

# A Brief Essay on Taste

This essay might seem not only brief but somewhat random, yet there is method in it. I have chosen points in the history of literature when authors have, for whatever motive, gone against the general expectations of what literature is supposed to be and do. Literary history is punctuated mainly by revolutions; some gradual, even benign, others sudden and momentous. Since the sixteenth century, thanks to the printing press, there has been a recorded dialogue between literature and criticism and from this we can discern trends in the way that the literary establishment, ostensibly acting on behalf of the reader, has responded to these changes. Prior to the middle of the twentieth century a general rule was maintained. When writers did something different, most notably when they tinkered with or transgressed established conventions, they were largely treated as sub-standard or as a capricious oddity. That a considerable number of these authors are now regarded as the greats of our literary heritage raises the question of why and how their reputations were transformed. There is no simple answer to this but by the end of this chapter we will, I hope, be better equipped to address it. The related question of why this game of transgression, adverse response, and acceptance is no longer played is equally complex and one that will be properly considered in the next chapter, but I will, to an extent, spoil the surprise: after modernism literary history came to a close.

*Is Shakespeare Any Good?: And Other Questions on How to Evaluate Literature*,  
First Edition. Richard Bradford.

© 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2015 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Let us begin with a hypothesis. Each of us has our private opinions on the most celebrated writers of the so-called “canon,” opinions usually formed when we were obliged to first read them at school. It is possible that not all of us particularly enjoy or even respect the work of some of these giants, but in what circumstances would we feel it appropriate to voice such misgivings, let alone write them down or put them into print? It is probable that we would reserve our views for those closest to us, or at least to companions who we trust as similarly disposed, and even then usually in informal circumstances, perhaps when drink has been taken. In short, what we feel does not necessarily correspond with what we feel able to say.

I’ll now shift from the hypothetical to the specific. Do you enjoy and respect the poetry of T.S. Eliot? He is held by many to be if not the most important then one of the three or four most significant poets writing in English in the twentieth century. His work is enshrined in anthologies of English verse and his status as a figure who *must* be studied in order for us to understand and appreciate modern poetry is unassailable. So, whatever your genuine response to the question the answer that you will record officially is most likely to be “yes.” With this in mind consider the following reviews of Eliot’s first significant collection of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations*, which included the poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” regarded by many as prefiguring *The Waste Land*.

Mr Eliot is one of those clever young men who find it amusing to pull the leg of a sober reviewer. We can imagine him saying to his friends: “See me have a lark out of the old fogies who don’t know a poem from a pea-shooter. I’ll just put down the first thing that comes into my head, and call it ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.’ Of course it will be idiotic; but the fogies are sure to praise it, because when they don’t understand a thing and yet cannot hold their tongues they find safety in praise.” ... We do not wish to appear patronising, but we are certain that Mr Eliot could do finer work on traditional lines. With him it seems to be a case of missing the effect by too much cleverness. All beauty has in it an element of strangeness, but here the strangeness over-balances the beauty. (From an anonymous review, *Literary World*, 5 July 1917)

Among other reminiscences which pass through the rhapsodist’s mind and which he thinks the public should know about, are “dust in crevices, smells of chestnuts in the street, and female smells in shuttered rooms, and cigarettes in corridors, and cocktail smells in bars.”

The fact that these things occurred to the mind of Mr Eliot is surely of the very smallest importance to anyone one – even to himself. They certainly have

no relation to “poetry,” and we only give an example because some of the pieces, he states, have appeared in a periodical which claims that word as its title. (From an anonymous review, *TLS*, 21 June 1917)

Certainly much of what he writes is unrecognisable as poetry at present ... and it is only fair to say that he does not call these pieces poems. He calls them “observations” and the description seems exact [because] we do not pretend to follow the drift of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (From an anonymous review, *New Statesman*, 18 August 1917)

Swift, brilliant images break into the field of vision, scatter like rockets, and leave a trail of flying fire behind. But the general impression is momentary; there are moods and emotions, but no steady current of ideas behind them. (Arthur Waugh, *Quarterly Review*, October 1916, reviewing *The New Poetry*, a collection which contained “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”)

I should point out that these four members of the literary establishment – sophisticated, well-read, open-minded individuals – were not in the minority. They represented what was a general consensus on Eliot’s verse, ranging from indulgent puzzlement to downright contempt.

Eliot was at the vanguard of literary modernism, a phenomenon too complex and varied to summarize easily, except to say that all of its advocates wished to unshackle themselves from the established traditions of writing, circa 1900. It is evident from the critics quoted above that Eliot’s debut collection departed from convention in two notable ways. It seemed to the *TLS* and *New Statesman* reviewers not to qualify as “poetry” at all, and from this we should assume that they refer to the extravagant and seemingly incoherent use of metaphor and to Eliot’s somewhat irregular meter. For Arthur Waugh, the meaning of the verse, such as it is, appears “momentary” and transient: there are effects, but no “current of ideas.” A persistent objection among these and other critics against early modernism was to what appeared to be the cultivation of striking and unusual impressions which defied understanding.

These critics might have been somewhat reactionary by temperament – those who praised Eliot were generally allied to the new aesthetic of modernism – but they were not stupid. They spoke as they found, and they found themselves unable to make sense of Eliot’s verse. It does not seem to me entirely implausible to imagine that some individuals a century later – that is, now – might experience a similar sense of being dumbfounded by it, aware that something is being brought about by the unrelenting clash of disparate images, but unable, perhaps unwilling, to venture an opinion on what exactly this is.

‘Prufrock’ opens:

Let us go then, you and I,  
 When the evening is spread out against the sky  
 Like a patient etherised upon a table;  
 Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,  
 The muttering retreats  
 Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels  
 And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:  
 Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
 Of insidious intent  
 To lead you to an overwhelming question ...  
 Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”  
 Let us go and make our visit.

We never find out any more about “you” referred to in this passage. He, or she, might be a figure who the speaker knows intimately, or casually, but is reluctant to describe in further detail; they might be a figment of the speaker’s imagination, or they might even be us, the reader, invited to join the speaker on his peculiar journey. This passage is merely a taster for even more baffling and apparently unanswerable questions raised as the speaker continues with his account. We are never clear if the “journey” is a jumbled version of events that might actually have occurred, a glimpse into a gallery of recollected memories from various conflicting experiences, or a piece-meal sample of the latter combined with images that are pure fantasy and unrelated to the lived existence of the speaker – if indeed we can treat this disembodied chain of images as enabling us to conceive of the speaker as a composite human being.

Let us be clear that, in making these observations, I am not simply indulging or attempting to explain the misconceptions of Eliot’s hostile critics. Quite the contrary; I am demonstrating that their points were valid. What is clear, however, is that what was said then would not be countenanced now. If you were a professional critic and literary journalist commissioned to write a piece on the centenary of the publication of Eliot’s collection and your principal point was that the collection was an intriguing curiosity but essentially incoherent and incomprehensible your article would be treated either as a parody of its century-old precursors or a symptom of your having taken leave of your senses. If, as a sixth former or undergraduate, you were to venture a similar opinion in an examination or essay your honesty would probably earn you a fail.

Within a decade of the publication of “Prufrock” the consensus had shifted and the majority of commentators were beginning to praise Eliot as one of the most original and brilliant poets of the era. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* appeared in 1922, in what would turn out to be modernism’s annus mirabilis, which also saw the publications of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, D.H. Lawrence’s *Aaron’s Rod*, W.B. Yeats’s *Later Poems*, and Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room*. Eliot’s poem is now recognized as probably his finest piece of writing and more significantly as a work that exemplified a turning point in the history of literature; in short, a masterpiece. The early reviews were still mixed but the begrudgers and doubters were now matched in numbers by those who felt it their duty to explain to the reading public why exactly this was a work of genius. Conrad Aiken, for example: “‘The Waste Land’ is unquestioningly important, unquestionably brilliant.” He goes on to substantiate his claim.

If we leave aside for the moment all other considerations, and read the poem solely with the intention of understanding, with the aid of the notes, the symbolism, of making out what it is that is symbolized, and how these symbolized feelings are brought into relation with each other and with the other matters in the poem; I think we must, with reservations, and with no invidiousness, conclude that the poem is not, in any formal sense, coherent. We cannot feel that all the symbolisms belong quite inevitably where they have been put; that there is anything more than a rudimentary progress from one theme to another; nor that the relation between the more symbolic parts and the less is always as definite as it should be. (*New Republic*, 7 February 1923)

Aiken seems here to be transfixed by the very same features that in the view of his predecessors rendered “Prufrock” unsatisfactory as verse, and it should be pointed out that in *The Waste Land* the confusing pattern of allusions to other cultural reference points of the earlier verse become all the more dense and frequent, and the avoidance of continuity more emphatic. Aiken, when referring specifically to the anti-Eliot critics, makes it clear that what they objected to should be treated as a key element of the poem’s excellence.

We reach thus the conclusion that the poem succeeds – as it brilliantly does – by virtue of its incoherence, not of its plan; by virtue of its ambiguities, not of its explanations. Its incoherence is a virtue because its “donnée” is incoherence. Its rich, vivid, crowded use of implication is a virtue, as implication is

*always* a virtue; – it shimmers, it suggests, it gives the desired implication beautifully – conveys by means of a picture–symbol or action–symbol a feeling – we do not require to be told that he had in mind a passage in the Encyclopedia, or the color of his nursery wall; the information is disquieting, has a sour air of pedantry. We “accept” the poem as we would accept a powerful, melancholy tone-poem. We do not want to be told what occurs; nor is it more than mildly amusing to know what passages are, in the Straussian manner, echoes or parodies. We cannot believe that every syllable has an algebraic inevitability, nor would we wish it so. We could dispense with the French, Italian, Latin and Hindu phrases – they are irritating. But when our reservations have all been made, we accept “The Waste Land” as one of the most moving and original poems of our time. It captures us.

