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Pleasure

Have we neglected it?

Fiction for pleasure

This evening I am going to see Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*. All day long I feel perceptibly cheerful. There will be good jokes, clever word play, the interaction of past and present, and a satirical portrait of a literary critic for good measure. My comprehension will be stretched to breaking point by the effort to grasp the reasons why time runs forwards but not backwards. It won't entirely end well. Knowing all this, I look forward to the moment, now and always thrilling, when the house darkens and the stage lights up. I anticipate *pleasure*.

To judge from the packed auditorium that night, I was not alone in my expectations. And it's not just *Arcadia*. Drama plays to full houses in London, New York, Paris, Tokyo, and Beijing, as well as any number of other towns and cities. All over the world people choose to watch stories performed on stage, at the cinema, or on television. We seem to like fiction on the page as well. In a study conducted in the UK in 2003, over half the sample of 6,000 people reported that they read fiction for pleasure. Only slightly fewer had bought themselves a novel, play, or poetry in the previous year. Nearly 50 per cent of the population makes use of libraries. In 2007 British publishers sold 162 million works of fiction.¹ British theatre was largely unaffected by the recession of 2008–9, while book sales declined by a smaller percentage

than other retail goods. Outside English departments, no one *has* to read novels – but they evidently do, and some go on to form book clubs and reading groups to discuss them. Far from giving way to the screen, as so widely predicted, the written word has held its own to the point where specially designed screens now mimic the book.

How should we account for the delight we evidently derive from the depiction of invented experiences, imagined events, and counterfactual worlds? And why has criticism so little to say about the nature of this enjoyment? To be sure, book reviewers in the press commonly assess the pleasure quotient of the work in hand, but generally without any sense of obligation to analyse it. Indeed, the Sunday papers tend to reiterate a naive set of more or less tautological phrases to indicate approval: ‘a good read’, ‘a page-turner’, or, when it comes to literary novels, ‘beautifully written’. Academic critics, on the other hand, prefer to evade the issue altogether. On the rare occasions when the question is posed, most of us shy away like wild things startled by a human intruder: our work is made of sterner stuff, we protest.

It is not as if the pleasure is open to serious doubt. All known human societies have stories and songs, even if the narratives found in the rain forest no more conform to the patterns familiar in Western fiction than the music observes classical Western harmonies. Ancient epic connects narrative with celebration: the warriors of *Beowulf* relish tales of heroism told by night in the mead hall. Not that the content is necessarily triumphal. At the banquet she gives for him, Virgil’s Dido begs Aeneas to recount the sad story of the wooden horse and Troy’s fall. This same tale, narrated from the Greek point of view by a skilled minstrel, once reduced Homer’s Odysseus to tears at a Phaeacian dinner. Women have for centuries relieved the tedium of repetitive household tasks by spinning yarns that absorb the attention of their listeners: it is while they make cloth that Ovid’s daughters of Minyas tell some of the most familiar stories in the *Metamorphoses*. Chaucer’s Host takes it for granted that the pilgrims will want to shorten their journey to Canterbury with tales; many of us today would hesitate to set out on a long journey without packing a novel.

Harry Bailey knows his pilgrims are expecting ‘to talen and to pleye’.² Telling stories, in other words, is linked with recreation. When Shakespeare’s Duke Theseus looks for a way of passing the evening on his wedding

night, he asks for 'some delight' to while away the lazy time: 'What revels are in hand? Is there no play / To ease the anguish of a torturing hour?'³ His request comes as no surprise to anyone in the audience, of course: the working men of Athens have been rehearsing for exactly this purpose. So common was the association between narrative enacted and festivity that many Shakespeareans have believed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* itself was composed for a similar occasion, probably an aristocratic wedding. The etymology of the English word *play*, paralleled in German (though not in French), links drama with amusement, relaxation, the temporary suspension of duty and responsibility.

