Golden Bowl* (*Love's Knowledge*, p. 157).

One should note incidentally that Nussbaum takes it for granted that James's fiction does indeed possess a truth-content (the proof of both its reality and its relevance discovered in the imaginative commitment of the reader). To put it in the most general terms, Nussbaum's approach suggests that great literature such as James's last novels *matters*, that it is full of real import, that it speaks to us of such perennial concerns as the quest for virtue and the highest good. It is the recognition of some such possible function of literature as this which might return us to the habits of impassioned reading and interpretation. The main point of Nussbaum's argument, however, is that it is the very literariness of great literature that enables it to do something which cannot elsewhere, in any other mode, be done. And this is one way of defending the unique character and claims of the literary.

The defence of the specifically literary as a special mode of discourse is essential for the lasting health of literary studies and the very survival, perhaps, of the English department. Valuable as the insights offered by cultural studies may be, they should not be arrived at through the marginalisation or denial of those properties which belong to literature and to no other form of discourse. It is significant and a little troubling that a number of texts thought essential for the student and teacher of English (such as Eagleton's *The Illusions of Postmodernism*) should be located in the section in the library reserved for Sociology. But one must continue to insist that the study of English is quite definitely *not* the same as the study of Sociology; just as, for similar reasons, the study of English is not the same as the study of Philosophy, or of History, or of Politics, or of Anthropology (though literature has these and other disciplines as adjacencies, and may have pertinent contributions to make to them). And one way of marking the uniqueness of literature is to insist on the reality of the category of the literary.

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There is a further positive note on which one may end. Delbanco, looking (p. 4) at the American situation, reports that 'many "traditional" students ... are turning away from literature in particular and from the humanities in general already in high school', with the expected knock-on effect at third level. Thankfully, this does not appear to be the case in Ireland (and certainly not in Maynooth, where the number of students taking English is at an all-time high). Thanks in part to our Nobel Prize winners for Literature (the most recent being Seamus Heaney, about a decade ago), literature and, by extension, the study of literature at third level, continue to enjoy both prestige and popularity. The downside at Maynooth, of course, is that the increase in the number of students has not been matched by a commensurate increase in full-time teaching staff.

Delbanco suggests (p. 13) that traditionally the English department has been 'a weak force in the politics of the university'. The real problem in this regard, though, lies in the political attitudes outside the university. It is difficult if not impossible to quantify the contribution of an English department to the economy or to the market-place, or indeed to defend what it does on strictly utilitarian grounds (though if Arnold is right, attempting to stimulate a 'free play of mind' must surely contribute to the preservation of democracy, and a literary criticism that emphasises the plurality of readings in a literary text might, as a corollary, encourage a wider sense of (cultural) pluralism). That is, however, a major theme that lies outside the scope of the present article. In the meantime, we might—just might—begin to believe in the possibility of persuading the government and the Minister for Education to place a higher value on what English departments contribute, if we who teach English recover some of the confidence we once possessed, and accept, for a start, that we are central, if not to the university as a whole, then at least to the humanities. For it may still be true, as Delbanco suggests (p. 8), that 'the condition of the English department is a pretty reliable measure of the state of liberal education in general'.



<sup>1</sup> *The New York Review of Books*, (November 4, 1999): cited from the website <http://www.nybooks.com/articles>. Delbanco has been Julian Clarence Levi Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University since 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), J. Dover Wilson, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 45. Hereafter referred to as *C and A*.

<sup>3</sup> In his 'Conclusion', Arnold underlines the ethical potential of a cultivated intelligence by invoking one of the great historical exemplars of the virtuous life. In his own breast, he asks, 'does not every man carry about with him a possible Socrates, in that power of a disinterested play of consciousness upon his stock notions and habits, of which this wise and admirable man gave all through his lifetime the great example ...?' (*C and A*, p. 211).

<sup>4</sup> See the references to 'disinterestedness' and 'a free play of the mind' in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*. A. Dwight Culler, ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 246.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. trans. and revd. Herbert Marcuse and Erica Sherover, (1978; London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1979), pp. ix, 10, 13.

<sup>6</sup> 'Annotations to Boyd's Translation of Dante's *Inferno*', in *The Complete Writings of William Blake: With All the Variant Readings*. Geoffrey Keynes, ed., (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1957), p. 412. By 'independent', Blake implies the poet's freedom from systematic thought; by 'wicked', a related freedom from orthodox habits of thought.

