

TIPS ON PRACTICAL CRITICISM, FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

1. These notes are written principally for undergraduates starting out in their first year of the English course at Caius, though they may have a use for students at a later stage, as a reminder. They need to be read in conjunction with Tips on Reading, since the activity known as Practical Criticism involves exercises in especially focussed and intensive close reading of text matter under artificial conditions. An undergraduate English course at Cambridge will usually include college-based supervisions or classes in Practical Criticism at various stages in the course, and Tips on Supervisions will also contain relevant advice. Some of you will already have done work of this kind, more or less, in school-work for GCE A2 English or in preparation for the STEP entrance paper.

2. The term Practical Criticism is a Cambridge invention and was introduced by I.A. Richards in the 1920's, at the very start of the separate and independent institution of the systematic study of English literature in its full historical, social and linguistic contexts. It was devised to describe a method of teaching (and testing) skills and developing insights which would enhance deeper and more alert understanding of literary works through detailed analysis of short text passages, often presented with no information about author, date of composition, or the place of the passage for analysis within the work from which it was excerpted. It has sometimes been referred to as a species of 'blind reading', though the aim is to sharpen perception and to develop more precise powers of description, diagnosis and critical judgement. Not much is blind about this.

3. The essential rationale is that reading is difficult to carry out alertly with full awareness of style and purpose and effects of language and form and imaginative response, because the habit of reading too broadly or too fast or without close focus excludes a full reckoning of fine detail in writerly practice. Also, that circumstantial knowledge about the authorship and exact historical origin of text material can pre-emptively determine judgement, before even you begin to read in depth and with an open mind; though an open mind is not an empty one. Articulating arguments based on specifically localised effects requires both accuracy in disinterested recognition and also a certain logic of enquiry and the support of value-assessments by balanced discussion: 'balanced', that is, between assertions of mere preference or personal taste in the context of disagreements, and the attempt to base estimation of quality or success on supporting feature-analysis and comparative appraisal: what might be termed 'evidence-based' critical argument. Some quite basic explanation may at times also be in order.

4. It should be recognised that this line of approach in information-quarantine and through a magnifying lens is admittedly artificial in a number of ways, and chiefly in three respects. First, we do not 'naturally' often read with arbitrarily restricted knowledge of who wrote what we read or when, or where the text-matter under examination may stand in the design context of a larger work. Second, the time and energy given to perusing a short text

passage in order thus to investigate its implicit layers of tone and stylistic resources, and to articulate arguments based on such investigation, would be utterly impossible if applied as a reading practice to full-length novels or epic poems: we must be able to read intelligently fast and over a major span if reading long books is to be coherent or even practicable. And third, effects of larger design and structure in a complex extended text are in any case often not directly attested by local stylistic features, and often cannot be effectively extrapolated from isolated close-reading exercises. These points sometimes seem to make intensive reading skills more pertinent to poetry and to briefer lyric poems than to the more extended scrutiny required by plays and novels, and more productive of insight into what may be the fundamentally intensive characteristics of lyric utterance.

5. In fact and in practice, however, close and broad reading skills reciprocally energise and complement each other. Regular exercises in close reading both sharpen and deepen accurate response to local texture and also feed into enhanced perception of larger-scale structure, to make us all-round better readers. One hand washes the other. Principles and foundations of a distinctive personal judgement begin to appear, together with increased range of response and cogency of evaluative judgement, supported by explorative argument within awareness of differing views and opinions. Step by step, as a reader, you begin to tune in and wake up.

6. What is the formal place of this kind of work within the English Tripos? From the beginnings of Cambridge English there have been examination papers in both Part I (end of second year) and Part II (end of third year) setting unseen passages of (English-language) verse and prose for analysis and critical evaluation; and these tests are still currently today a significant element in the examination process. (At some stage in your work you may gain some practical benefit from scrutiny of recent past examination papers, all held in the College Library, but hurry not towards the charnel-house.) Text material may originate from anywhere in the chronological range between medieval and contemporary, so that there is frequently a distinct historical aspect to understanding the detailed resources of a non-modern text passage. Often deliberative comparison is entailed, between passages cited in pairs or groups for elucidation by resemblance or contrast. Sometimes specific knowledge is called for, as in matters of narrative formalisms, versification, linguistic registers, dramatic conventions, satirical targets, allusional and rhetorical patternings, and the like. Sometimes deeply personal or foundational insights are at stake, as in questions of imaginative integrity or moral contestation. And yet, despite the outreach of such issues, there are skills that can be practised and learned.