Let us be clear on this. Aiken does not berate Eliot’s enemies because of their interpretive blindness, their failure to recognize the innovative aspect of his verse discovered by him. He makes it clear that he sees exactly the same essential characteristics as they do, except that in his opinion they are what make this poetry an achievement of such immense importance, and not, as they judged it, a passing curiosity. To return to my previous analogy, he comes across as a benign, indulgent tutor to a group of first-years who have been brave enough to confess that it sounds like gibberish. Yes, he condescendingly agrees; it does. And with my help it will be your gateway to a new conception of art and thinking.

Within a few weeks of Aiken’s article Harold Monro published in *Chapbook* (no 34, February 1923) what he called “An Imaginary Conversation with T.S. Eliot,” to which Eliot’s contributions are brief and gnomic. The seemingly flippant tone of the piece encapsulates a serious point, already broached by Aiken: specifically, there is a communications breakdown between Eliot – or more accurately his verse – and much of the literary establishment. Monro states, somewhat archly,

I know it was not written for me. You never thought of me as among your potential appreciative audience. You thought of nobody, and you were true to yourself. Yet, in a sense, you did think of me. You wanted to irritate me, because I belong to the beastly age in which you are doomed to live. But, in another sense, your poem seems calculated more to annoy Mr Gosse, or Mr Squire, than me. I imagine them exclaiming: “The fellow *can* write; but he *won’t*.” That would be because just when you seem to be amusing yourself by composing what they might call *poetry*, at that moment you generally break off with a sneer. And, of course, they can’t realise that your faults are as virtuous as

their virtues are wicked, not that your style is, as it were, a mirror that distorts the perfections they admire, which are in truth only imitations of perfections. Your truest passages seem to them like imitations of imperfections.

He goes on to explain why those who doubt its qualities are unable, despite themselves, to appreciate Eliot's endeavor.

Most poems of any significance leave one definite impression on the mind. This poem makes a variety of impressions, many of them so contradictory that a large majority of minds will never be able to reconcile them, or conceive of it as an entity. Those minds will go beyond wondering why it so often breaks itself up so violently, changes its tone and apparently its subject.

The charge so frequently laid against Eliot – that he deliberately abjures coherence and continuity, and for apparently arbitrary reasons refuses to enable the reader to make sense of his poetry – is here treated as his formative stylistic signature, something which, when struggled against, is unappreciated and misinterpreted. Monro expands on this.

Most poets write of *dreaming*, and use the expression that they *dream* in its conventional rhetorical sense, but this poem actually is a dream presented without any poetic boast, bluff, or padding. (Monro, *Chapbook*)

Monro's point is that in traditional verse dreaming, and by implication all other sub-rational activities, is translated into the ordered linguistic discourse of the waking or conscious world. This, he contends, is a falsification of a unique experience. Eliot attempts, via his disorderly pattern of private and cultural allusions, to replicate these sensations.

Monro's and indeed Aiken's case is reasonably convincing: Eliot, they argue, demonstrates that poetry is capable of achieving far more with language, and indeed creating an experience for the reader, than had previously been thought possible. In going beyond precedent he creates a double bind for those who have invested their aesthetic expectations in what is known and established. The latter recognize that his medium is "poetic," in a very flexible sense of the term, yet feel confused and aggrieved by his refusal to conform to the given regulations on what poems must be and do.

Knowing what we do of Eliot's elevation to a status of unassailable greatness we might feel it proper to treat the work of Monro, Aiken, and others as early instances of the replacement of hidebound prejudice with insight and discovery. But a question is begged by the revelations, if such they are,

that his verse transformed our expectations of the breadth and capabilities of poetry. One might ask: are originality and innovation worthy undertakings in their own right? *Monro*, to an extent, anticipates such queries and offers a justification for *Eliot's* departure from conformity.

This poem is at the same time a representation, a criticism, and the disgusted outcry of a heart turned cynical. It is calm, fierce, and horrible: the poetry of despair itself become desperate. Those poor little people who string their disjointed ejaculation into prosaic semblances of verse – they pale as one reads “*The Waste Land*.” They have no relation to it: yet, through it, we realise what they were trying, but have failed, to represent. Our epoch sprawls, a desert, between an unrealised past and an unimaginable future. “*The Waste Land*” is one metaphor with a multiplicity of interpretations.

*Monro's* doleful yet unspecific references to the plight of “our epoch”, and to “an unimaginable future” would have registered vividly for his readers. A war which seemed for many to have undermined the claims of Europe to civilization had ended barely 4 years earlier. The allegedly dehumanizing consequences of modern technology – including everything from the wireless to the motor car – were, some argued, encroaching more and more upon the capacity of human beings to determine their own destiny. Indeed, all of these are now part of the standard explanation for why modernism – in literature and elsewhere – came about; its motivation was its radical purchase upon a world in a state of torment and dissolution.

The case would seem to be closed. *Eliot's* detractors are consigned to the history of interpretation and aesthetics, stubborn footnotes to its rightful progress. This, at any rate, would be the verdict of the vast majority of literary writers and commentators after the 1920s and 1930s, followed closely by their academic counterparts. But without necessarily allying ourselves with the critics who doubted the value and significance of *Eliot's* work, we should I think revisit this period of debate and transformation because there are questions raised by it that remain unanswered.

To reiterate: *Monro's* conclusion was that *Eliot* was not involved in the arbitrary or self-interested pursuit of innovation but rather that his implicit pretext both justified and illuminated his experiments. He was marshalling the so far unexplored potential of literary art as a means of reflecting unvoiced states of mind. There is an issue that underpins this that has been ignored completely by subsequent literary historians and critics. *Monro* takes it for granted – and assumes that all others will too – that it is the



given function of literature to work as some form of index to shifts and variations in the real world, and his assumption opens doors upon a vast range of correlate problems. Even if we accept that literature can do, or at least achieve with a degree of special discernment, what is beyond the standard registers of contemporary debate – journalism, political writing, and so on – does this not relegate it to an activity whose primary function is polemicism or dogmatism? Literary art is generally treated – both by its champions and enemies – as a form of writing defined by its lack of accountability to fact and actuality. Even the so-called realist novel carries its own implied set of inverted commas: it might seem a little more realistic than its less trustworthy counterparts but it is still by its nature pure fiction. If we accept *Monro's* case – and he is certainly not alone in advocating it – and concede that literature should, even to a partial extent, commit itself to the process of excavating and illuminating aspects of lived experience that might otherwise remain undisclosed, or at least left to experience rather than captured in language, then we must also concede that one of the principal criteria for evaluating a literary work – judging its qualities and assessing it in relation to other works – must be grounded in its perceived success in this twin role of disclosure and representation. Paradoxically, then, modernism is by its nature superior to realism because it is more realistic.

This cascade of questions and attendant dilemmas is, I accept, too taxing for anything close to a straightforward resolution, at least at this point. I present it to you because it encapsulates the nature and purpose of the whole of this book. It is too easy to treat the conflict between Eliot's supporters and detractors as a battle won by the former and part of the undisputed chronicle of literary history.

Consider again the pretext of *Monro's* case. He contends that in order for literature to properly engage with change in society it must radicalize itself, as most modernist works did. The implications of the model are disturbing, given that it consigns virtually every type of writing that preceded Eliot – generally classified as traditional writing – as by its nature incapable of dealing with the raw material of present day (circa 1920s) existence. Even if we grant that the argument is only in part tenable then it still had far-reaching consequences. Modernism did not extinguish traditional writing and nor did it overturn the latter's ascendancy as the preferred option for the ordinary reader. Therefore, in agreeing with *Monro* we are effectively prejudging conventional writing as second rate. Can we really accept that realist novels and conventional poems are inherently unsuitable as a means of addressing the

complexities and turmoils of society, particularly society in a state of flux – given that most historians would contend that society is continually in a state of flux? This returns us once more to an overarching question already raised: why should we judge the value and quality of literature according to how effectively, or otherwise, it tackles contemporary life? The poems of John Donne are acclaimed as brilliant examples of the short lyric but do they tell us any more about early seventeenth century England than we might learn from historical records? And if not, are they any the worse, as literature, for that?

Let us now consider another giant of modernism whose transformative effect on the history of the novel was, arguably, equal to that of Eliot with poetry: James Joyce. Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) begs comparison with Eliot's "Prufrock" in that both were their respective author's initial assaults upon the bastions of tradition in their chosen genre. *A Portrait* is unconventionally lacking in the solid narrative storyline of the nineteenth century novel but the most radical feature of the novel involves the relationship between the main character, Stephen Dedalus, and the third person narrator. Stephen does not tell his own story but the narrator sympathetically adjusts the style of the novel to suit his mood. Indeed, as Stephen becomes more preoccupied with his ambitions as an "artist" the style becomes correspondingly more intensive and mature. Joyce, however, was treated far more sympathetically by reviewers than Eliot.

When one recognizes genius in a book one can perhaps best leave criticism alone ... There are many pages, and not a few whole scenes, in Mr. Joyce's book which are undoubtedly the work of a man of genius, nevertheless, it leaves us combative. The reader – who is as much ignored, and as contemptuously, as it is possible for him to be in a printed work – revolts and asserts himself from time to time, and refuses to sit down passively under the writer's scorn. Once criticism is let loose, it finds range enough and many marks to hit.