Is it because the pleasure of fiction is too frivolous, then, to merit serious attention that criticism backs away from it? If the joys of reading corresponded only to joy narrated, or the depiction of delight, the answer might be yes. In such circumstances an interest in pleasure would confine us to romantic comedy and, in my case, detective stories. Intrigue and misunderstanding offer excellent entertainment from a knowing distance; happy endings fulfil elementary wishes; murder mysteries solved promise that justice can be had. But, as the durability of the Troy story shows, enjoyment does not in practice depend on a good outcome. Moreover, narrative has proved its fitness to tackle more elevated issues. While epic defined heroic virtue, Greek and Roman myths gave bodily form to the unaccountable in human life – love, wisdom, art. Fiction is able to make the inchoate take shape: desire finds definition in love stories, sad as well as happy; the unknowable exerts a pressure on the everyday in tales of the uncanny. Fictional form invests serious matter with pleasure: Plato dramatized philosophy in dialogues; Jesus taught ethics by recounting parables. The Judeo-Christian Bible is one long and winding story; Islam also has its narratives of heroic struggle and martyrdom. Evidently, delight need not depend on escape into a carefree world, or the promise of a satisfying conclusion.

The case of tragedy

On the contrary, the most distressing events seem to give intense pleasure in tragedy. How odd that people should be glad to watch Oedipus remorselessly insist on his undoing, Lear misjudge others to the point of

madness, or Hedda Gabler pursue a deliberate path to destruction. In the case of tragedy, then, the question of pleasure surfaces after all, but in the form of a puzzle. The sheer unexpectedness of such a widespread inclination is so striking that a number of writers have been provoked to consider why people enjoy the dramatic representation of suffering, reflecting on the paradox from a range of perspectives. If spectators are not all closet sadists masquerading as lovers of theatre, what can it be that draws us to plays we know in advance will dramatize disaster?

Curiously, while it is enjoyment that provokes the question, pleasure itself is commonly sidestepped in the answers, replaced with something rather different. Aristotle maintained that the appeal of tragedy resided in pity and fear depicted in order to achieve *catharsis*.⁴ His term has generated considerable discussion, but the consensus is that it means purgation, by analogy with the physiological process of excretion. Tragedy, in Aristotle's view, at once portrays and excites emotion in order to expel it, as if to rid the community or the individual of excess passion, and evidently such relief does them good. The implication must be that, if strong feelings are themselves enjoyable, it's even better when they stop. Aristotle's account offers the dramatists a defence against Plato's plan to exclude writers of fiction from his ideal Republic, allowing them a worthy purpose in the commonwealth after all, but he has little to say about what happens to the audience in the theatre. His emphasis is on the benefits experienced once the play is over.

Two thousand years later the pleasure of tragedy remained a riddle. Friedrich Schiller, for instance, shares the view that emotion is delightful in itself. Indeed, he declares, the more painful the feeling, the more captivating the experience, even if the distress is one's own. But this interesting possibility is not left to stand alone. Surely in these cases it cannot be the sheer agitation that gives pleasure, Schiller reflects; instead, it must be the freedom to exercise a rational control over its intensity. Pleasure is, in Schiller's view, the supreme purpose of art, and tragedy fulfils that purpose by presenting moving events which prompt the mind to assert the independence of a 'sublime spiritual disposition'.⁵

Schiller was among the first to appropriate a Kantian distinction for criticism. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* Immanuel Kant

explicitly engages with the question of pleasure, dividing his attention to begin with between the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful, he concludes, is inviting, playful, vital, while the feeling of the sublime, by contrast, is at first only a 'negative pleasure'. The sublime involves an initial sense of inadequacy, as the mind acknowledges its own limitation in the face of unlimited grandeur, until reason steps in to permit an apprehension of the infinite. Sublimity is not to be located in the object itself but in the mind excited by the object to activity on its own account.⁶ When he brings the Kantian sublime to bear on drama, Schiller too locates the pleasure of tragedy beyond the negative experience of the work itself, in the playgoer's mastery of the tragic occurrences depicted on the stage. Attention shifts from the relationship between the performance and the audience to an action exerted on this exchange by the spectator alone. Pleasure is redefined as the assertion of mental sovereignty over both drama and self, and it entails the deliberate establishment of a distance from the immediate response to the theatrical event.

More than a century later, and starting from a very different theoretical base, Sigmund Freud would also locate his explanation of the predilection for tragedy just outside the experience. Noting the continuity between children's play, itself by no means always joyful, and grown-up plays at the theatre, he comments that tragic events may present the opportunity to recollect and work over in the mind what is in itself painful in the first instance. Tragedy can thus yield the pleasure of reflection after the event as its 'final outcome'.⁷

Here the distance between performance and the so-called pleasure is still more readily apparent: once again, enjoyment is equated with mastery and it comes later, when the play is over. And in this respect, if in no other, when A. D. Nuttall devotes a short book to the question *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?*, he turns out to agree with Freud. 'In the tragic theatre suffering and death are perceived as matter for grief and fear, *after which* it seems that grief and fear become in turn matter for enjoyment.'⁸ Nuttall's case is that we experience tragedy as practice for disaster, a hypothetical rehearsal for our own death. Theatrical sufferings are not real but, in entering into them sympathetically, we reach a true knowledge of the worst that may come. The satisfaction resides in that understanding. Once again the enjoyment

is located outside the experience of the play itself, and here too it consists in something more high-minded than pleasure as we normally conceive it.

