

Literary Communication as Dialogue

Responsibilities and pleasures
in post-postmodern times
Selected papers 2003-2020

Roger D. Sell

14

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Literary Communication as Dialogue

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Volume 14

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Series editor's preface

The *Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes* (FILLM) is UNESCO's ceiling organization for scholarship in the field of languages and literatures. The Federation's main aim is to encourage linguists and literary scholars from all over the world to engage in dialogue.

During the twentieth century, linguistic and literary studies became steadily more professional and specialized, a development which significantly raised the overall standard of research, but which also tended to divide scholars into many separate and often smallish groupings between which communication was rather sporadic. Over the years this became something of a handicap. New ideas and findings were often slow to cross-fertilize.

Given the rapidly globalizing world of the early twenty-first century, the relative lack of contact between scholars in different subject-areas became a more glaring anomaly than ever. Against this background FILLM decided to set up its own book series, in the hope of fostering a truly international community of scholars within which a rich diversity of interests would be upheld by a common sense of human relevance.

Books appearing under the label of *FILLM Studies* deal with languages and literatures world-wide, and are written in an English that will be immediately understandable and attractive to any likely reader. Every book presents original findings – including new theoretical, methodological and pedagogical developments – which will be of prime interest to those who are experts in its particular field of discussion, but also seeks to engage readers whose concerns have hitherto lain elsewhere.

Roger D. Sell

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Introduction

1.

At the beginning of the third millennium, literature is alive and well. World-wide, there are numerous texts, not only new texts, but also older, and indeed some ancient texts, to which both individuals and whole communities still accord the high status traditionally denoted by “literature” as a label.

Even so, that label is no longer such a strong or frequently used marker as it used to be. Whereas, during the Victorian and Modernist periods, literary texts were often said to create a special aesthetic heterocosm, nowadays the borderline between literary texts and other kinds of writing is less distinct, as is also the borderline between high-brow and low-brow more generally. Already by the last decades of the twentieth century, several genres of writing which fifty or a hundred years earlier had been regarded as “popular” were coming to be seen as channels for “serious” undertakings.¹

The weakening of conventional literary expectations has now reached the point at which the only surefire way actually to define literature is as the body of texts which, in ordinary conversation, are *referred to* as literature – the texts which, in practice, are awarded the literary label. As definitions go, this could not be more circular or nominalistic. But it does have its usefulness, not only in giving at least some idea of what is under discussion, but also in allowing discussion to continue without getting bogged down in a misleading purism of endless niceties, exclusions, and exceptions. On the contrary, a circular and nominalistic definition of literature frankly accepts that the realm of letters is at last recovering something of its pre-nineteenth-century breadth. Literature is no longer the domain of just certain types of verse, certain types of novel, certain types of stage-play.

1. Cf. Roger D. Sell, “*Watership Down* and the rehabilitation of pleasure,” *Neophilologische Mitteilungen* 1 82 (1981) 28–35 (rep. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 357, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Farmington Hills: Gale, 2014), 5–10), and *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000), 253–279. See also Karen Ferreira-Meyers, “From minor genre towards major genre: Crime fiction and autofiction,” in *Major versus minor? Languages and literatures in a globalized world*, eds. Theo D’haen, Iannis Goerlandt, and Roger D. Sell (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2015), 171–186.

Correspondingly, literature now attracts widely varying kinds of enquiry, some of which, for many nineteenth- and twentieth century commentators, would not have seemed matters of literary interest at all. When a literary text comes under the scrutiny of deep-locational critics, for instance, it is taken to embody the history of place. Exactly as their banner suggests, these critics' overall concern is with localities, and not only localities at their most physical, but also localities as experienced, as remembered, as constructed, as imagined, and as valued, both emotionally and politically.² The non-aesthetic "worlds" for which literature is nowadays investigated are in fact decidedly discursive, involving abstractions, conceptualizations, ideology, culture. Not least, they can enter into dialogue with worlds arising from music, from dance, from visual representations, but perhaps above all from other uses of language.³

When various worlds important to human beings begin to interact like this, so-called literary texts can be just one medium among others. But to point this out is not to detract from literature's potential. Especially the literature of our own time, though it has much to say "about" present-day media culture, can also, through its own handling of technological resources, of human subjectivity, and of new aesthetic possibilities, significantly shape that very same culture.⁴ If, on the one hand, present-day literary texts are often adaptations or imitations of works produced in film, computer games, and many other forms of cultural production, then, on the other hand, new works produced in film, computer games, and many other forms of cultural production are often adaptations or imitations of literary texts.⁵