Not for its apparent formlessness should the book be condemned. A subtle sense of art has worked amidst the chaos, making this hither-and-thither record of a young mind and soul ... a complete and ordered portrait.

(“A.M.” of the *Manchester Guardian*, 2 March 1917)

“A.M.” is impressed by Joyce's experiment with narrative but unsettled by the consequences.

Not all the scenes are touched by genius. Some read like disagreeable phonographic records of the stupid conversations of ill-born and ill-bred youths,

composed of futile obscenities, aimless outrages against reasonable decencies – not immoral, but non-moral in a bad-mannered fashion. Perhaps Mr. Joyce wants to show what may be, and often is, the ugly background of fairer things which consent astonishingly to grow in a sordid neighbourhood.

On the one hand “A.M.” accepts enthusiastically that Joyce’s technique causes us to reconsider our standard notions of what fictional representations involve, yet he/she is slightly appalled by what this uncovering of inner thoughts – variously random, obscure, vulgar, base, and so on – actually comprises. “A.M.” certainly does not dispute that what Joyce shows us is a truthful portrait of what happens beneath the façade of manners and courtesy – he/she concurs that all humans are equal in this respect – but he/she is distressed by the fact that the disclosures have been made public and, even worse, that literature has been employed to do so.

Francis Hackett, writing in *The New Republic* (3 March 1917) can claim to be the most insightful of the early commentators. He describes astutely the symbiotic relationship between Stephen’s mental landscape and the sympathetically shifting temper of the narrator, a considerable achievement on his part given that nothing quite like this had been attempted in the English novel.

What gives its intensity to the portrait is the art Mr. Joyce has mastered of communicating the incidents of Stephen’s career through the emotions they excited in him. We do not perceive Stephen’s father and mother by description. We get them by the ebb and flood of Stephen’s feelings, and while there are many passages of singularly life-like conversation – such, for example, as the wrangle about Parnell that ruined the Christmas dinner or the stale banter that enunciated the father’s return to Cork – the viridity is in Stephen’s soul.

Hackett next confronts the dilemma that caused for “A.M.” feelings of admiration and revulsion.

A novel in which a sensitive, critical young man is completely expressed as he is can scarcely be expected to be pleasant. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is not entirely pleasant. But it has such beauty, such love of beauty, such intensity of feeling, such pathos, such candor, it goes beyond anything in English that reveals the inevitable malaise of serious youth.

The two critics deal differently with the same contentious issue, and Hackett mounts a defense of Joyce almost exactly the same as Monro’s of

Eliot. Both treat transgressions of the accepted purpose of literature as tokens of its ability to transform otherwise stilted, inhibited perceptions of a turbulent moment in history. And once more two interconnected questions are raised: why is literature uniquely equipped to perform such tasks and does its role, as such, compromise its status as art and cause it instead to become primarily an index for our conceptions of who we are and what we experience? While the latter is a commendable achievement it challenges the enduring sense of literature as art-in-language, absolved of obligations to reason and fidelity. Does this matter? It does, because it causes further confusion for the long debated issue of what is, and what is not, good literature. Consider for a moment the criteria that underpin Hackett's championing of Joyce. He, Hackett, is walking a very fine line between a celebration of high quality writing (and in this respect he does not make it clear why Joyce's method is more intellectually challenging, even enjoyable, than the methods of the previous century) and an exemption of writing from aesthetic judgments; these, he argues, are less important than its relevance, its ability to record a sense of social discord and malaise.

I give greater attention to this issue in the next chapter, but now I shall turn back the clock to a point more than a century before the birth of modernism when the trajectory of literary writing faced another moment of disjunction, Romanticism.

The *Lyrical Ballads, With a Few Other Poems* (a collection of poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, first published in 1798) is taken by most to be the inaugurating moment of Romantic verse, and it embodies the perversities and unresolved paradoxes that inform all aspects of the movement. In the second edition, published in 1800, Wordsworth, in the newly added Preface, proclaims that his intention is to make available in poetry "the real language of men," to catch the unmediated "spontaneous overflow or powerful feeling." He is, however, somewhat guarded and obtuse on how exactly he intends to realize these objectives. The vast majority of the poems in the collection concern the lives and experiences of the uncultured denizens of the rural landscape of eighteenth century England. The best known and most widely discussed are "The Idiot Boy," "Simon Lee," and "The Mad Mother." Wordsworth presented these figures as possessed of an intrinsic wisdom uncomplicated and undiminished by the intellectual constraints of the educated city dweller, and the poems that caused the most controversy among early reviewers of the collection were those that centered upon characters who were neither quaint nor particularly heroic and who presented the reader with few opportunities to reflect

upon their dire state as being the cause of some tangible form of social injustice or symbolic of an ungenerous branch of fate. They simply existed, and Southey (1798), in a much-cited review, sums up the puzzling unprecedented character of this exercise. “The Idiot Boy,” he claimed, “resembles a Flemish picture in the worthlessness of its design and the excellence of its execution.” “Worthlessness” should not be mistaken as evidence of Southey’s complete disapproval; he meant that the poem lacks any sense of allegory or pregnant meaning, that it is simply a naturalistic portrait of fact without comment. Similarly, Dr Burney in *The Monthly Review* (1799) compared the rural ballads with “pictures,” “as dark as those of Rembrandt.” The principal subjects of these poems, Johnny in “The Idiot Boy,” Martha Ray in “The Thorn,” the unnamed Mad Mother, or the eponymous Simon Lee, are never the commanding presences of their pieces. Sometimes their speech is reported but the story is always told by someone else, never quite the same person but serving a similar purpose in Wordsworth’s sociocultural confidence trick. His speakers are intermediaries between his own condition of high cultural erudition, a state he regrets but from which he knows he can never detach himself, and a region unpolluted by art and philosophy where tactile experience and emotion enjoy unostentatious purity. Wordsworth conducted an exercise in cultural ventriloquism. He went down-market in an attempt to invest ordinary, manifestly ill-educated presences with transcendental significance. “The Thorn” begins:

There is a thorn; it looks so old,  
 In truth you’d find it hard to say,  
 How could it ever have been young,  
 It looks so old and grey.  
 Not higher than a two-years’ child,  
 It stands erect this aged thorn;  
 No leaves it has, no thorny points;  
 It is a mass of knotted joints,  
 A wretched thing forlorn.  
 It stands erect, and like a stone  
 With lichens it is overgrown.

Like rock or stone, it is o’ergrown  
 With lichens to the very top,  
 And hung with heavy tufts of moss  
 A melancholy crop:

Up from the earth these mosses creep,  
 And this poor thorn they clasp it round  
 So close, you'd say they were bent  
 With plain and manifest intent,  
 To drag it to the ground;  
 And all had joined in one endeavour  
 To bury this poor thorn for ever.

The critical reception of *Lyrical Ballads* was largely unsympathetic and in his piece in the *Critical Review* (1798) Southey indicated the nature of the disdainful consensus, commenting on "The Thorn":

The advertisement says that it is not told in the person of the author but in that of some loquacious narrator. The author should have recollected that he who personates tiresome loquacity becomes tiresome himself.

Southey's point is that the speaker is, if not entirely unsuitable for serious poetry, then at least capable of trying the patience of the cultivated reader.

Southey again:

The "experiment", we think, has failed, not because the language of conversation is little adapted to "the purposes of poetic pleasure", but because it has been tried *upon uninteresting subjects...* every piece discovers genius.

Wordsworth and Coleridge faced a problem: if, as they stated, their objective was to capture a mood, a state of mind, that transcended high culture they must either reinvent themselves as peasants – and that, as *Lyrical Ballads* proved, was both inauthentic and preposterous – or they must be honest about their own status as educated erudite writers and do something radical with conventional verse. The rustic pieces of *Lyrical Ballads* are stories, of a sort, but they propose no straightforward philosophic or moral truisms. On the one hand Wordsworth and Coleridge did not want to turn their countryfolk into weird, plain-speaking replicas of Kant or Hume but at the same time nor did they wish them to relinquish their quiet, instinctive wisdom. Southey was right; the "experiment" with rustic odes was a failure. Wordsworth and Coleridge were awed by ordinary uneducated people but they knew nothing about them and subjected them to a patronizing brand of intellectual anthropomorphism, imparting to them a kind of rough sagacity that was part of their own intellectual fantasy. After

the volume was published the experiment died and the rustic ballads endure only within the educational establishment. Any elementary degree course on English will involve hapless students in an encounter with them. What will be lacking, however, is the opportunity to assess these pieces as literary artworks and, potentially, reach the conclusion that Wordsworth and Coleridge (mainly the former, who was primarily responsible for the rustic project) produced poor quality poetic hybrids. True, they are *interesting* as testaments to how innovation can go wrong but they are not in their own right of much value. So why have they survived in the canon, preserved like their fellow artefacts from the capricious questionings of the ordinary reader? They might not have worked as attempts to buy access to a nirvana of primitivism but they can be regarded as precursors to an upmarket brand of self-absorption – made up both of narrative poems and odes – which displays a similar reluctance either to complete their tales or to allow us to unravel their themes and enigmas. Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Christabel,” Keats’s “The Eve of St. Agnes” all seem to promise some kind of conclusion to their story or clarification of what they really mean, and all fail to deliver.

John Hazlitt on Coleridge’s “Christabel” and “Kubla Khan,” now regarded as quintessential classics of Romanticism, typifies contemporary responses.