In an ultimate example of pleasure moralized, Roger Scruton calls his response to tragedy *awe*, and finds this feeling redemptive. 'The tragic hero is both self-sacrificed and a sacrificial victim' and 'when sacrifice is present and respected, life redeems itself'.⁹ Here pleasure is renamed as reverence and tragedy leads to an analogue of religious experience. In every instance, it seems, the surprising fact that tragedy pleases is interpreted in terms that replace delight with another, more solemn, state of mind, a condition we might identify as akin to pleasure, perhaps, but not the thing itself.

There is palpably something in each of these arguments – and most, to my mind, in Nuttall's. But, in the end, with the possible exception of Scruton's, which rewrites drama as divinity, each succeeding explanation bypasses what takes place in the theatre in favour of the playgoer's presumed intellectual processes after the event, a transformation of enjoyment into earnestness that surely fails to do justice to whatever it is that impels us to watch tragedies. Do people genuinely see *Antigone* to feel purged, or *Othello* to master the emotion it excites? Does *Hamlet* really entice us as a rehearsal for death, or *Miss Julie* with a promise of redemption? In my view, the pleasure is more immediate than any of these accounts allow, more a concomitant of the performance than its after-effect. Perhaps that is why the appeal of tragedy is hard to discuss without betraying it: analysis by definition comes later. But we impoverish criticism, nonetheless, when we fail to reflect on the nature of the power that is exerted in the moment when we hear and see them by words and images combined as stories.

The English curriculum

And yet we do all too commonly fail – and not only in the extreme case of tragedy. When most English departments give an account of their work, the pleasure that might be thought to belong to the students' prime activity turns out to be too incidental a matter to elicit

any formal attention whatever. In 2007 the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK revised its benchmark statement for English, defining the nationwide framework for first degrees in the discipline. This document, drawn up by academics after wide consultation with the subject community, is designed to appease a surveillance culture bent on transparency. In response to this pressure, it wisely discloses as little as possible, for fear of giving offence to potential students, their parents, employers, taxpayers, the government, or any other conceivable source of support or funding. Even so, it cannot fail to include some pointers to the range and scope of the prevailing practices of English departments. The 'subject knowledge' inculcated there apparently includes a familiarity with authors, texts ancient and modern, and global literatures in the English language, as well as a grasp of genre, historical context, critical traditions, and critical vocabulary. There is not, as far as I can see, one word in the entire document about accounting for or analysing the pleasure that sustains reading and playgoing.

I am not, of course, proposing that English departments should be responsible for producing a comprehensive theory of pleasure. We can leave that to the philosophers. Nor is it quite a question of *why* fiction pleases: that is one for the psychologists. Still less is it a matter of prescribing enjoyment ('I like the theatre, so you should too'): not everyone has to enjoy fiction; some people would rather watch football or go rock-climbing. Instead, the issue for criticism is a textual one: what feature or features of a form of telling that initially caught the attention of some part of the public on the basis that it pleased them is responsible for the pleasure it gave and perhaps continues to give?

Cries of joy

Pleasure does not always go entirely unnoticed, of course: many critics 'love literature', especially those who see emotion as a weapon in their struggle against theory. The trouble with unreflecting rapture is that it enlightens no one who doesn't already share it.

A year or two ago I had a letter from a schoolteacher reproaching me for the damage we theorists had done to the study of English.