7. There will come a time, perhaps quite early on, when you are brought to realise a more or less profound ignorance of the formal structures of English versification, in their variety and historical development. Don't fall into dismay, as such ignorance is very widespread. You will need to inform yourself about English metre and metrical rhythm, the construction of the verse line and effects of medial pauses and line-ending, including the categories of metrical feet and their historical usage. You will need to understand the devices and functions of rhyme, as a constituent feature of prosody and generic stanza-conventions in fixed forms like the sonnet, in

more adaptive forms like the ode, and in versification types like the heroic couplet, as well as the more informal rhyme-effects in blank verse, modern *vers libre* and so on. Some poets have made extensive innovations; some periods have been associated with particular verse modes and have developed characteristic habits of diction and grammatical or figural structure. All of these ordered arrangements, of repeat forms and expressive variation, are special resources in verse writing designed to develop the rhythmic patterns of poetic language use, and you will need to start by learning the rudiments. When your ignorance becomes oppressive, that's the time to ask your current supervisor or your director of studies for guidance about reading and how to proceed further in acquiring DIY expertise.

8. What form is a Practical Criticism supervision likely to take? There is some variety of individual practice but certain features are salient. You may be in a small group (pair) or a larger discussion-class, but each session is likely to have been preceded by the supply to you (one week or so beforehand) of some text material for preparation. This is to be the basis for enquiry and discussion at the supervision itself, and so your individual preparation for each session is crucial to good progress. Often an exercise will be headed by a rubric or question designed to direct at least the initial focus for discussion, and exam questions will always carry such a heading. At a successful supervision each of you will have worked on the text material very intensively, preparing notes and questions, pondering issues, ready to follow leads and raise queries both with your supervisor and also in lateral debate with your partner or partners. Be ready to hold your ground unless it weakens beneath you, and also to pay rather scrupulous attention to alternative views and their supporting arguments.

9. Typically, and more especially if the text-material is poetry, one of you is likely to be asked to read the passage aloud, so that each of you should be prepared for this: reading and 'making-sense' may be intimately linked to performance-values in literary composition, and the counterpoint of intonation and spoken sentence-rhythm against metrical pattern, line-ordering, and maybe also rhyme, will often set up effects bearing directly on interpretation. Reading aloud may also open questions about 'natural speech', the 'voice' or 'voices' of utterance, the effects of muting or silence, of apostrophe or speaking-to, of indirect speech and its hybrid varieties, of formal eloquence, all in variously implicit relation to Wordsworth's belief that the poet was 'a man speaking to men' (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*), as against a more recent denial: 'artists have a responsibility to their work to raise it above the vernacular' (Rene Ricard).

10. What kinds of preparation will assist you to use each session well, to make a series of steps forward in techniques of understanding? First, you must make an early start on reading the material, many times, exploring all the features you can see or half-glimpse so as to bring them to explicit consciousness. Brood on what you read. Language-use is crucial. Become at home with the employment of major historical dictionaries and concordances; look up words and phrases unfamiliar to you, within what you judge to be the probable historical period from which the text-material comes, and make a careful record of your findings, ready for use in the session ahead. On occasion very simple or seemingly transparent words or expressions will turn

out to be actively complex, and will require detailed investigation. For any text features that seem to presuppose special knowledge or information, seek out what can be discovered and again record what you find; but don't waste time in detective work about authorship if that information has been withheld. Work out elucidative questions to put to yourself, to sharpen your perception of stylistic choices made, vocabulary and syntax and image-patterns and pervading tonalities like irony and witty artifice. Be alert to how meaning and usage change historically over time. Remember that mere enumerative description however acute will leave a text passage lying flat on the page; it will come to life only as you engage with its inner energies, which may be latent behind or beneath appearances or only obliquely expressed by surface features.