The fault of Mr. Coleridge is, that he comes to no conclusion. He is a man of that universality of genius, that his mind hangs suspended between poetry and prose, truth and falsehood, and an infinity of other things, and from an excess of capacity, he does little or nothing. Here are two unfinished poems, and a fragment.

In parts of “Christabel” there is a great deal of beauty, both of thought, imagery, and versification; but the effect of the general story is dim, obscure, and visionary. It is more like a dream than a reality. The mind, in reading it, is spell-bound. The sorceress seems to act without power – Christabel to yield without resistance. The faculties are thrown into a state of metaphysical suspense and theoretical imbecility.

Josiah Conder is similarly confounded:

The conclusion of the second part of “Christabel”, about “the little limber elf,” is to us absolutely incomprehensible. “Kubla Khan”, we think, only shews that Mr Coleridge can write better *nonsense* verses than any man in England. It is not a poem, but a musical composition.

A damsel with a dulcimer  
 In a vision once I saw:  
 It was an Abyssinian maid,  
 And on her dulcimer she play'd,  
 Singing of Mount Abora.

We could repeat these lines to ourselves not the less often for not knowing the meaning of them...

In the mean time, we cannot conceal that the effect of the present publication upon readers in general, will be that of disappointment. It may be compared to a mutilated statue, the beauty of which can only be appreciated by those who have knowledge or imagination sufficient to complete the idea of the whole composition. The reader is obliged to guess at the half-developed meaning of the mysterious incidents, and is at last, at the end of the second canto, left in the dark, in the most abrupt and unceremonious manner imaginable. (*Eclectic Review*, June 1816)

The anonymous reviewer in the *Anti-Jacobin* is probably the most impatient and bad-tempered. On "Christabel":

Had we not known Mr Coleridge to be a man of genius and of talents, we should really, from the present production, have been tempted to pronounce him wholly destitute of both. In truth, a more senseless, absurd, and stupid, composition, has scarcely, of late years, issued from the press.

William Roberts fumes as vehemently as his fellow sceptics and his comments on Coleridge and Romanticism in general are fascinating.

The epidemic among modern poets is the disease of affectation, which is for ever carrying them into quaint, absurd, and outrageous extremes. *One* is determined to say nothing in a natural way, *another* is for saying every thing with infantile simplicity, while a *third* is persuaded that there is but one language for the drawing room, the Royal Exchange, the talk of the table, and the temple of the Muses. One consequence of this fatal propensity to affectation among our poets is a terrible sameness or mannerism in each of those who have been encouraged to write much; and the worst of it is that each of these luminaries, while he moves in his own orbit in perpetual parallelism with himself, has a crowd of little moons attending him, that multiply the malignant influence, and propagate the deceptious glare. But the most insufferable of all the different forms which modern affectation in composition has assumed is the cant and gibberish of the German school



which has filled all the provinces, as well of imagination as of science, with profound nonsense, unintelligible refinement, metaphysical morals and mental distortion ...

We shall hail the day, as a day of happy auspices for the moral muse, when our present fanatic race of poets shall have exhausted all their "monstrous shapes and sorceries", and the abused understandings of our countrymen shall break these unhappy spells, forsake the society of demons, and be divorced from deformity. (*British Review*, viii, August 1816)

The parallels between Roberts's summation of where Romanticism is at fault and many of the early responses to modernism, poetry and fiction, are extraordinary. Irrespective of how we feel about Roberts's refusal to indulge this new phenomenon his argument, technically, is sound enough. Throughout the closing decades of the seventeenth century and the entirety of the eighteenth prevailing opinion was that poetry should equal the essay or the pamphlet in its claim upon coherence and transparency; the most celebrated verse of this period served as a lens to clarify complexities of thought and impression. As Roberts and his contemporaries note, Romanticism caused the pendulum to swing as far as possible in the opposite direction. Romantic poems, allegedly, had become vehicles for making the already unfathomable even more so, an arena for self-indulgence that alienates the ordinary reader. These very same charges were laid against T.S. Eliot. What, we might be forgiven for asking, had happened during the intervening century? Did the conservatives and doubters of the early twentieth century not realize that all of this had happened before? Not quite. What actually occurred was a process that can best be described as the domestication of revolt. By the mid-late nineteenth century the radicalism of the Romantics had been refined into an inconclusive thoughtfulness, encompassing such fundamentals as disillusionment, loss, often despair but in a manner that allowed for contemplation rather than confusion.

John Keats was a member of the second generation of Romantic poets and the reception of his work reflects the gradual sense among the literary establishment of a willingness to enquire, even celebrate, rather than condemn. Some reviewers treated him as depressing continuation of a trend begun by Wordsworth and Coleridge.

For ourselves, we think that Mr Keats is very faulty. He is often laboriously obscure; and he sometimes indulges in such strange intricacies of thought, and peculiarities of expression, that we find considerable difficulty in discovering

his meaning. Most unluckily for him, he is a disciple in a school in which these peculiarities are virtues: but the praises of this small *coterie* will hardly compensate for the disapprobation of the rest of the literary world. (Unsigned piece in *The Monthly Review*, July, 1820)

A few months earlier the *London Magazine's* correspondent proposed that the faults were not with Keats, but with the incapacity of readers to adjust their ingrained expectations of what poetry should be and do.

*Endymion* is totally unlike all these, and all other poems. As we said before, it is not a *poem* at all. It is an ecstatic dream of poetry – a flush – a fever – a burning light – an involuntary out-pouring of the spirit of poetry – that will not be controuled. Its movements are the starts and boundings of the young horse before it has felt the bitt ...

Almost entirely unknown as this poem is to general readers, it will perhaps be better to reserve what we have further to say of its characteristics, till we have given some specimens of it. We should premise this, however, by saying, that our examples will probably exhibit almost as many faults as beauties. But the reader will have anticipated this from the nature of the opinion we have already given – at least if we have succeeded in expressing what we intended to express. In fact, there is scarcely a passage of any length in the whole work, which does not exhibit the most flaring faults – faults that in many instances amount almost to the ludicrous. (*London Magazine*, ii, April 1820)

Romanticism had not changed and it had certainly not, through Keats, been purged of its radicalism, but, urges the reviewer, if we soften our inflexible notions of literary expectation, allow that something previously unknown might exceed what the known could achieve, then we might discover in these new works something more exalting, and challenging, than had been thought possible. Again we encounter a replica of what would occur with modernism, 100 years later: a new way of seeing would cause the cautious reader to cross the boundary between a region of doubt and perplexity to one of enlightenment.

I have compared these two periods to emphasize how the process of acceptance, the absorption of the unprecedented into common practice, tends to be a generic feature of response to radicalism: shock and rejection are followed by thoughtful consolidation. And I have done so to raise some questions. What changes? Do the critics, and as a consequence readers, become less intolerant and able to discover qualities previously overlooked or are such “responses” actually symptomatic of an addiction to change for its own sake, something that automatically overturns rational

evaluation? Third, and most significantly, we must consider the unclear relationship between what the establishment, at a given time, considers acceptable as literature and the ability of a particular writer as a literary craftsman. Few if any of the critics who display hostility to the works of Eliot, Joyce, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats would condemn them as incompetent writers. Rather, to offer an analogy, they are seen as talented sportsmen of some promise who have decided, without consulting the governing body, to alter the rules of the game. These initial transgressions are eventually adapted to a new set of conventions, but how do these modifications, these changes to what is and is not acceptable, affect the more fundamental question of the difference between good and bad writing? There are no easy answers to any of these questions but to better address them it is useful to consider the fact that not all changes in the critical consensus have been brought about by precipitate responses to innovative writing. In one notable instance the literary establishment took it upon itself to look backwards and re-evaluate work produced more than a century earlier.

The poets who are thought to have best embodied the spirit of English Renaissance literature are those of the so-called Metaphysical School. They thrived in the early seventeenth century and their most celebrated representatives, notably John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Robert Herrick, Richard Crashaw, Thomas Traherne, and Andrew Marvell, now occupy an esteemed place in the canon of nondramatic poetry, their elevated status unquestioned by literary cognoscenti and their work granted confirmation of classic status by the reading lists of university courses. Like many others we have already considered they are effectively immune from critical disfavor. Consider then the following opinion on them expressed by another writer, and critic, to whom we are expected to accord largely unquestioning respect, Samuel Johnson:

But wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, they have more than enough. *The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together* [emphasis added]; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased. (Johnson, 1779–1781, p. 218)

Johnson objects to, as he sees it, the overadventurous and irresponsible use of figurative language (or “wit” as he puts it). In this respect, he was speaking on behalf of the general consensus of eighteenth century ideas regarding poetry. His principal point is that the Metaphysicals deliberately used language to undermine orderly perceptions of reality. By the phrase “heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together” he meant that ideas, concepts, and images that had no natural or logical relation to each other were caused to seem as though they did; the innately paradoxical was made to seem self-evidently logical and plausible. In his “Second Anniversary,” Donne tells of how

Her pure and innocent blood  
Spoke in her cheeks, and so distinctly wrought  
That one might almost say, her body thought.

Typically, he engages with that perennial debating point of philosophers and theologians, the relationship between the corporal and the spiritual, and, although one might take issue with Johnson’s use of the term “violence,” there is without doubt a hypnotizing “yoking together” of “heterogeneous ideas.” Johnson and his contemporaries were aware that figurative language was a collateral feature of all poetic writing but in their view it should be used with discrimination and as a means of clarifying or buttressing a point of logical disputation. Donne, however, performs the verbal equivalent of illusionism, causing her cheeks to speak and her body to think. T.S. Eliot stated:

It is the difference between the intellectual poet and reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think, but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. *When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience* [emphasis added]; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, and fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.