It was not the first such letter I had received, but it was more thoughtful and more fluent than many. Its author, he told me, had grown up with the ideological criticism of the 1980s but had undergone a transforming experience when he went on to read Harold Bloom's best-selling book, *The Western Canon*. This work had made him recognize the joylessness of much contemporary critical writing, by contrast with Bloom's own obvious pleasure in reading, and my correspondent quoted some of the vocabulary in which this pleasure is inscribed. Bloom's terms of endorsement are resolutely derived from the Romantic movement. He credits his favoured authors with 'cognitive acuity, linguistic energy, and power of invention'; they are sometimes 'vital' and regularly 'sublime'. He applauds 'exuberance', 'originality', and 'universality'.¹⁰

In other words, Bloom is excited by lively ideas and the fresh, vigorous deployment of words, especially when these virtues can be shown to have widespread appeal. It's a start, certainly, but not quite what I have in mind in proposing the analysis of pleasure. The problem with Bloom's vocabulary is that it does little more than *register* an enjoyment it does not illuminate further. Bloom's asseverations of delight are a step in the right direction, perhaps, even if they are betrayed by the banality of most of his readings, but they don't do much more than parade his own pleasure in reading. And as Malcolm Bowie puts it, 'Critics don't get far if they simply say "look at me, I'm enjoying"'.¹¹ A criticism that marvels at selected works, while assuming that we all know cognitive acuity, not to mention universality, when we see it, does very little to advance the study of pleasure in a way that might be helpful to other critics.

Indeed, Bloom himself insists that the qualities he so approves cannot and should not be further defined: 'Pragmatically, aesthetic value can be recognized or experienced, but it cannot be conveyed to those who are incapable of grasping its sensations and perceptions.'¹² Taken literally, this sentence is no more than a tautology: nothing can be conveyed to those who are incapable of grasping it. But Bloom's point is that, while the pleasures of canonized fiction (he calls it literature, of course) are in some exalted sense unutterable, they are immediately available, nonetheless, to the naturally discerning (as, we must suppose, he is).

No wonder the book was greeted with such enthusiastic reviews in its time. How gratifying, by sharing Bloom's widely consensual preferences, to find oneself capable of discrimination, possessed by nature of good taste, among the few who can grasp the vital and sublime sensations and perceptions conveyed by the great canonical works of Western literature. But in English departments we have been here before, most notably in the post-war epoch of F. R. Leavis, and I can vouch for the fact that, when institutionalized, the model generates at least as much pain as joy. Reading soon turns into a process of being called to account. Am I, the reader is impelled to ask, good enough to appreciate the works others, the previous generation, have denominated as pleasurable? And if not, what is wrong with me? Bad faith often follows: I *do* like the selected works *really*, even though I mistakenly experience reading them as a chore, and this shows how discerning I am; now let me teach you to like them too (even though in principle such appreciation cannot be conveyed).

'Aesthetic' pleasure

In the sentence in question Bloom substitutes 'aesthetic value' for 'pleasure' as if they were the same thing, and for many they are. Once *pleasure* is coupled with *aesthetic*, we find ourselves, willy nilly, in a world of value judgements. The common and apparently unthinking slide from *pleasure* to *aesthetic pleasure* is no help with the project I believe we should undertake, because it begins by differentiating the right kind of pleasure from the wrong.

Sadly, the handful of critics who have recently set out to analyse the pleasures of reading seem to find themselves reproducing the vocabulary of aesthetics, which, true to its Kantian origin, concerns *judgements of taste*. From that perspective, criticism deals with works of *art*, perceived as distinct from other products in the same mode that do not meet this high standard.¹³ In *The Scandal of Pleasure*, for instance, Wendy Steiner defends enjoyment, but with the proviso that this is always linked to preference. Her book, she declares, is 'an attempt to explain what it means to invest art with value and derive pleasure

from it'.¹⁴ In this otherwise excellent account of the censorship debates of the 1990s, the discovery of value comes first and vindicates the pleasure. I yield to none in my admiration for the reading skills of Marjorie Perloff, but her defence of pleasure against ideological reading also depends on judgements of value: 'critics seem to have forgotten what brought them to *Ulysses* or *Heart of Darkness* in the first place – namely, the uniqueness of these novels as works of art'.¹⁵

I suppose all texts are unique in a sense: certainly, they are all different. But *uniqueness* coupled with *art* generally indicates that ranking is in progress. And, sure enough, Perloff immediately goes on to denigrate cultural studies as the engagement with mass pleasures, which, she complains, is driving unique works of art off the syllabus. Meanwhile, Andrew Bowie, Professor of German, goes so far as to place judgement at the heart of a curriculum that should centre on 'the best', the 'significant' products of Western culture. And we see what this implies as he goes on to press for an aesthetic model that will 'reveal the deficiencies of inferior cultural production'. Like Bloom, he also insists that aesthetic appreciation cannot be theorized or explained. Evidently, it belongs to the realm of the irrational.¹⁶