11. It is worth attempting some head-on thoughts about 'meaning'. Confronted with passages of text you may sometimes face a choice between leading questions: 'what does it mean' *versus* 'how does it work'. It will be evident that words and phrases carry lexical meanings, sometimes in multiple array of possible signifying activity, sometimes also echoing other literary or historical usage. It will be evident too that what words mean is a different question from what a text-passage means; or what are the meanings at work in a whole literary composition, its thematic conflicts and developments and layers of interpretation. (For discussion of inherent lexical 'vagueness' see e.g. William Labov, 'The Boundaries of Words and their Meanings' [1973], in Bas Aarts *et al.* [eds], *Fuzzy Grammar; A Reader* [Oxford, 2004] [Caius Lib.: 401 A], and for discourse context, Pieter A.M. Seuren, 'Lexical Meaning and Presupposition' [1988] in his *A View of Language* [Oxford, 2001] [Caius Lib.: 400 S].) Also a further complication arises when we speak of what a person means, of his or her intention to be understood in a certain way, through speech or action; thus concerning Cordelia's silence in *King Lear* we may ask two slightly but importantly different questions: what does her silence mean, and what does she mean by her silence. In drama these issues can be especially acute: what a particular speech 'means' will vary amongst its on-stage auditors, some of whom may be more inward than others with part-hidden purposes; and for the larger audience an initial array of distinct possible or probable meanings may be modified in retrospect by later disclosures or the 'dramatic irony' of subsequent events. It is fairly unlikely that questions of the playwright's own meaning or meaning-intention will feature strongly in this interplay of interpretation, though the choice of topic may indicate certain possible motives in the context of the times.

12. Where personal character is represented as a focus for point-of-view interaction, as in narrative fiction, again what is meant may be an aspect of what this person means, in speech and action, or what this person is capable of successfully wishing to mean, depending on self-knowledge and expressed in the sense of actions consequentially undertaken, such actions then interpreted by others from differing viewpoints along significantly divergent lines. The resulting social complex of behaviour, and the novelist's construction of an extended meaning-process in many strands, gives the reader much work for imaginative and emotional intelligence, for sympathy tempered by judgement. Linguists and philosophers of language, and even lawyers, sometimes speak of 'plain sense', normative or 'ordinary-language'

meaning; but students of literature know well that literary language is not ordinary, even when it adopts for stylistic purposes the speech patterns of natural utterance. Patterns of symbolism or constructed allegory, especially in pre-modern works, or tragic foreclosure in tightly plotted drama, may also require us to read for the sense of the design along more or less genre-specific lines of construal, just as earlier communities once read the pattern of daily events in terms of a directing providence. Both grammar and syntax inflect the stylistic pitch and meaning-effects of writing, and formal devices like prosody and metre and figuration will alert the reader to further aspects of meaning carried by structure and form--bringing into view what may be meant by 'carried' in this context. Richness of meaning may challenge or even defeat coherence of design; or it may reveal ordered depths of multiple significance (polysemy, ambiguity), or layers of structure and structure-echo, so that successive readings and succeeding generations of readers can discover constantly new insights and rewards.

13. There may be occasions when a particular assignment of text presents other kinds of problem about meaning: not that the overall tendency refuses to come into focus and start to make sense or assume recognisable character, but the reverse. This occurs when a rather distinct interpretation springs into view, with details clicking into place to support what may seem highly coherent yet at the same time somewhat over-determined or even far-fetched, as if running out along a rather unlikely or outlandish track. And yet it seems altogether plausible, and provides a welcome mechanism for resolving your own state of puzzlement. Here you may need to take a deep breath and rouse yourself to extra-vigilant scepticism, so as to test this apparently persuasive 'reading' (which term in this context carries the sense of 'an overall interpretation or relating of different parts and aspects of analysis to a coherent inclusive view'). Does all the detail really fit in and confirm your big idea; have you maybe jumped over-willingly to conclusions; may what you have be not the whole story, nor even in fact the main one? Sometimes, despite efforts to keep your mind fully open and receptive, a very specific point of view can take command of your thoughts, too early or too completely, and then you may need to argue against yourself, to rekindle your uncertainties so as to discover other dimensions, maybe even working your way out of a deep and comfortable pit into which you have all-unguardedly stumbled.