(Eliot, 1921, p. 2024)

Eliot agrees almost exactly with Johnson on the nature of Metaphysical technique: “A thought to Donne was an experience.” But Eliot regards the ability to undermine the logical and empirical specifications of reality as

the essential calling of the poet: to use poetic language to oblige us to re-examine our rational processes of thinking and our perceptions of actuality. For Johnson, the eighteenth century rationalist, the distinction between, say, bodily sensations and the workings of the intellect should be maintained as much in poetry as in a philosophical essay. For Eliot, the modernist, it is the duty of the poet to challenge, even undermine, such orthodox classifications: "in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes." While these two critics differ with regard to the value of Metaphysical writing, they agree precisely on its character and effect.

Once more we encounter a discord between an estimation of a writer's ability and the way they have chosen to execute it. Johnson and his peers rarely doubted the capacities of Donne, Herbert, and others as poetic writers but they treated them largely as wasted geniuses.

Johnson's premise is as follows: "If the father of criticism [Aristotle] has rightly denominated poetry ... *an imitative art*, these writers will without great wrong lose their right to the name of poets, for they cannot be said to have imitated anything: they neither copied nature nor life, neither painted the forms of matter nor represented the operations of the intellect." Whether or not Aristotle's verdict on the purpose of poetry should be treated as decisive can be left until Chapter 8. What is important here is to note that Johnson never regards the Metaphysical poets as sub-standard writers but his estimation of their work is effectively pre-decided. Before he reads a poem, by the Metaphysicals or anyone else, Johnson has made up his mind about what criteria it should meet and if it fails to do so, even if the poet displays an abundance of creative talent, it is automatically downgraded aesthetically.

To a certain degree all of us, from critics to general readers, are guided in our estimation of a work by ingrained expectations, even prejudices. Very often these vary according to temperament and disposition, but in the case of Johnson and his contemporaries their ideas on what did or did not qualify as good literature were formed according to a commonly accepted critical consensus. Something similar to this notion of the literary establishment bound together in a fabric of received wisdom obtains in most periods, but with fluctuating allowances for indulgence and conjecture. The eighteenth century was probably the most resolute and inflexible in the history of English, for several reasons. Given that the vast majority of commentators dated the provenance of English literature to the sixteenth century, it was barely then two centuries old. It came into the world accompanied by

classical antecedents on what literature should be and do but it had no indigenous rules of its own. This in itself caused a sense of collective insecurity among the new cultural establishment, a preoccupation with designing a new set of conventions that matched classicism in terms of rigor and comfortable predictability. This first generation of critics and rule-makers was greatly influenced also by the political mood of the period. The eighteenth century began within living memory of the Civil War and its equally turbulent aftermath and there was a general determination to establish a sense of coherence and order within society, a model based upon an ideal of classical civilization.

The Royal Society was founded after the Cromwellian Protectorate during the first months of the Restoration and in the succeeding decades established itself as a kind of barometric guide to developments in the key areas of thinking and writing. Its best-known and most widely quoted statement of purpose occurs in Thomas Sprat's "The History of the Royal Society (and for "history" we might read "manifesto"):

The resolution of the Royal Society has been ... to reject all amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style; to return back to the primitive purity and shortness, when men deliver'd so many *things* almost in an equal number of *words*. They have extracted from all their members a close, naked, natural way of speaking, positive expressions, clear senses, a native easiness, bringing all things near the Mathematical plainness as they can, and preferring the language of Artizans, Countryman, and Merchants, before that of Wits or Scholars.

(Sprat, 1667 (1908), pp. 117–118)

Sprat detects a danger in "amplifications digressions and swellings" of expression – which is virtually a definition of poetry – mannerisms that might as much mislead as entertain; he prefers the "Mathematical plainness" of the language of those who work for the good of the country. Before apportioning to Sprat an intolerance of literature per se we should note that John Dryden restates his proposition in his 1677 manifesto on the proper use of poetry: "the definition of wit ... is only this: that it is the propriety of thoughts and words; or, in other terms, thoughts and words elegantly adapted to the subject." The parallels between both commendations of clarity, order, and coherence in writing and Johnson's attack on the Metaphysicals, a century later, are self-evident.

Though frequently praised during the eighteenth century even Shakespeare did not escape censure. In fact, the majority of those who enthused about him did so in response to the quality of contemporary performances. As literary works in their own right his plays were treated with widespread circumspection, which sometimes bordered on condemnation. George Colman in his *Critical Reflections on the Old English Dramatic Writers* (1761) claims that the popularity of Shakespeare has been sustained by his appeal to our baser appetites for verbal gymnastics and thrilling stories, which cause us to overlook his failings as a serious writer.

The conduct of these Extravagant Stories is frequently uncouth, and infinitely offensive to that Dramatick correctness prescribed by late Critics and practised (as they pretend) by the French Writers.

Colman's principal objection to Shakespeare is that he is overambitious to the point of hyperbole, that he attempts to force the universality of experience into dramas which become overloaded with incongruities.

What patient Spectators are we of the Inconsistencies that confessedly prevail in our darling Shakespeare! What critical Catcall ever proclaimed the indecency of introducing the Stocks in the Tragedy of *Lear*? How quietly do we see Gloster take his imaginary Leap from Dover Cliff! Or to give a stronger instance of Patience, with what a Philosophical Calmness do the audience doze over the tedious and uninteresting Love-Scenes, with which the bungling hand of Tate has coarsely pieced and patched that rich Work of Shakespeare! – To instance further from Shakespeare himself, the Grave-diggers in *Hamlet* (not to mention Polonius) are not only endured but applauded; the very Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* is allowed to be Nature; the Transactions of a whole History are, without offence, begun and completed in less than three hours; and we are agreeably wafted by the *Chorus*, or oftener without so much ceremony, from one end of the world to another.

Colman is pursuing an argument similar to Johnson's on the Metaphysicals: the lens of literary representation has become too distorting and refractory. In her *Shakespeare Illustrated: or The Novels and Histories on which the Plays of Shakespeare are Founded* (1753–4), Charlotte Lennox seems ostensibly set upon a scholarly account of the sources of Shakespeare's works, in history and literature, but it soon becomes apparent that she is as much concerned with the extent to which his drama defies credulity and

causes individual characters to speak and behave in ways that defy logic and the basic rules of consistency. On *Measure for Measure*:

As the Character of the Duke is absurd and ridiculous, that of *Angelo* is inconsistent to the last Degree. His Baseness to *Mariana*, his wicked Attempts on the Chastity of *Isabella*, his villainous Breach of Promise and Cruelty to *Claudio* prove him to be a very bad Man, long practised in Wickedness; yet when he finds himself struck with the Beauty of *Isabella* he starts at the Temptation, reasons on his Frailty, asks Assistance from Heaven to overcome it, resolves against it, and seems carried away by the Violence of his Passion to commit what his better Judgement abhors.

Are these the Manners of a sanctified Hypocrite, such as *Angelo* is represented to be? Are they not rather those of a good man overcome by a powerful Temptation? That *Angelo* was not a good Man appears by his base Treatment of *Mariana*; for certainly nothing can be viler than to break his Contract with a Woman of Merit because she had accidentally become poor and, to excuse his own Conduct, load the unfortunate Innocent with base Aspersions and add Infamy to her other Miseries. Yet this is the Man who, when attacked by a Temptation, kneels, prays, expostulates with himself, and while he scarce yields in Thought to do wrong his Mind feels all the Remorse which attends actual Guilt.

Her analysis of the characters, their apparent motivations, and their relationship with each other is not inaccurate, but she raises, without explicitly addressing, a question. Is she basing her criteria for good literature upon what might be expected of a nonliterary work, such as a historical account of an actual event, in which truth, plausibility, and in the end authenticity overrule inventive license? We might treat her comments indulgently, as a curiosity, and we would do so on the assumption that we have progressed to a more sophisticated conception of what is and is not allowable in literature. We might, but what if we were then asked to chart the progress of evaluation and name the points at which the moments of enlightenment occurred? In short, does historical progress always confer improvement upon habits of interpretation?

One of the most celebrated dramatists, poets, and commentators of the century was Oliver Goldsmith. He does not offer as detailed a reading as Colman or Lennox but his unsympathetic judgment is based on similar premises.

We seem to be pretty much in the situation of travellers at a Scotch inn: vile entertainment is served up, complained of and sent down; up comes worse, and that also is changed; and every change makes our wretched cheer more unsavoury. What must be done? Only sit down contented, cry up all that comes before us, and admire even the absurdities of Shakespeare.



Let the reader suspend his censure; I admire the beauties of this great father of our stage as much as they deserve but could wish, for the honour of our country, and for his honour too, that many of his scenes were forgotten. A man blind of one eye should always be painted in profile. Let the spectator who assists at any of these new revived pieces only ask himself whether he would approve such a performance if written by a modern poet; if he would not, then his applause proceeds merely from the sound of a name and an empty veneration of antiquity. In fact, the revival of those pieces of forced humour, far-fetch'd conceit, and unnatural hyperbole which have been ascribed to Shakespeare, is rather gibbeting than raising a statue to his memory; it is rather a trick of the actor, who thinks it safest acting in exaggerated characters, and who by out-stepping nature chuses to exhibit the ridiculous outré of an harlequin under the sanction of this venerable name. ("Of the Stage" from *An Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe*, 1759)

In Goldsmith's view, Shakespeare's work is an example of low culture which appeals to those who prefer "forced humour, far-fetched conceit and unnatural hyperbole" over the more prudent and discriminating qualities of great literature. He asks if we "would approve such a performance if written by a modern poet," implying that public taste has improved considerably since Shakespeare and his contemporaries introduced audiences to modern drama. To respond, as many of us would, that public appreciation of Shakespeare's greatness has improved since the mid-eighteenth century brings us to a dilemma. In our move to our present state of intellectual and cultural maturity have we actually gone backwards, to a point before Goldsmith when Shakespeare was uninhibited by such expectations as a resemblance between the play and the world? Goldsmith again:

What strange vamp'd comedies, farcical tragedies, or what shall I call them, speaking pantomimes, have we not of late see. No matter what the play may be it is the actor who draws an audience. He throws life into all; all are in spirits and merry, in at one door and out at another; the spectator, in a fool's paradise, knows not what all this means till the last act concludes in matrimony. The piece pleases our critics, because it talks of old English, and it pleases the galleries, because it has fun. True taste, or even common sense, are out of the question.