It goes without saying that we all have tastes. In the last analysis, I might prefer to read Henry James rather than a supermarket romance. I have, however, discovered culturally illuminating qualities in the second category without giving up on the first.¹⁷ If criticism is to help us understand our culture, it makes no sense to begin by dividing the terrain of fiction in two. But defenders of aesthetic value thrive on moral panic. If we don't make judgements of quality criticism's central task, they insist, masterpieces will be neglected and soap opera will be thought as good as Sophocles.¹⁸ It is at least arguable, on the other hand, that if we stop privileging judgements of taste, the phrase 'as good as' will cease to frighten us. I have never heard anyone seriously claim that cornflakes packets are as good as *King Lear*. Instead, what they do say, perfectly reasonably, is that we can tell a great deal about contemporary culture from close attention to its sales material, including its packaging.

As for taste, very little light is usually shed on individual works by debates about their merits. What objection can there be to a preference for *Arcadia* over *Krapp's Last Tape*, or vice versa, come to that?

I am quite happy to think that some people enjoy Ian McEwan more than I do. Conversely, I confess that I long to share my pleasures, converting my friends to a taste for Brecht. These issues are surely perfectly admissible as topics for dinner-table discussion, even when they lead to an agreement to differ. You like *Phèdre*, I like *Phaedra*, let's call the whole thing off. But why we ought to institutionalize our preferences is less clear, not least since the reasons for them apparently remain ineffable.

When it comes to the curriculum, I should be more convinced by an argument that higher education would do well to introduce students to a range of works they might not otherwise come across than one based on the tastes of the professoriate. However, this plan to concentrate on what the young haven't already encountered might leave out Shakespeare. (It is quite hard for anyone brought up in the English-speaking West not to come across Shakespeare.) And whether or not Shakespeare is what the promoters of aesthetic value call significant and the best, his plays form nearly as substantial a component of the weave of subsequent fiction in English as the Bible. To understand how writing works, we are better placed if we have a more intellectual engagement with each than everyday life encourages. I should like to see them both on offer as matter for analysis – though not as tests of discernment.

In any case, the argument from aesthetics is no use in the quest for an account of the pleasures of fiction because it begins from the premise that, since some fiction counts as art, what doesn't is deficient and therefore does not give pleasure, or not, at least, the correct sort of pleasure, *aesthetic* pleasure. That argument completes a circle. The issue I see as neglected is not why some texts give a higher form of pleasure than others: this has had a good run for its money without, in my view, advancing knowledge in a particularly useful direction. To avoid repeating it, I shall do my best to avoid the evaluative term *literature*, not because criticism should be value-free (how could it?), nor because we ought to become indiscriminate (how could we?), but because the relative worth of this text as opposed to that cannot be the best place to start. The question we have not asked, or not pursued with sufficient vigour, is what draws us to fictionality in the first place – why it is, for instance, that children chant playground rhymes or look forward to bedtime

stories. From an early age many people have strong preferences, but the young generally feel no compulsion to dignify the jingles and tales they like best with 'aesthetic value'.

The Pleasure of the Text

The French, who are conventionally less inhibited than Anglo-Saxons, have tackled the question of pleasure directly, and most notably in Roland Barthes's book *The Pleasure of the Text*. At first glance, this looks more like it. Barthes loves reading; in fact, he finds a 'profound hedonism' in all culture. At the same time, he draws attention to the repression of such hedonism by nearly every form of philosophical analysis. 'Pleasure is continually disappointed, reduced, deflated, in favour of strong, noble values: Truth, Death, Progress, Struggle'¹⁹ Yes, indeed.

This book, a strange assortment of observations and fragments, is too anarchic to be credited with a single, clear-cut hypothesis, but at least one thread is perceptible at intervals throughout. This is a distinction between two kinds of pleasure: on the one hand, *plaisir* (pleasure) and, on the other, *jouissance*, or what the translator calls 'bliss'. In its clearest formulation, this difference is represented as a binary opposition:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts ... unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.²⁰

In this respect *The Pleasure of the Text* can be seen as developing the distinction proposed in the same author's *S/Z*, published in Paris five years earlier, between the conventional, readable work and the plural, writable one.²¹ Since Barthes feels the tradition he inherits does not take pleasure seriously, he silently turns to one of the few philosophers who does and his analysis takes us back once again to Kant.