14. We must also activate questions such as: what was the meaning, or range of possible meanings, in the historical context of a text's original genesis; what can or may have been the meaning-impact for different reader groupings, as for example alternative political or religious persuasions, regional locations, women readers as opposed to men, readers with or without knowledge of the classics, foreign tongues, etc. Sometimes a highly pointed then-contemporary context may have generated a locally influential significance that can be reconstructed with the aid of historical knowledge; but a modern reader may choose also to ponder the survival power of a literary work as reaching beyond such determining origins. Meaning-then and meaning-for-us as context-based framings of the question about how texts mean can extend also to wider frames: what Shakespeare means or can mean to a Russian reader, what Tolstoy means or can mean to an English reader with strong, or weak, knowledge of the original language and culture.

From even this condensed summary it should be evident that meaning is constructed by interactivity of many factors and cannot be taken as evidently inherent in texts or able to be construed directly from their supposed authorial intentions.

15. Each Practical Criticism session is likely to call upon different kinds of effort and response, in order specifically to extend your range. There can be no standard template for preparation, except this constant feature that your best powers of close attentive reading are required to be exercised before the session begins, so that you can leap further forward once you start to compare your own insights with those of the other participants. Your supervisor is not going to lay claim to intrinsically more authentic understanding than yours; this should be an equally-pitched discussion with listening and asking as well as contending or digging in heels. You are likely to need to think about genres of composition and how they have changed over time; about intended audiences or readership in historical context; about cadence and rhythm and structures of aural effect in prose also as in verse; about narrative construction and viewpoint; and you are likely to need to expand your own analytic and critical vocabulary of technical terms and to understand how such terms are correctly used. In actual discussion be prepared to choose your words carefully, to think hard even as you speak and listen; don't turn up distracted or expect most of the work to be done for you. Each strand of an argument should support another step forward. Don't make up your mind too early; and don't leave it too late. Learn how to change your mind, too: consistency is sometimes a mask for stubbornness, as also pliancy may be for indolence.

16. As you become more practised you may attempt some self-awareness and analysis of your own response-language. When you find yourself using present-participle descriptors like *moving*, *exciting*, *interesting*, *surprising* or *disturbing*, and their negative counterparts such as *unconvincing* or *prevaricating*, ask yourself what kinds of agency are implied, and where they are located. Who or what moves, excites, or fails to convince? Does the response occur in your individual reception of text by causal effect from the implicit author-agency, or from identifiable features or aspects of the text process, or is it not direct cause but provocation or trigger-effect that generates response? How much in these arousals derives substantively from within the reader's own propensity, or are we more like tuned instruments, prompted to resonate but not to make invention on our own account? Do our own powers of imagination (perhaps also of envisagement) learn from a text process how most fully to come into play, to dramatise and enrich our reading encounters, or otherwise to register gaps of disappointment between text-ambition and actual accomplishment? How much monitoring control and choice over the process do we exercise? What is being reported when you find yourself using past-participle descriptors (often negative) like *confused*, *unbalanced*, *disordered*, *unjustified*, *exaggerated*, *sentimentalised* or *stereotyped*, where what is described seemingly relates to kinds of failure (of realisation, intelligence) located within the text process itself rather than within unsuccessful reader-responsiveness. If, to cite another case, in reading a complex or dense text you find yourself losing patience, this may be because your stamina in concentrated attention is not yet fully developed; or

it may be that the writing itself exhausts its own vitality, lapsing into mannerism; but then, mannerism itself may be a kind of deliberate text-play, its own rationale. In short, what is the reader's part when writing succeeds, and when it fails?