The most detailed and withering attack on Shakespeare comes from Henry Home, Lord Kames, a figure little known today but whose work

matches modern criticism in its attention to detail. In his voluminous *Elements of Criticism* (1762) Kames picks relentlessly through passages of Shakespeare's drama in a manner that prefigures twentieth century New Criticism and on the basis of his findings draws conclusions on the Bard's value as a poet and playwright. Typically, on what he treats as the overambitious use of figurative devices:

It is remarkable that this low species of wit has among all nations been a favourite entertainment in a certain stage of their progress toward refinement of taste and manners, and has gradually gone into disrepute. As soon as a language is formed into a system and the meaning of words is ascertained with tolerably accuracy, opportunity is afforded for expressions that, by the double meaning of some words, give a familiar thought the appearance of being new; and the penetration of the reader or hearer is gratified in detecting the true sense disguised under the double meaning. That this sort of wit was in England deemed a reputable amusement during the reigns of Elizabeth and James I is vouched by the works of Shakespeare, and even by the writings of grave divines. But it cannot have any long endurance: for as language ripens and the meaning of words is more and more ascertained words held to be synonymous diminish daily, and when those that remain have been more than once employ'd the pleasure vanisheth with the novelty.

This is based on the same evaluative pretext as Johnson's dismissal of the verse of the Metaphysicals and it should be made clear that those who begrudged Shakespeare a claim to true literary quality were in the majority throughout the eighteenth century. Anyone who would express such opinions today would at best be indulged as an eccentric, a figure who could be tolerated because their views are self-evidently preposterous. When did the consensus alter? The Romantics found in Shakespeare crucial parallels with their own creative manifestoes. What the eighteenth century critics treated as a careless abundance of invention and stylistic experiment, the Romantics seized upon as a triumph of the unfettered imagination over stifling conventions, literary and philosophical. Shelley went so far as to proclaim that Shakespeare had attained a God-like quality which rendered him immune from any sort of criticism, even that which praised him ("On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth," 1823). Since then a degree of sanity has intervened, but something of what George Bernard Shaw called the "bardolatry" of the Romantics endures. Contra Shelley, we now allow ourselves to criticize him but there are implicit boundaries that no communicator will dare cross.

We return to Shakespeare in Chapter 3 and close this one with a consideration of how the novel was dealt with during the eighteenth century, the period of its birth in England.

Tobias Smollett's *Humphrey Clinker* (1771) was published more than 50 years after the book that is generally agreed to have launched the genre, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), but it is evident from responses to it that there was still no clear agreement on what novels were.

The anonymous reviewer in *The Critical Review* is impressed by the letters between Mr Brimble and Mr Melford:

Upon their expedition to North Britain, contain so many interesting observations, that they must not only gratify every reader of curiosity, but also tend to correct many wrong notions concerning that part of the Island. We would willingly give an account of many of the particulars related of Edinburgh and its inhabitants, but as our readers are probably less acquainted with the manners of the people farther North, we shall extract the representation which is given of the economy in the house of a Highland gentleman.  
(*The Critical Review*, XXXII, 1771, pp. 81–88)

Reviewers often praise novelists for the attention they give to detail and setting as a means of lending more credibility to the story and its characters, but the *Critical Review* correspondent is preoccupied exclusively with Smollett's reliability as a source of information on lesser known parts of England and Scotland.

We find, from another passage in the work, that Lough Lomond, from whence the river Leven issues, is a body of pure highland water, unfathomably deep in many places, six or seven miles broad, and four and twenty miles in length. This contains above twenty green islands, covered with wood; some of them cultivated for corn, and many of them stocked with red deer.

This might, to us, come across as a somewhat bizarre way of assessing the qualities of a novel. The modern equivalent would be a review of Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* that is made up entirely of comments on how well the author informs those unacquainted with life in New York of the luxurious interiors of Broadway apartments, ongoing trends in furniture and décor, types of shoes favored by well-appointed stockbrokers, and the inhospitable standards of public transport, particularly the Subway, compared with chauffeured private limousines. This reviewer's seemingly obsessive focus on fact was not uncommon during

the eighteenth century and towards the end of the piece we come upon an inadvertent explanation for it.

Instead of visionary scenes and persons, the usual subjects of Romance, we are frequently presented with many uncommon anecdotes, and curious expressions of real life, described in such a manner as to afford a pleasure even superior to what arises from the portraits of fancy. We are every where entertained with the narration or description of something interesting and extraordinary, calculated at once to amuse the imagination, and release the understanding from prejudice.

Some in the 1770s still referred to fiction as “Romance,” though “the novel” had by then overtaken this term in common usage. During the early decades of the century it was the custom to conflate the new brand of prose storytelling with the romance epics of the medieval period and the Renaissance. Most of these were in verse rather than prose but they at least offered later, often confused, commentators with some kind of precedent for the novel. This reviewer notes that Smollett dispenses with “visionary scenes and persons, the usual subjects of Romance,” by which he means that Romance – and Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* falls into this category – was licensed to experiment with the boundaries between reality and the fantastic. The reviewer, albeit somewhat belatedly compared with most of his peers, is accepting that what we now understand to be classic realism – that is, the world we live in recorded convincingly in prose – was now the *modus operandi* of the new genre. However, having apparently recognized this he is perplexed by what exactly realism is supposed to do, and compensates by treating the novel as if it belonged in the same genre as Defoe’s *A Tour of Britain*; that is, as documentary travel writing.

The review encapsulates a problem that faced critics, and readers, throughout the eighteenth century. As we have seen with Romanticism and modernism, writing that transgressed against convention could be celebrated or condemned for doing so, but what if there was no obvious precedent for a work or works to be compared with? Often we find in published responses to novels and in private correspondence expressions of enjoyment, appreciation, and quite often disgust, but in each instance the remarks will be cautiously offered, sometimes accompanied by a sense of guilt, even anger. People were clearly deeply affected by the experience of reading this new kind of literature – it would have been the equivalent of showing a film to an audience that had never before encountered cinema – but they were

often unsettled by having to deal with emotive reactions for which there were no filtering systems. No one was quite sure what the novel was and as a consequence the mechanisms that routinely enabled them to measure or rationalize their feelings about literature or any other form of art became inadequate.

Daniel Defoe is credited with laying the foundations for the English novel with his best known works, notably *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Colonel Jack* (1722), and *Moll Flanders* (1722). Newspapers were in their infancy during this period but one will search in vain through them for contemporary coverage of his fiction. It was not that his work failed to attract public attention – quite the opposite, all his fiction was immensely popular – simply that reviewers did not know how to deal with a genre with no obvious literary parentage.

When retrospective accounts of his work began to appear in the 1770s and 1780s commentators remained uncertain of how to treat it:

*Robinson Crusoe* must be allowed by the most rigid moralist, to be one of those novels, which one may read, not only with pleasure, but also with profit. It breathes throughout a spirit of piety and benevolence: it sets in a very striking light ... the importance of the mechanick arts, which they, who do not know what it is to be without them, are apt to undervalue: it fixes in the mind a lively idea of the horrors of solitude, and, consequently, of the sweets of social life, and of the blessings we derive from conversation, and mutual aid: and it shows, how, by labouring with one's own hands, one may secure independence, and open for oneself many sources of health and amusement.

(James Beattie, *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, 1783)

Ethics and morality are still regarded by some as significant elements of literature, but the number of such advocates is dwindling: 50 years ago the court case unbaning Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* effectively demolished the idea that art should encourage good behavior. Beattie, professor of moral philosophy at the University of Edinburgh and highly respected critic, is obviously dumbfounded by what he elsewhere terms the "new romance." Unlike poetry and drama the novel lacked anything resembling an abstract formal structure. Stories seemed to meander from one point to another without any obvious evidence of planning, rather like life as we know it. Indeed, the controversy that first surrounded *Robinson Crusoe* – that Defoe had plagiarized Alexander Selkirk's autobiographical account of his actual experience as a castaway – was fuelled in part by the confusion provoked by Defoe's insistence that he had invented Crusoe and his narrative.

Such things were unknown and unclassifiable so he must either be lying or copying someone else's version of the truth. Beattie, following a line taken by many of his peers who faced the same dilemma, elects to treat the novel as something close to a modern parable. He was no doubt aware that some people derived excitement and often prurient pleasure in witnessing the successes and woes of fictional characters but this would hardly qualify fiction as literary art. Hugh Blair agrees that *Robinson Crusoe* is morally edifying, yet his praise carries a hint of caution, causing him to warn the reader against becoming too easily beguiled by the story while forgetting its instructive purpose.

While it is carried on with that appearance of truth and simplicity, which takes a strong hold of the imagination of all Readers, it suggests, at the same time, very useful instruction; by showing how much the native powers of man may be exerted for surmounting the difficulties of any external situation.