In much of my own work over the past forty years or so I, too, have been tracing relationships between so-called literary texts and something which many earlier aestheticians and critics saw as fundamentally different from literature: human communication in general. Nor have I been alone in this. To take one recent example, Elina Siltanen discusses the poetry of the American experimentalists John Ashbery, Lyn Hejinian, and Ron Silliman as a form of communication that is "reciprocal". Her point is that these poets invite readers to make their own sense of countless small details of expression, observation, thought, and narrative which at

2. Jason Finch, *Deep locational criticism: Imaginative place in literary research and teaching* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2016).

3. Tom Clark, Emily Finlay, and Philippa Kelly (eds), *Worldmaking: Literature, language, culture* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2017).

4. Sarah J. Paulson and Anders Skare Malvik (eds), *Literature in contemporary media culture: Technology – subjectivity – aesthetics* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2016).

5. See Casie Hermansson and Janet Zepernick (eds), *Where is adaptation? Mapping cultures, texts, and contexts* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2018), and Sylvie André, "World literature / World culture: TV series and video games," in *Major versus minor?* eds D'haen et al., 187–204.

first sight fail to hang together even from one line to the next. Here, says Siltanen, are three writers who, dissatisfied with older notions of poets as superior beings, tease out the idiomatic serendipities of their own texts in virtual collaboration with readers they regard as human equals and fellow-users of present-day American English.⁶ What I find especially heartening and perceptive here is that, even though the three experimentalists are often said to be “difficult”, Siltanen shows them as favouring relationships with their readers that are non-hierarchical, warmly inviting, and pleasurable. In a sense that I shall later explain, this makes her own critical project typically post-postmodern.

2.

In 2019 some of my own earlier attempts to think about literature within a communicational perspective were brought together in *A humanizing literary pragmatics: Theory, criticism, education: Selected papers 1985–2002*.⁷ That selection shows how, by the mid-1980s, I was drawing on ideas and terminologies available in linguistic scholarship, and particularly in the field of pragmatics. My aim was to develop a historical literary pragmatics that would re-humanize the discussion of literature in ways not then supported by other scholarly paradigms. While grateful for many of the insights of literary formalists, literary structuralists, new historicists, and deconstructionists, I found their marginalization of literature’s human qualities too disnaturing.

Some of my suggestions were in reaction against claims that were still being made by aestheticians and critics of a formalist orientation. For one thing, I said that a work of literature, despite its artistry, cannot be seen as an impersonal aesthetic heterocosm, but is indeed one among other kinds of historical communication. This means that it will be fundamentally affected by both its writer’s context of writing and any current respondent’s context of responding. To a greater or lesser extent, in any given realization of its potential these two contexts will be heteromorphic, resulting in complexities of interpretation, affect, and evaluation which historical literary pragmaticists will seek to explore. For another thing, I said that in all kinds of language use – in literary use as much as in any other – one can see the workings of what Halliday called the interpersonal function of language. Like any other users of language, when literary writers address their envisaged respondents they draw on the resources of deixis, of modal and evaluative expressions, of the politeness

6. Elina Siltanen, *Experimentalism as reciprocal communication in contemporary American poetry: John Ashbery, Lyn Hejinian, Ron Silliman* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2016).

7. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

spectrum, and of genre expectations. In this way they model a relationship with respondents that in its own way will be just as real as any other human relationship.

Two of my further suggestions responded to claims made by deconstructionists and various schools of structuralism and historicism. On the one hand, my idea was that our pragmatic contextualizations of any kind of language-in-use – literary as much as any other – do often yield, at least for the time being, viable interpretations of meanings and deeds. But on the other hand, I also argued that this can happen without context having to become an ineluctably determining factor in people's lives. Seen my way, a human being, though most certainly a *social* animal, on whom context is far more influential than was understood by nineteenth-century liberal humanists, is actually a social *individual*, enjoying considerably more intellectual, moral, and emotional leeway than was accorded by the liberal humanists' post-modern critics.

By the turn of the century, I was reasonably sure that a historical literary pragmatics along these lines could indeed help to re-humanize our thinking about literature. Such a perspective, it seemed to me, could be of benefit, not only in literary theory and literary criticism, but also in literary and language education in both schools and universities.