17. Some exercises set before you will provide opportunity and incentive to make reckoning of how a text develops and integrates its various features to resolve into completeness, such as formal unity of design or a culminating effect of closure. Sometimes unity may be achieved by a narrative of converging ends, sometimes by an array of contrasting elements brought into balance and concluding fullness. Sometimes a novelist will represent a shaped episode naturalistically, with its own local ending: as, an encounter, a visit, a conversation, a moment of enhanced interior reflection. Again, short lyric poems will often present these features most decisively; but (for example) dramatic soliloquies, or shaped passages from larger sermon-texts, or episodes from fiction with a strong sense of local design, may all adopt rhetorical formalisms that bring out a cohesion of thematic aspects and a coherence of overall unity. How texts open and how they close are issues here: how a novelist sets out a new micro-beginning at the start of a chapter, how *Paradise Lost* makes a commencement into the next Book in the sequence, what stylistic markers a playwright may use to close a non-final act-structure or the culminating eloquence of a passionate speech.

18. In the hands of a skilled writer the cadencing of prose paragraphs can convey the effects of formal development with as much subtlety as the prosodic forms of an accomplished poet. Often a local effect of interim closure may foreshadow the larger structural necessities of generic form, so that final design may be built up and disclosed through many anticipations. Some texts or text-passages may deliberately refuse the effects of resolved closure, substituting dissonance or disturbance, to deprive the reader (at least at this stage) of any sweet satisfaction. The experience of unity or resolution in retrospect can bring many active strands together and often will amount to greatly more than the sum of its component parts (this is a rather Coleridgean idea). Reader-encounter with such integrating closure may prompt large and deep reflection, on how such experience can affect and satisfy us; and, maybe, can alter or enhance our primary sense of meaning in how we view the world and understand ourselves. And of course our deep thoughts may be not without a certain smugness, too.

19. All aspects of diagnostic, critical reading as a mode of study eventually bring with them implied issues of a more theoretic kind. How far can the results of critical enquiry claim any kind of objective status? Is critical scrutiny, or can it be, a part of the reading activity itself; or must it mostly be, or indeed ought it to be, a derived and secondary or subsequent exertion? What are the relations within kinds and modes of text between thought and ideas, and themes and topics, and issues, and overall signification or meaning or meanings? Do we justly presume a constancy (more or less) of underlying 'human nature', of stable personhood, particularly in the schedule of recognisable emotions and feelings, and how far may this schedule be culturally determined? Is literature a form of human knowledge, or can a cohort of texts comprise a working culture or part of it, for a stage in the evolution of socially cohesive communities; and when we read successfully do

we assimilate or become part of such knowledge; and is our critical function in part a task of resistance to such assimilation, to become conscious of presupposed communalisms and to question them?

20. Does the concept or function of the author have a decisive, or contributory, role to play? Are acts of interpretation validated by actual text-structures, or by features intrinsic to the world contained within a text, or also by aspects of the world implied as existing outside the immediate text-world; or also by the interactive constructions of the reader or the reader-community? If by allusion of theme or the maybe ironical shadow of an earlier topic or literary aspect (sometimes triggered by specific resemblance of language) the range of meaning within a passage of text seems extended in resonance and implication, perhaps for example by a biblical half-echo, how do we account for the effects of one meaning as embedded within another; and how confident in such case do we need to be that apparent echoes, if truly active, must have been deliberate? Are the formal and expressive aspects of text-structure, such as prosody, repetition, sonic and figural patterning, point-of-view alternations, linguistic registers, act-and-scene divisions, intrinsic to how a text generates meaning, or are they chiefly supportive and symptomatic of prior textual purpose? Is it possible as an active reader to remain uncommitted (either consciously or by tacit assimilation) to a specific theory of meaning in language, or to distinct principles of judgement? Are we as readers required to imagine fully believing in an historical world-view now superseded or disproved, or which we find objectionable, or can we make a suspended, virtual assent?