In the difference between *plaisir* and *jouissance* Barthes rewrites the distinction between the positive delight of the beautiful, which contents and fills, and the experience of the sublime, which begins in negativity, unsettles, and leads to crisis.

The text of *plaisir* is one to curl up with; it confirms and reassures. The text of *jouissance* is avant-garde; it challenges complacency, repudiates good form; it shocks, disturbs, and in the process thrills. True to Kant, Barthes does not denigrate the comfortable, euphoric text. On the contrary, he palpably loves it. His book constantly reverts to what is enjoyable in Stendhal, Balzac, Proust. It was a text of *plaisir*, according to his own later classification, that Barthes chose to analyse in minute detail, line by line, in *S/Z*.

Even so, the vocabulary of his distinction makes it very clear which mode carries greater weight. True again to Kant, Barthes reproduces in his account of *jouissance* the philosopher's association of gravity with the sublime. While the beautiful is recreative, the emotion aroused by the sublime encounter, Kant notes, seems 'not play but something serious in the activity of the imagination'.²² In Barthes's analysis, the text of *jouissance* that breaks with culture and unsettles the prevailing values defines itself by a heroic resistance to orthodoxy. Bisecting the field of fiction in this way, Barthes comes close, however inadvertently, to reinstating the strong, noble values he set out to challenge in the name of pleasure itself.

It is easy to see why the sublime has come to have a higher standing in criticism than the beautiful: while the beautiful diverts and charms, the sublime allows for the high seriousness conventional criticism requires of art. For this reason, I am reluctant to take *The Pleasure of the Text* as the basis for reflection on the delights of fiction. In its modern appropriations the Kantian division, which separates seriousness from play, implies that to be worthy of attention reading has to be hard. And the consequence of *that*, in turn, might easily be to relegate or trivialize the enjoyment derived from the texts that are most widely read. Once again, as a starting point, at least, for the consideration of pleasure, we should do better to find a framework for discussion that does not encourage us to invest it in one kind of writing at the expense of another.

Modernist unpleasure

If in Kant's own time the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime conforms broadly to the difference between classical and Romantic values respectively, Barthes rewrites the opposition in order to distinguish between realism and high modernism, juxtaposing the nineteenth-century writers with his contemporaries, Philippe Sollers, Severo Sarduy, Alain Robbe-Grillet. To modernism, the narrative coherence of classic fiction seemed to simplify a complex world and the justice of its resolved endings represented a lie. We can debate the moment when this scepticism first set in (was it with Dostoevsky, Zola?) but disillusionment led to a mode of writing that would in due course refuse conventional subject matter, as well as narrative and syntactic structures, and with them every aspiration to the beautiful. Rejecting orthodoxy in all its incarnations, art opted for the sublime, and in its most negative aspect chose an aesthetic of ugliness and the unpleasing.

In 1963 Lionel Trilling drew attention to these values, more current then than they are now. The ideal of pleasure, he believed, had exhausted itself; rampant consumerism promised altogether too much that was comfortable; people were sated and disappointed with 'specious goods' and the charm of the beautiful. Modern art therefore pressed towards discomfiture and bafflement: it distinguished itself by the misery it conveyed. We might be forgiven for finding our friend Kant here all over again, but Trilling himself appealed to psychoanalysis: 'There is no psychic fact more available to our modern comprehension than that there are human impulses which, in one degree or another, and sometimes in the very highest degree, repudiate pleasure and seek gratification in – to use Freud's word – unpleasure.'²³

Trilling aligned modernist unpleasure with the death drive. Whether or not this is the best way of explaining it, he surely judges astutely when he observes that the motive here is an alternative form of 'gratification'. In other words, unpleasure paradoxically offers its own forms of enjoyment. If, as the case of tragedy indicates, distressing content does not obviate pleasure, a zest for the representation of wretchedness should not be confused with wretchedness itself. Indeed, the signifier may offer its own diversions. James Joyce made

witty capital out of the unsavoury; *Waiting for Godot* began to delight audiences as soon as they stopped being frightened of it. Raw topics, depressing themes, and the rejection of conventional patterns of narrative do not necessarily result in misery for readers or spectators.

Enjoyment takes many different forms, including, perhaps, a pleasure in unpleasure, and the last thing I want to do is efface those differences. But if we are to go back to first principles, we shall do better not to begin from yet another binary opposition between kinds of pleasure, dismissing one as consumerist, while elevating another as art.