<sup>7</sup> See Francis Wheen, *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World*. (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), p. 94. The extended account of the hoax is on pp. 89-95. Wheen's work will be subsequently referred to as *Mumbo-Jumbo*.

<sup>8</sup> The 'babbling impenetrability of most post-modern texts' is one of the prime targets of Francis Wheen, part of whose broader agenda is the defence of Enlightenment clarity in both thought and expression. See *Mumbo-Jumbo* pp. 86-89, especially p. 87, from which the quotation about 'babbling impenetrability' is taken. Terry Eagleton's acerbic comment on postmodernist jargon is worth quoting: despite believing in 'style and pleasure', postmodernism 'commonly churns out texts which might have been composed by, rather than on, a computer'. *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. (Oxford/Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 29. Hereafter referred to as *Illusions*.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Johnson: *Selected Writings*. Patrick Cruickwell, ed., (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 480.

<sup>10</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 119, 123, 125, 159. One should note, too, Miller's assertion (p. 35) that the 'efflorescence of literary theory signals the death of literature'.

<sup>11</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. (1933; 2<sup>nd</sup> impression, London: Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 113.

<sup>12</sup> The conservative (or uncritically self-reinforcing) nature of critical theory, as well as its reductivism, was succinctly expressed by Frank Lentricchia (again, a critic thoroughly versed in theory) in an article of 1996: 'Tell me your theory and I'll tell you in advance what you'll say about any work of literature ...' (*Lingua Franca* (September/October, 1996), p. 64). The sentence ends on a note that is both caustic and admonitory; 'especially those [works] that you have not read'. The remark is admonitory in that it reminds us of a suspicion now readily entertained by many teachers of English: that our students, adept as they may be at reading theoretical pronouncements on a given text, will have neither the application nor, it may be, the ability to tackle the literary text itself. It is probably a lot easier for some students to engage with the feminist debate about Milton's possible misogyny in *Paradise Lost*, than to take the trouble to read (appreciatively) *Paradise Lost* itself.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g., Eagleton's *After Theory*. (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 2, on the disappearance from cultural theory of genuine political concerns: 'In some cultural circles, the politics of masturbation exert far more fascination than the politics of the Middle East. Socialism has lost out to sado-masochism. Among students of culture, the body is an immensely fashionable topic, but it is usually the erotic body, not the famished one. There is a keen interest in coupling bodies, but not in labouring ones.' As a later summary has it (p. 51), 'radical combat' gives way to 'radical chic'. Even in post-colonial theory the shift to ethnicity has 'helped to depoliticize the question of post-colonialism' (p. 12). In *The Illusions of Postmodernism* the 'politics of postmodernism' are seen to 'have beat an undignified retreat from older political issues', while post-structuralism, 'which emerged in oblique ways from the political ferment of the late 1960s and the early 1970s', became 'gradually depoliticized after being deported abroad ...' (pp. 24-25).

<sup>14</sup> Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 1012 Chapters*. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), pp. 245-46. Emphasis added.

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- <sup>15</sup> Richard Norman, *Hegel's Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction*. (London: Sussex University Press, 1976), p. 59.
- <sup>16</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch: An Authoritative Text*. Bert G. Hornback, ed., (London and New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1977), p. 166.
- <sup>17</sup> See *Pragmatism in Focus*. (Selections from William James), Doris Olin, ed., (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 46-47.
- <sup>18</sup> This kind of argument is central to James's famous essay on 'The Will to Believe': see, e.g., William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Frederick H. Burkhardt et al., eds, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), pp. 27, 32-33.
- <sup>19</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism*. (London, etc.: Edward Arnold, 1992), p. 50.
- <sup>20</sup> Murray Krieger, *Words about Words about Words: Theory, Criticism and the Literary Text*. (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 17, 18.
- <sup>21</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 192. Hereafter cited as *Love's Knowledge*.
- <sup>22</sup> *The Ethics of Aristotle (The Nicomachean Ethics)*. Transl. J. A. K. Thomson, revd, Hugh Tredennick (London, etc.: Penguin, 1976), pp. 199-200. A footnote by the translator on p. 199 summarises as follows: 'The circumstances of our actions are often too particular and complicated to be covered satisfactorily by any generalisation'.