*(Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, 1783)*

Critics were less sympathetic when Defoe offered his characters more license in terms of conscience, behavior, and lack of repentance. In his *Life* (1785) of the novelist, George Chalmers comments that in *Moll Flanders* "Defoe was aware, that in relating a vicious life, it was necessary to make the best use of a bad story; and he artfully endeavours, that the reader shall be more pleased with the moral than the fable ... with the end of the writer than the adventures of the person." By this he means that despite her record of crime and licentiousness Moll is lightly punished, escaping the gallows, and settles with her husband into a life of quiet contrition. In short, he gives nominal attention to the "moral" while allowing the reader, like Moll, to enjoy her risqué "fable." Chalmers is seemingly bemused by Defoe's *Life of Roxana*.

Scenes of crimes can scarcely be represented in such a manner, says Defoe, but some make a criminal use of them; but when vice is painted in its low-prized colours, it is not to make people love what from the frightfulness of the figures they ought necessarily to hate. Yet, I am not convinced, that the world has been made much wiser, or better, by the perusal of these lives: they may have diverted the lower orders, but I doubt if they have much improved them; if however they have not made them better, they have not left them worse. But they do not exhibit many scenes which are welcome to cultivated minds.

He finds it difficult to decide, from one sentence to the next, if he is dealing with a book illustrating the true nature of "vice" – and by implication

arousing repugnance for those of “cultivated minds” – or if these “scenes ... painted in ... low prized colours” are dangerous literary entertainments prized by “the lower orders.”

Confusion reigns in commentaries by Blair, Chalmers, and others because the novel, barely six decades old, had announced its presence without disclosing its purpose. Chalmers, in his prefatory remarks, classifies these novels as “fictitious biography” which, he declares, “may be more instructive than a real life.” Absurd as it might seem to us, critics and readers in the eighteenth century suffered persistently from interpretive double-vision, unsure of where to draw the line between treating the inhabitants of novels as candid representations of fellow human beings or as pure inventions. As a consequence estimations of the aesthetic and formal qualities of a work became entangled with, sometimes subsumed by, the kind of valuations that enable us to assess incidents and individuals who are part of our world. Such difficulties did not arise with poetry because the formal mechanisms of the genre – meter, rhyme, figurative usage, and so on – were recognizable to all literate persons and enabled them to distinguish between verse and every other form of language. Crucially, this benchmark further allowed for a consensus on what could be done in poetry. Ordinary language – from conversation through pamphleteering to the philosophical essay – was expected to be truthful and coherent while verse was a combination of invention and gratuitous effect. A reliable definition of what was and what was not poetry was also the foundation for evaluation. Imagine hearing a piano played very badly, or someone singing to themselves in a manner that is toe-curlingly dreadful. Even if we cannot name the concerto or the song we can sense that something is wrong. But if we have no knowledge whatsoever of musical notation how do we describe the nature of the performer’s problem? This was the dilemma faced by eighteenth century commentators on the novel. They read novels, were affected by them in different ways, but the genre – unlike poetry – lacked a reliable definition and terminology for describing how they worked and what they did.

The figure who caused the most controversy, and confusion, was Henry Fielding. *Tom Jones* prompted a long letter from “Aretine”, in effect an article addressed directly to Fielding (*Old England*, 27 May 1749). From the first part one imagines Aretine coming close to bursting a blood vessel as he attempts to channel his poorly suppressed rage into coherent sentences. One might indeed judge him faintly deranged, at least before detecting the method beneath his obsessive preoccupation with minutiae and authenticity. For example, he spends a considerable amount of time on Fielding’s

placing of the Allworthy's Gothic Seat "on the *South-East* Side of a Hill, sheltered from the *North-East* by a Grove of Oaks; and from a Lake at the foot of a Hill, issued a River that for several Miles *was seen* to meander thro' Meadows and Woods, 'till it emptied itself into *the Sea*." He accuses Fielding of a gross misrepresentation of the true topography of "the Counties of *Devon* and *Dorset*" and explains in tortuous detail how it is impossible to "reconcile this Description with Probability." One might of course attempt to steady the fuming Aretine by pointing out that Mr Allworthy and his entire estate do not exist but this would merely point up the difference between the way novels were perceived then and now, and would not necessarily reinforce the superiority of our point of view.

Aretine's case is more subtle than it first seems. His complaint against Fielding's reconfiguring of the known landscape of south-west England is a preamble to the second part of his letter where he details a comparable mismatch between the behavior of figures in the novel, and their implications for morality and social integrity, and the world beyond the covers of the book. He does not claim simply that Fielding is irresponsibly licensing bad behavior – that is, degrading principle in the same way that he modified Devon and Dorset – rather that to have so many people act in such a determinedly improper manner in an evolved, largely Christian society (a "History of Bastardism, Fornication and Adultery" as he puts it) defies credibility. It is, I think, too easy to dismiss Aretine as a delusional idealist. Many during the eighteenth century perceived the world as a formulated model. They did not blind themselves to human tendencies that failed to conform to it but they treated these as aberrations rather than, as we might, permutations on a limitless diversity of motives, acts, and consequences. In Aretine's opinion the abundance of corruption and depravity in the novel was a wilful misrepresentation of the achievements of civilized society. It was, in short, unrealistic.

Am I overindulging Aretine? A little perhaps, but we might pause before regarding ourselves as his enlightened betters. Consider Will Self's *Cock and Bull* (1992), a work consisting of two novellas. In the first, Carol, an otherwise submissive wife, grows a penis and rapes her husband, Dan. In the second, John Bull, a quintessentially male rugby player, acquires a vagina at the back of his knee and is seduced by his (male) doctor by whom he – or to be more anatomically specific, his leg – becomes pregnant. Despite the fact that what happens to these individuals seems unimaginably grotesque, they are characters portrayed as normal and believable to the point of cliché. There are enormous differences between *Tom Jones* and



*Cock and Bull*. Principally, even if we accept that the behavioral extremism of the former is, at least in Aretine's view, improbable, Self confounds accepted biological fact. But there are parallels too. Both demonstrate that fiction is, by its nature, the most realistic form of literary representation while at the same time that which is most capable of unsettling our notion of reality.

Samuel Johnson did his best to draw up regulations that might steady these conflicting properties. Fielding is not mentioned by name but it was evident to all who read the following that Johnson was dealing with the controversies caused by his novels.

Many Writers for the sake of following Nature, so mingle good and bad Qualities in their principal Personages, that they are both equally conspicuous; and as we accompany them through their Adventures with Delight, and are led by Degrees to interest ourselves in their Favour, we lose the Abhorrence of their Faults, because they do not hinder our Pleasure, or perhaps, regard them with some Kindness for being united with so much Merit. (*The Rambler*, No 4, 31 March 1750)

This ability to shift the focus between good and bad qualities is a back-handed compliment to Fielding's achievement in *Tom Jones*, but Johnson tempers praise with censure. He concedes that characters such as Jones can partly conceal their flaws by their mercurial presence, causing the reader to involuntarily suspend the caution that governs their relationships with real people. Johnson treats fiction, and Fielding's use of it in particular, as subversive. In his view its capacity to create a version of the world we live in enables us to sidestep the responsibility that the latter entails.

There have been Men indeed splendidly wicked, whose Endowments throw a Brightness on their Crimes, and whom scarce any Villainy made perfectly detestable, because they never could be wholly divested of their Excellencies; but such have been in all Ages the great Corrupters of the World, and their Resemblance ought no more to be preserved, than the Art of murdering without Pain.

Johnson goes so far as to imply that such novels have the power to override the reader's distinction between the real and the invented, particularly those which "confound the Colours of Right and Wrong, and instead of helping to settle their Boundaries, mix them with so much Art, that no common Mind is able to disunite them."

Even by our postmodern standards, this is a quite extraordinary claim: fiction, he contends, alters our preconceived opinions and discernments. It is likely that Johnson based his observation on his experience of talking to readers because if the private correspondence of the era is anything to go by the novel did indeed “confound the Colours of Right and Wrong” and blur their “Boundaries.”

It is still common, at least in informal conversation, to refer to characters from a novel in familiar terms, as if our acquaintance with them via the book is the equivalent of having met them. But in most instances we are aware that this is a capricious indulgence. The private correspondence of eighteenth century novel readers discloses that for them invented figures commanded a more enduring, almost metaphysical presence.