3.

At the same time, one dehumanizing factor was still giving me pause for thought: the arcane jargon for which some professional literary scholars were notable. In places they seemed to resort to learned terminology, not because it was particularly relevant to the case in hand, but in a pedantic attempt at scholarly self-legitimation. As a result, their work came across as not so much scholarship as scholasticism. They would have had much to learn, it seemed to me, from more popular, and even gossipy ways of talking about literature.⁸ Ordinary readers were instinctively confident about something which, on this showing, scholars could sometimes forget: that a literary work is not written primarily to be studied, but to be read. In fact, of course, it cannot be studied *until* it has been read. It is the reading that brings it into being.⁹

8. See Roger D. Sell, "Literary gossip, literary theory, literary pragmatics," in *Literature and the new interdisciplinarity: Poetics, linguistics, history*, ed. Roger D. Sell and Peter Verdonk (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994, 221–241 (= item 13 in Sell, *Humanizing literary pragmatics*), and "Literary pragmatics and the alternative *Great Expectations*", in Sell, *Humanizing literary pragmatics*, 179–194.

9. Cf. Roger D. Sell, "Simulative panhumanism: A challenge to current linguistic and literary thought," *Modern Language Review* 88 (1993): 545–558 (= item 11 in Sell, *Humanizing literary pragmatics*).

Obviously, as the reading progresses it does cue in reflection and interpretation. What comes into play is a kind of hermeneutic circle, such that readers, as they continue to respond to a text's detailed self-unfolding, also continue to refer their every new impression to a growing sense of the text as a whole. Reciprocally, their most recently revised sense of the text as a whole affects the formation of their next new impression. And so on, and so on. Even for non-scholars, reading is inseparable from this thoughtful complement, a proto-scholarly complement, as we might call it, though one which a commentary from some actual scholar may helpfully enrich.

But there is the point: "helpfully". When writing for members of their own specialist grouping, scholars are likely to use technical terms and to rely on a very specific body of shared knowledge and ideas. But as soon as they address scholars outside that grouping, quite the same language and assumptions will no longer work. And in their most obviously public roles, especially in any role they may have as teachers, they will need nothing short of the common touch, an attribute which in their case will have to involve, less a readiness to water scholarship down, than a due respect for the intelligence of their human fellows. Scholars who embrace this egalitarian stance, and who are true to ordinary readers' sense of literature as texts produced by, for, and about human beings, not only avoid disnaturing the phenomenon on which they are experts, but also legitimate both their own calling and the institutions with which it is associated. Their chances of persuading readers to take on board new insights are so much the better.

So had I been practising what I preach? In the papers from 1985 to 2002 selected for *A humanizing literary pragmatics*, I was certainly trying to write an English that would be jargon-light and fluently non-scholastic. A number of technical terms were unavoidable, but I tried to explain their meaning and necessity, particularly bearing in mind that historical literary pragmatics is an interdisciplinary venture. Part of the challenge was to address literary critics, literary theoreticians, students of culture, historians, linguists, teachers, and educationalists in a way that all of them would find immediately understandable and interesting. But even more to the point, in places I was also hoping to attract some ordinary readers, to whom an excessive or mystifying use of technical terms would have been even less welcome. To acknowledge the sensitivities of ordinary readers was not, it seemed to me, to compromise the quality of literary scholarship, but was rather the best way to keep literary scholarship human. With that same end in view, in some papers I was already endorsing common-sense views, not only on the processual primacy of reading over study, but also on the human relationships that develop between literary writers and those who respond to them.

4.

As I looked back on what I had been writing during the last two decades of the twentieth century, then, I hoped that my manner of presentation had not been too off-putting, and that my re-humanizing arguments and analyses had been worthwhile. Even so, the work did not seem finished. Now that the main pragmatic considerations had been squarely lodged, perhaps my language of exposition could become still less dependent on technical terms from linguistics. And such a stylistic development on my part might also match with some further developments in my re-humanizing message.

For a start, from that time onwards I have had a good deal more to say about those relationships which can develop between writers and respondents. One of my main observations has been that, even if literary communication is not dependent on face-to-face co-presence of the parties, or on any other kind of opportunity for feedback from the one to the other, or even on the parties' temporal co-existence, the process is nevertheless dialogical in spirit, involving real responsibilities on both sides, plus some equally real, and shareable pleasures. In particular, there is that pleasure which can be taken in comparing notes about literary texts as written by, for, and about – or for that matter, about representations of – human beings.