Gaiety

So far, then, this excursion into existing critical discussions of pleasure has proved disappointing. The appeal of fiction is variously explained, but generally in terms that privilege some quite other state of mind: mastery, reflectiveness, redemption, even unpleasure. These may well be good things, but they none of them resonate with my expectations of *Arcadia* – or, come to that, of *Middlemarch* or *The Waste Land*.

In the chapters that follow, I shall look first at two of the surrogate tastes currently indulged in English departments: the satisfaction of taking the moral high ground in homiletic reading, and the substitution of narrative for interpretation in biography. After that, I mean to consider the reduction of pleasure to reassurance in the critical elevation of realism at the expense of other genres, before going on to assess the place of fiction in culture and in history, with a view to suggesting that we could be more adventurous than we are. Finally, in chapter 7, I undertake to offer some speculations, however tentative, on how we might begin to approach an understanding of the pleasures of fiction. The book is not a recipe for hedonism, although I'd like readers to have a good time. Instead, it's a proposal to get serious about pleasure. And if that sounds like an oxymoron, the fact only goes to show how uncomfortable the term still makes a society that inherits an ethic of hard work and self-denial.

Meanwhile, to keep the eventual project before us, let some of the poets testify. In 'Lapis Lazuli', written in 1938, W. B. Yeats reflects on

the role of the poet in a society threatened with extinction by the coming war. Shouldn't verse give up on pleasure to echo the prevailing dread? An antique sculpture, however, which has somehow survived the civilization that made it, shows three Chinese men climbing a slope. The stone is aged, discoloured, cracked, and dented. In the poet's imagination the old men go on to reach a little halfway house:

There, on the mountain and the sky,
On all the tragic scene they stare.
One asks for mournful melodies;
Accomplished fingers begin to play.
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.

The point here is not the facile proposition that war will pass, or is put into temporal perspective by the immortality of art. On the contrary, the poem gives both war and loss their full tragic weight. Against the odds, however, a single carving lives on to sustain the knowledge that even in desolation music, doleful in proper recognition of the moment of its making, nonetheless generates gaiety. The fable defends poetry's traditional role of giving pleasure.²⁴

And criticism? Surely that, at least, is an unremittingly serious business, ready to concede the pleasures of fiction, perhaps, but only in a proper spirit of earnestness? Not necessarily. Here is Ezra Pound's view, now transcribed in bold above my desk:

Gloom and solemnity are entirely out of place in even the most rigorous study of an art originally intended to make glad the heart of man.

Gravity, a mysterious carriage of the body to conceal the defects of the mind. (LAURENCE STERNE)²⁵

Surely both Yeats and Pound point to something we have too readily allowed ourselves to forget.

In *The Gay Science* Friedrich Nietzsche, dedicated apologist for pleasure, considers the unlikely possibility that poetry, this wildly beautiful, irrational thing, should be considered useful. But utility was its first purpose, he unexpectedly decides: poetry was once designed

to appeal to the gods, to charm them into yielding to human prayers. Eloquence was thought able to placate by its own magic the fiercest of supernatural forces, impelling them to listen and obey. Work songs, Nietzsche goes on, bewitched resistant demons, rendered them compliant; incantations summoned spirits from another world.²⁶

Are the Psalms of David, perhaps, an attempt to appease a wrathful deity with verse? Church leaders who, in the name of transparency, modernize the rhythms of Cranmer's prayer book and the King James Bible evidently don't realize what riches they possess. Moreover, what enchants divinity may be just as compulsive in human life. Chaucer, or his fictional surrogate in *The Legend of Good Women*, loves books so much that virtually no other source of enjoyment can drag him away from them, unless perhaps holidays and walking in May. Sir Philip Sidney, meanwhile, judges that a good story will prevail over other pleasures, keeping the young from their games and old people from the fireside.²⁷

Deep down, most critics probably share his assessment: the capacity of verbal artefacts in every form to solicit and secure the most rapt attention has never been seriously disputed. Indeed, works of fiction are available for us to read at all only on the grounds that they once gave pleasure to someone – a populace, an aristocratic audience, a monarch, or simply a single editor. That, amid a diversity of critical values and practices, is one widely shared conviction. Surely, then, we are just pottering about on the seashore of criticism if we don't think about why.