As to Tom Jones, I am fatigued with the name, having lately fallen into the company of several young ladies, who had each a Tom Jones in some part of the world, for so they call their favourites; (and ladies, you know, are for ever talking of their favourites). Last post I received a letter from a lady, who laments the loss of her Tom Jones; and from another, who was happy in the company of her Tom Jones. In like manner, the gentlemen and ladies (who had their Tom Jones's and their Sophias), a friend of mine told me he must shew me his Sophia, the sweetest creature in the world, and immediately produced a Dutch mastiff puppy. (Lady Dorothy Bradshaigh to Samuel Richardson, November 1749)

There is certainly a degree of self-caricature in this image of a platoon of Tom Joneses seemingly escaped from the novel but at the same Lady Bradshaigh hints that Fielding (whom Richardson detested) has hit upon a so-far untouched seam of credibility, verging on illusionism. Lady Henrietta Luxborough thinks Fielding

Produces personages but too like those one meets with in the world; and even among those people to whom he gives good characters, he shews them as in a concave glass, which discovers blemishes that would not have appeared to the common eye, and may make every modest reader fear to look in such a glass, as some do who have been beauties, and would choose to fancy themselves so still. The Beauty herself might shun it equally; for that sort of glass would not flatter, and defects would appear, as there is no perfection in us mortals. – If Mr Fielding and Mr Hogarth could abate the vanity of the world by shewing its faults so plainly, they would do more than the greatest divines have yet been capable of: But human nature will still be the same, and would,

I am afraid, furnish them, if they lived till the world ended, with such imperfect objects to represent. (Lady Henrietta Luxborough to William Shenstone, 23 March 1749)

Lady Luxborough seems both disturbed by the novel's power to draw one into a world remarkably similar to the one she inhabits, and enchanted by the experience. She indicates that fiction enables the literary writer, for the first time, to disarm the reader of their protective self-delusions on who they are or what their society is like. She celebrates that which horrified Chalmers and which Johnson censured. A vivid demonstration of her point comes in an exchange of letters between Catherine Talbot and Elizabeth Carter:

The more I read Tom Jones, the more I detest him, and admire Clarissa Harlowe – yet there are in it things that must touch and please every good heart, and probe to the quick many a bad one, and humour that it is impossible not to laugh at. (Catherine Talbot to Elizabeth Carter, 22 May 1749)

Johnson's mixed boundaries are clearly evident here, and there is something almost confessional in Talbot's manner, as though she feels at once enchanted and uneasy about finding in a novel something she might be wary of admitting to in the world. Her friend replies, not perhaps to put her at her ease but at least to explain how Fielding has held both of them in a trance.

I am sorry to find you so outrageous about poor Tom Jones; he is no doubt an imperfect, but not a detestable character, with all that honesty, goodnature, and generosity of temper. Though nobody can admire Clarissa more than I do, yet with all our partiality, I am afraid, it must be confessed, that Fielding's book is the most natural representation of what passes in the world, and of the bizarreries which arise from the mixture of good and bad, which makes up the composition of most folks. Richardson has no doubt a very good hand at painting excellence, but there is a strange awkwardness and extravagance in his vicious characters. (Elizabeth Carter to Catherine Talbot, 20 June 1749)

Richardson, she finds, is in fear of causing readers to see in disagreeable characters aspects of themselves, or worse be attracted to them. Fiction was proving itself capable of achieving something that until then was thought to define literature by its absence from it. Literature, primarily poetry, was expected to set itself at a distance both from ordinary language and from

the world in which ordinary language was predominant. The novel, in the hands of Fielding and the like, encroached upon it.

Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is today routinely cited as an act of prescient genius, being the forerunner of works by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Milan Kundera, Carlos Fuentes, and Salman Rushdie, to name but a few. It is celebrated as modernism two centuries before its time, which would cause one to expect contemporary reviewers to respond with varying degrees of utter astonishment. It divided opinion, certainly, but no more so than Fielding's more controversial pieces of a decade earlier. Owen Ruffhead complains mainly of boredom:

But your Indiscretion, good Mr Tristram, is not all we complain of in the volumes now before us. We must tax you with what you will dread above the most terrible of all imputations – nothing less than DULLNESS. Yes, indeed, Mr Tristram, you are dull, *very dull*. Your jaded Fancy seems to have been exhausted by two pigmy octavos, which scarce contained the substance of a twelve-penny pamphlet; and we now find nothing new to entertain us.

(*Monthly Review*, XXXIV, February 1761)

The anonymous reviewer of the *Critical Review*, on the other hand, is amused:

The reader will not expect that we should pretend to give a detail of a work, which seems to have been written without any plan or any other design than that of shewing the author's wit, humour, and learning, in an unconnected effusion of sentiments and remarks, thrown out indiscriminately as they rose in his imagination. Nevertheless, incoherent and digressive as it is, the book certainly abounds with pertinent observations of life and characters, humourous incidents, poignant ridicule, and marks of taste and erudition. We will venture also to say, that the characters of the father and uncle are interesting and well sustained, and that corporal Trim is an amiable picture of low life.

(*The Critical Review*, xi, April 1761)

If the plotless, digressive, sometimes fathomlessly introspective nature of this book is indeed the forerunner of experiments by Joyce and others why is it then that reviewers of the latter gasped in incomprehension and often condemned modernism as shameful disfigurement of the true principles of writing while Sterne's contemporaries felt that he was a little eccentric but not greatly unusual? The critics of the 1760s, unlike their successors in the early twentieth century, had no clear notion of what fiction was and what it

was supposed to do. As each year went by another author would place a question mark against what their immediate predecessors had contributed to this continually evolving mass of precedent.

A consensus on these matters would not be arrived upon until the early nineteenth century, when for roughly the following hundred years the prevailing convention was that while the techniques evolved in the eighteenth century – generally “realist” in nature – should be perfected, the novelist must also practice a degree of self-censorship. Our baser and certainly our more disturbing instincts and motives should be reconditioned to suit the conventions of Victorian society regarding what could be said about the human condition, despite what was known. A similar regime of filtering obtained for representations of what actually went on in the streets, living rooms, servants’ quarters, and of course the bedrooms of the nation. Realism endured not because, as in the eighteenth century, it enabled us via the novel to look again at ourselves but because it licensed a collective delusion.

As I made clear at the beginning, this account would not be comprehensive. It has, however, been my intention to show how we react to changes in literary protocol.

The most obvious conclusion one might draw from the critics and commentators covered is that evaluation is essentially a capricious and unreliable activity. But look closer and some common factors begin to emerge. The generally hostile reception that greeted the more unconventional Romantic and modernist writers evolved into accommodation and appreciation. These writers were deprecated, sometimes feared, because they transgressed the commonly agreed rules on what literature was expected to be and do. Within decades, however, the rules would be rewritten and this raises a point that I fully address in the following chapter: was this alteration of what was and what was not acceptable a recognition of something that genuinely expanded the boundaries of literary art or was it a totemic glorification of experiment for its own sake? More significantly, did the acceptance of what was first seen as discomfiting relate in any way to an improvement for the reader in what we might call, for want of a better word, their enjoyment of the novel, the play, or the poem? Pleasure is something that most of us, if we are honest, associate with our attraction to literature. In basic terms, if a book is the opposite of pleasurable we will probably not finish it and will in all likelihood guard ourselves against a future encounter with anything similar to it. Publishers, agents, booksellers, and publicity specialists base their jobs on this simple maxim but when we

come to the more abstruse environment of literary criticism and analysis the notion of “pleasure” is not only less easy to grasp, it is something that is rarely spoken of. Few, if pressed, would deny its existence but its exact nature is treated like a shameful instinct.

It is clear enough that those who disagreed vehemently on virtually all other aspects of early modernism had one thing in common. They thought that the new writers had shifted literature away from the mass market by making it more difficult to comprehend. True, its advocates regarded this as to the benefit of all concerned, even those who would find it difficult to cope with the challenge; it would stir intellectual challenge and improvement. Such elevated engagements would certainly be different from the satisfactions enjoyed by fans of Dickens— basically, the fascination of melodrama and a good story – but it might, just, be classified as a form of pleasure. But let us drop the façade. The enjoyment offered by the verse of Eliot is completely different from that gained from readings of the verse of, say, his near contemporary, Edward Thomas. Equally, the Romantics – despite their ludicrous claims to being attuned to elementary human experience – shifted poetry to a state of introverted self-consciousness that would prevail for a further century until the modernists decided to turn a middle-class ritual into something even more elitist. Perhaps they, the Romantics, did achieve something; some people obtain a form of pleasure from being part of an intellectual cadre, particularly if it involves the opportunity for spiritual enlightenment as promised by the Romantics and their successors. To complicate matters, how do we deal with Johnson and his near contemporaries? They seemed to harbor an almost puritanical fear of poetry and drama, Shakespeare in particular, which tempted the reader into the fantastic possibilities of language. Wild metaphor and the transformation of human limitations through the excesses of language (Shakespeare again) seemed for the critics of the eighteenth century almost bestial, something that catered to the demands of the dangerous populace. It was, they came close to admitting, a form of rough pleasure. Similarly, the arrival of the novel stirred in commentators all manner of confusions and fears regarding the nature of how readers would respond to this new phenomenon. At the heart of the debate was the question of whether the reader thought they were witnessing a fictional version of their world, a replica of it, or some weird amalgam of the two. Throughout, there was a conflict between the attraction of suspending disbelief and an anxiety regarding the results, in particular the temptation to forget the moral obligations of life beyond the book.

It would be wrong to draw easy conclusions from all of this but at the same time one cannot help noticing that there is often a causal relationship between those moments when literary writers attempted to shrug off the ongoing conventions of their genre and the appeal of the new types of writing to what we have come to refer to as the general reader: in short, the intellectual establishment made room for the avant garde while the ordinary consumer tended to avoid it.

The novel is a most challenging phenomenon in that before the end of the eighteenth century there was no genuine consensus on what it was and what it might do: change is difficult to conceive of when we are not certain of what is being altered. Nonetheless, the European novel evolved into the prevailing though by no means unswerving ritual of classic realism in the nineteenth century, a monolith challenged by the reflective self-examinations of modernism. Here we come upon a point that propels us into the next chapter. Certainly, we treat the likes of Joyce and Woolf as classics but who “reads” them in the sense that their mannerisms have become a routine feature of what we expect of in fiction? Alternately, are they secretly classified as artefacts, treated as a dead language? This question is singularly pertinent to fiction but it raises another which forces us to address the progress of literature itself. Is experiment something we can perennially treat as the attainment of aesthetic potential? Or will it at some point draw literary history to close and cause us to think again about the benefits of innovation? With these questions in mind we should now turn our attention to modernism.