In working towards a dialogical paradigm for literary study, I took advantage of my positions as Director of the Finnish Ministry of Education's children's literature project, as Åbo Akademi University's H. W. Donner Research Professor of Literary Communication, and as Director of that same university's literary communication project. These roles enabled me to invite groups of international scholars to a series of conferences and symposia at which literary dialogicality was the main topic of discussion. One such group was the Philosophy of Communication Section of the European Communication Research and Education Association. Another was the International Association for Dialogue Analysis, a body which, along lines anticipated by Bakhtin's ideas about addressivity, has debated the dialogicality of *all* language use (spoken or written), a topic in linguistics that has been no less relevant to my new-millennial work than were early developments in linguistic pragmatics to my efforts back in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁰ Some of the other groups invited to Finland were made up of more traditional literary historians, who were seeking to bring dialogical perspectives to bear on early modern religious writing, and on early Stuart drama. The fruits of all this collaboration can now be sampled in a number of critical anthologies to which it gave rise.¹¹

10. Cf. Edda Weigand, *Language as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2009).

11. Roger D. Sell (ed.) *Children's literature as communication: The ChiLPA project* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002); *Literature as communication: Guest-edited special issue, Nordic Journal of*

Pursuing the same concern with dialogicality, I have also written three single-author books. *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (2000)¹² is addressed to critics who take on the time-honoured role of mediator, their aim being to help readers responsibly recognize literary authors in all their positioned yet personal distinctiveness. Mediating critics' strongest support, the book suggests, is a historical but non-deterministic literary pragmatics of the kind developed in my earlier work. Equipped with this, they can more confidently deter readers from solipsistic, non-dialogical presentism, encouraging them rather to empathize with otherness, to acknowledge the human achievement of significant acts of writing, and to reciprocate authors' own faith in communication itself – their faith, to spell it out, in their human fellows. Then in *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized* (2001),¹³ I try to show what this can mean in practice, through extended case studies of Henry Vaughan, Fielding, Dickens, T. S. Eliot, Frost, William Gerhardie, and Andrew Young. In *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (2011),¹⁴ finally, there are detailed accounts of Shakespeare, Pope, Wordsworth, Dickens, T. S. Eliot, Churchill, Orwell, Lynne Reid Banks, and Pinter which, moving on from mediating criticism's concern with the ethics of response, develop a communicational criticism to deal with the ethics of writing – with the question of whether, and if so how, a particular writer recognizes the human autonomy of every possible respondent.

Between the papers from the period 1985–2002 and the critical anthologies and single-author books from the new millennium there is an obvious continuity. Not only do the humanizing premises still apply. The dialogical perspective makes for a humanization that is even more marked. If literature's potential dialogicality is to be fully activated, this calls, on the one hand, for respondents who try – perhaps with help from mediating critics – really to empathize with writers and, on the other hand, for writers who – in ways identifiable by communicational critics – really leave room for respondents to draw their own conclusions. Writers who, in

English Studies 7 (2007) 1–172; *Literary community-making: The dialogicality of English texts from the seventeenth century to the present* (Amsterdam: Benjamin, 2012); and *Literature as dialogue: Invitations offered and negotiated* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2014). Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (eds), *Religion and writing in England, 1558–1689: Studies in community-making and cultural memory* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009). Roger D. Sell, Adam Borch and Inna Lindgren (eds), *The ethics of literary communication: Genuineness, directness, indirectness* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2013). Roger D. Sell, Anthony W. Johnson, and Helen Wilcox (eds), *Community-making in early Stuart theatres: Stage and audience* (London: Routledge, 2017).

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Keats's phrase, have "a palpable design upon us" are less immediately conducive to dialogicality than writers who are more prepared to live and let live – writers who, again in Keats's formulation, show signs of an undogmatic "negative capability": the capability of being "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".¹⁵ When respondents and writers are indeed willing to respect each other's human autonomy, this results in a high level of dialogicality that triggers literature's richest pleasures.

5.

This hedonic consideration brings me back to Elina Siltanen and her post-post-modern reading of the three experimentalist poets. It brings me, as well, to the post-postmodern character of my own recent work.