21. Likewise, can a literary text lay claim to any kind of truth, or truthfulness (as 'not false or fraudulent', or 'true-to-life', or 'true-for-me', in relation to the world or to the human experience of history), or to the authenticity of human behaviours like belief or suffering, moral choice and personal growth, encounters with conflict or disordering emotions? Many philosophers of language will maintain that only propositions can be true or false, by virtue of what they state and whether the state of affairs that is asserted can be upheld as having meaning and being not incorrect. But 'being true' is in this sense unusefully more precise than intimating or bringing into view a truth, as for example a truth concerning human nature or some central truth of human experience. If we speak of 'deep feelings', what is it that may be deep about them and why might they seem important; are there significant gender-aspects to modes of imaginative sympathy in responsiveness to powerful writing? Are features like irony or complexity or multiple ambiguity within a piece of text to be considered as style options, or are they preconditions for textual richness and value? Can a text be intelligent, or manifest or represent kinds of intelligence, and if so does a reader experience this as a quality evidently imported from and via the author's control? Could we speak in certain cases of the inherent operational intelligence of the text-process and its progression through formal development, and is this a special province of wit or satire, or a generic possibility of literary language-use?

22. Are discriminating acts of judgement clearly different in origin from opinions, and are all judgements necessarily provisional? Are the narratives of reading a text and the narratives recounted within its sequence (novels,

plays, ballads & epics) parts or aspects of the same overall narrative construction? How far is literary text a scheme of performance or even play, how far imitation or representation, how far a kind of try-on or thought-experiment, or a provocation to the reader's vicarious envisagement or suspended disbelief? Under what conditions might terms like *simple* or *fresh* or *honest* or *direct*, or *natural*, or even *sincere* or *genuine*, be apt praise-words? Do we have use for a word like *beauty*? Such issues in all 57 varieties will emerge over time in the context of successive discussions and the common or disputed ground to which they constantly return. The term 'practical' as prefixed to 'criticism' indicates that issues like these can be addressed and developed as they arise, rather than comprising initial questions to be settled as necessary starting points.

23. Further on from these theoretical issues may now be asked, what is the final purpose of these exercises, to what end are they instrumental, apart from developing certain study skills which can hardly be cultivated merely for show, like prize marrows. What is Practical Criticism for? The short answer must be, to strengthen discrimination in making judgements of value about works of literature, so as to make reasoned decisions about what is good: whether a text under consideration (briefly excerpted or a complete whole) has value, and what it means to make claims of this kind. Is this a good poem, a good piece of writing, a good novel or a good play? To answer such questions may be to make practical judgements, each one shaped by the individual occasion, but if expectations of values or principle set the standard we ought to be able to clarify and justify what we do: a task for the reader community as well as for the student apprentice. In some measure we accept a text-world as set out beyond our powers of alteration, and yet reading is not an act of surrender: 'who is in charge here?' is not a straightforward question.

24. Another purpose for Practical Criticism may also be invoked. In first encounter with large, complex issues of judgement and principle, or even with initially acute problems of recognition ('whatever kind of writing can this be?') it may not be possible to focus with full clarity upon the ideas involved, or the underlying intensity of theme or image-process, or the generic (often hybrid and contrarian) linguistic devices of an innovative and unfamiliar concept of quasi-literary composition. There is no merit in merely avoiding or shelving problems beyond the reach of clear definition, because once such an unresolved challenge is even partly apprehended it can rest provisionally at the back of your mind as a reference-point for recurrent further thinking, within a range of incomplete longer-term tasks and dilemmas. Thus the here-and-now study work of this kind can open up, even without initial clarity, prospects requiring persistence and step-by-step resolution. Give yourself as clear a view as you can, and then hold the frame for repeated future visits. Some large and important ideas may indeed be intrinsically, permanently, characterised as not-clear.

25. What kinds of value may a literary work possess or disclose, and why does it matter? A work may be good of its kind, or good for a purpose, or good to me but less so to you, or as good to me as to you but for different reasons; or even, your reasons for thinking it good may be very close to mine for thinking it less so; or we may recall that a ticket can be good for one journey, a fruit good to eat, just as a book may be good to read, or a good read; or a