By "post-postmodernity" I mean the era which, in the twenty-first century, has followed on from the condition of postmodernity, which itself had followed on from the condition of modernity. Uncontroversially, I find the main hallmark of early modernity in the rise of science, with its stress on empiricist rationality, which during the later-modern age of enlightenment often went in tandem with the political ideals of universal brotherhood and freedom. Then during the era of postmodernity, modernity's hegemonic grand narratives of scientific mastery and political teleology were challenged by radical reconceptualizations of the nature of scholarly argument, of responsibility, of identity, and of political legitimation. By the last decades of the twentieth century, and especially within large multicultural urban societies, one of postmodernity's chief manifestations was proving to be the so-called culture wars. Appealing to a politics of recognition that respected human identities of every possible type, many different groupings were now struggling to make audible, for the very first time, a voice of their own. Thirty or forty years further on, the hallmarks of *post*-postmodernity include a continuing acceptance of recognition politics as the most humane way forward, but also some reservations, particularly as regards postmodern intellectuals' tendency to assign any given individual to just some single, homogeneous identity formation. That kind of scripting is now seen to have been unintentionally narrow and even repressive, exactly as some commentators were complaining at the time.¹⁶

15. John Keats, *Selected letters of John Keats*, ed. Frederick Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 72, 53.

16. E.g. K. Anthony Appiah, "Identity, authenticity, survival: Multicultural societies and social reproduction", in Amy Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 149–163. Cf. Sell, *Literature as communication*, 8–12.

In principle, the scope of post-postmodern literary critics is far greater than what I have been able to cover in my own work. Their attempts at mediating criticism and communicational criticism need not be limited to diachronic juxtapositions of different phases of just a single tradition, but could also take in meetings between several different traditions within many a here-and-now.¹⁷ Some critics could have a particular interest in the manifold hybridities and rainbow coalitions of our own time, in which case, distancing themselves from the over-regimentation of postmodern identity politics, they could be on the look-out for communities that might grow very large indeed, becoming more and more heterogeneous and less and less hegemonic. Their watchword would be that a community is not at all the same thing as a consensus.

Whatever their more particular line of interest, post-postmodern literary critics will be quick to see literature as communicational in the word's etymological sense. Literature can *make or consolidate a community*. That community, moreover, can itself operationalize post-postmodern political values. Given a writer who does not have a palpable design upon us, a negatively capable writer who feels no need to say the last word, the thrust of a literary text can even be partially utopian.¹⁸ This will not be a matter of its being idealistic, visionary, or optimistic in the thoughts, perceptions, or stories it harnesses. On the contrary, in all these respects it is just as likely to be profoundly disillusioned and bleakly pessimistic. Rather, its partially utopian thrust will lie in the relationships it makes possible between its negatively capable writer and all the many different kinds of people who respond to it over time.

In an ideal world, these would be exemplary relationships in which the parties, despite all their differences of formation and opinion, would acknowledge each other's human dignity, and embrace the pleasures of celebrated othernesses. But the world is not ideal, needless to say, and a literary work does not transport respondents to some cloud-cuckoo-land. Typically, the reason why a work's thrust is only partially utopian will be that its utopian potential comes up against something more down-to-earth and imperfect. To take Dickens, for instance, there is a tension between, on the "utopian" side, a mode in which he liberally invites readers to think

17. See Roger D. Sell, "Social change and scholarly mediation", in *Re-imagining language and literature for the 21st century*, ed. Suthira Duangsamorn (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 133–50, "Literary scholarship as mediation: An approach to cultures past and present", in *Cultures in Contact*, eds Balz Engler and Lucia Michalcak (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2007), 35–58, and "The importance of genuine communication: Literature within a participatory pedagogy," in *Towards a dialogic Anglistics*, eds Werner Delanoy, Jörg Helbig and Allan James (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2007), 247–261.