work may have seemed thrillingly good to me when I was younger; or if the word *good* is used in some more absolute sense, then will it have an ethical or moral character, and is that the region in which ultimate critical disagreements may reside? To say, 'he is a good man' is maybe different in kind as well as in degree from 'this is a good table', and 'this is a good book' perhaps stands somewhere in between. One form of answer is to look for good effects upon the reader, to enable deep or complex or profoundly enlightening insights to arise from fully achieved acts of reading. Another kind of answer is to say that art is good when most completely and truly for its own sake: its autonomy speaks to us. A hybrid answer might claim that a deep integration of the appetite for formal balance and subtlety of imagination with a defence or discovery of the shared human world in its deepest human fulfilments can bring experiences of value arising out of encounters with objects which have high value intrinsically and generate answering acknowledgements in us of the value of value. Or, we might the more value experiences of art which profoundly unsettle and challenge us, which defy all craving for resolution or composure. Well, final questions are often not easy to put in a clear and simple way, or to approach in a hurry. By indirection we find direction out.

26. When as readers we make a judgement by comparison we may say, this text-passage or poem or comic drama is better than that one, or, one author is better or finer, more all-round brilliant, than another, leaving the criteria largely implicit. But if we are to justify what we claim, then we must set out grounds for reasoned preference which cannot be merely personal taste if they are to engage the serious attention of other readers. Judgements on a small scale, micro-criticism, are not essentially different from those made more broadly or with a larger scope (macro-criticism); it may not be plausible to claim that a judgement can be definitively right, but there are certainly many ways to be wrong: unobservant, flimsy in argument, facile or shallow as well as well-intentioned but not very bright. In using terms like *good* and other language-forms making value-claims we attempt to develop a shared discourse of judgemental acts which may strengthen a shared sense of the values which we care about, and why we do so. The language of final ends may ultimately be idealistic in nature, religious or moral or even in some cases ideological. In some cases the negative may be valued because it asserts a resistant scepticism or a threatened opposite positive, as in some satire, or in the horrific worlds of Dante's *Inferno* or Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*; but the claim that unflinching knowledge of evil is necessary and salutary in itself (harsh realism) also has its defenders, as well as those who would denounce this as horror-movie kitsch.

27. When in a final summing-up you write or say, these are my grounds for judging this to be a profoundly subtle and intelligent and strongly composed text, getting close to the heart of important matters, not hedging back from complexity and even ugliness in the search for difficult insight, these are variant ways of claiming values and summarily indicating what these values are. The area of negotiation lies somewhere between the writer, the text, the reader, and the cultural community then and now; but the idea of value itself may have its roots in a part of the universe immune to local constraints. Thus, finally you say, this is a good poem, very good, good in the highest

degree; or weak, confused, poor because evasive or fudging issues or lazily derivative or just mediocre. Each time you come to this point you should be strengthening your understanding of what you say and claim, to define what value means to you and why the good is good and worth having, in ways that can be recognised and described and (however provisionally) affirmed.

28. Fundamentally you will sooner or later find yourself involved in deep questions of humanity and powers of understanding and matters of memorable, significant worth. Controlling the encounter with potentially overwhelming issues like the justification of love or the delusions of pride, the inner nature of selfhood and its contested social expressions, and making connections with words and devices on the page as well as with the interchange of your own reader response with an authored self-performing text, can take you to central places in the study of literature and its cultural variance. Literature is not sheltered from the world torn by struggles for social justice and the relief of arbitrary suffering, afflicted for us by the mere privacy of joy: the reading-station is where we are. Some stressful reading experiences may leave you more than somewhat shaken to discover your own morbid and hitherto unexamined complacency: a defensive humanism shored up to validate an imperious subject-position. But then, maybe, a strain of turgid resentment or self-righteousness in what you read may provoke an answering respect for lightness and balance and the finesse of adroit comedy. Texts conceal and reveal, within historical time and over a lifetime, in often elaborate play with the reader's perception. Also, it is part of the challenge of extended, intelligent study that you should keep yourself alert by these many questions that arise from reading; but there will also be, for well-tuned readers, moments of rightness and completeness which can set all questions aside and perhaps even leave you deeply grateful. Whether during this course-work you are asked to produce written reports, or to construct the argument orally during prepared discussion, it is only a full engagement that will carry you strongly beyond your present horizons, and awaken your latent insight into literary representation as deep evidence of human life. Make much effort, and learn the ropes.

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