18. Cf. Roger D. Sell, "The example of Coleridge: A utopian element in literary communication", in *English without boundaries: Reading English from China to Canada*, eds Jane Roberts and Trudi L. Darby (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 88–103.

for themselves and, on the other side, a mode in which he is much more masterful and self-assertive. This is not the kind of thing to which most readers have given conscious thought. Yet the experience of reading his novels can certainly involve an alternation between half-conscious feelings of empowerment and a vague sense of being dominated.¹⁹

All the same, in his more liberal mode Dickens really does empower readers, even if this is something they have not fully appreciated. And literary writers in general do welcome readers into a kind of egalitarian fellowship. Some writers may at first seem to make things less than than cosy, often by introducing some kind of obstacle to the actual process of reading. But the reason why one of the critical anthologies I have co-edited has the title *The ethics of literary communication: Genuineness, directness, indirectness* is that, when writers and readers genuinely respect each other's human autonomy, this can be precisely by way of texts that are extremely provocative in their frank directness, or of texts which, like the experimentalist poems discussed by Elina Siltanen, are not deceptive or badly written, yet are nevertheless decidedly indirect, thereby encouraging respondents to do their own bit towards building and assessing ideas, stories, and experiences. By giving respondents these kinds of challenge, writers truly do respect their human autonomy, even prompting them to a rewarding creativity on their own behalf.

The writer-respondent bond is never a total unanimity in any case. It involves, rather, a two-way acceptance of difference that can sharply contrast with antagonisms dramatized *within* works of literature. Many of the relationships depicted in literature are variously *non*-egalitarian, to effects which range from the sublimely comic to the grimly tragic or absurd. In fact it is often this democratic deficit that makes a story worth telling in the first place,²⁰ and when the writer enables readers to compare notes about such human subject-matter, this can be catalytic to writer-respondent relationships which, by comparison, feel much more satisfactory and enjoyable. Sometimes they may even be exemplary enough to make utopia feel a good deal closer after all.

Post-postmoderns' preparedness for such fusions of the ethical and the hedonic, their taste for pleasurable egalitarian markers like those noted by Siltanen in Ashbery, Hejinian, and Silliman, is another example of that weakening of earlier literary expectations which I mentioned at the outset. In particular, it is a reaction against any lingering assumption that literature has to be snobbishly gloomy, secretive, and

19. See Roger D. Sell, "Two opposite modes of communication between Dickens and his readers," item 19 below.

20. For tellability as seen within a communicational narratology, see Roger D. Sell, "Great Expectations and the Dickens community," in Sell, *Communicational Criticism*, 194–221, esp. 208–216.

arduous – that it has to embody the sort of kill-joy elitism which in I. A. Richards (on “stock responses”), T. S. Eliot (on an inevitable “difficulty” in Modernist poetry), or Lionel Trilling (on “the fate of pleasure”) now certainly can seem dated. Not that Richards, Eliot, and Trilling were the last to tap this vein. From the 1970s onwards there was Terry Eagleton, for instance, who apparently thought that literary pleasures seduced readers less brainy than himself into undesirable ideological stances.²¹ Indeed, there was an entire twentieth-century line of such forbidding pride of intellect, scrutinized by Raymond Tallis in his *Enemies of hope: A critique of contemporary pessimism, irrationalism, anti-Humanism and counter-Enlightenment*,²² by John Carey in his *The intellectuals and the masses: Pride and prejudice among the literary intelligentsia, 1889–1939*,²³ and in my own *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized* (2001). Granted, if taken as a response to the traumatizing horrors of twentieth-century history, the despondent anti-hedonism of so many intellectuals was more than understandable. Granted, too, their frame of mind did not bar some of them from creative work of quite extraordinary power.²⁴ Yet the fact remains: the deepest, the most basic assumptions of the twentieth-century intelligentsia were so far from life-enhancing that the post-postmoderns’ common touch and openness to joy could only come as a welcome relief.

The obvious risk is that their common touch and openness to joy might fuel dreams of lotus-land delights that would be no more beneficial than twentieth century anti-hedonism. Against this, however, can be weighed the success of a post-postmodern writer such as Salman Rushdie. In Rushdie’s novel *Shalimar the Clown*, the nostalgia for Kashmir’s earlier peace and harmony, and the passionately idealistic longing for a return to that golden age, are juxtaposed to a very full awareness of present-day enormities world-wide. The novel warmly encourages a hope for human survival and well-being, while its realism constantly inhibits self-deception.²⁵ If a post-postmodern strain in literary criticism can only achieve

21. I. A. Richards, *Practical criticism: A study of literary judgement* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1929), 235–254; T. S. Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets” [1921], in his *Selected essays* (London: Faber, 1951), 281–291, esp. 289; and Lionel Trilling, “The fate of pleasure,” in his *Beyond culture: Essays on literature and learning* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 62–86. Cf. Sell, “*Watership Down* and the Fate of Pleasure”, and *Mediating Criticism*, 17–22, 217–222. For some discussion of Eagleton, see items 17 and 18 below.

22. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997. London: Faber, 1992.

23. London: Faber, 1992.

24. Cf. Roger D. Sell, “The impoliteness of *The Waste Land*,” in his *Mediating criticism*, 107–138.

25. Roger D. Sell, “Where do literary authors belong? A post-postmodern answer,” *Rocznik Komparatystyczny: Comparative Yearbook* 6 (2015): 47–68 (= item 14 below).

this same kind of balance, then, far from trivializing literature, far from making it seem too blandly cheerful, far from pulling the wool over anybody's eyes, it will remind us of literature's true human scope. To repeat something I said about communication, literary as much as non-literary, in *Mediating criticism*,

[e]ven a grief, even a fear, even a sense of horror, even an insight into human nature's most ridiculous or disturbing sides, becomes, as soon as it is communicated, so totally different from suicidal despair as to make the world a better place. ... Thanks to communication, whether non-literary or literary, people of various backgrounds can actually be brought closer together, in the very desire for joy and fulfilment, in the predisposition to give and receive comfort, and in the shared endurance of suffering, even when suffering would otherwise quite debilitate desire.²⁶

Perhaps I should underline as well that, far from forgetting my "serious" concern with writers and respondents' mutual obligations, I am suggesting that literature's ethical dimension and its hedonic dimension actually overlap, and for the simple reason that egalitarian relationships are enjoyable in their own right. When we are responding to a literary work, no less than when we are engaging in any other form of communication, to be well treated by another human being, in this case by a literary author, is immensely gratifying, and so, too, is our sense of being able to repay such decency and kindness, in this case through a fair-minded reading. Even the more formal kinds of literary pleasure – the pleasure of recognizing a sonnet as a sonnet, for instance – are pleasures which we share, and delight in sharing, both with the particular writer and with fellow-respondents, as we and they all make each other welcome in a single, egalitarian circle of heterogeneous individuals. Ever since classical times there has been an assumption that literary authors use pleasure to sugar-coat a pill of instruction, thereby arrogating to their own authorial caste a knowing superiority. On a post-postmodern view, however, literary pleasures are great levellers-up.

6.

Since the turn of the century, the themes of literary responsibilities and pleasures, of post-postmodernity, and of literature's dialogical community-making have also featured in a fair number of separate papers I have written, some for the previously mentioned critical anthologies, some for various other anthologies, and some for journals or scholarly gatherings. Not included in this present selection are papers on

26. Sell. *Mediating Criticism*, p. 217.

Shakespeare,²⁷ Wordsworth,²⁸ Winston Churchill,²⁹ and Orwell,³⁰ plus an account of communicational narratology,³¹ and a comparison of mediating discourse with the discourse of conflict.³² All these items were substantially revised for the related chapters in *Communicational criticism*, which is still in print, and to which I hope any interested readers will find their way.³³ Instead, the present volume brings together nineteen other papers, all of them similarly representative of my thinking over the past two decades.

In the first paper, dating from 2003, the term “post-postmodernity” is not actually used. The keyword in its title is still “postmodernity”. In effect, though, the paper lays out some of the groundwork for post-postmodern thinking, and the second paper, dating from 2004, launches an argument to which, in the last

27. Roger D. Sell, “Henry V and the strength and weakness of words: Shakespearian philology, historicist criticism, communicative pragmatics,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 100 (1999): 535–63, reprinted in *Shakespeare and Scandinavia: A collection of Nordic studies*, ed. Gunnar Sorelius (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 108–41.

28. Roger D. Sell, “Wordsworthian communication,” *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 6 (2007): 17–45, and “Wordsworth and the spread of genuine communication,” *Literature and values: Literature as a medium for representing, disseminating and constructing norms and values*, eds Sibylle Baumbach, Herbert Grabes, and Ansgar Nünning (Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2009), 125–43.

29. Roger D. Sell, “Mediational ethics in Churchill’s *My Early Life*,” in *Auto / Biography and mediation*, ed. Alfred Hornung (Heidelberg: Winter, 2010), 207–225.

30. Roger D. Sell, “Waistlines: Bowling, Orwell, Blair,” in *Language, Learning, Literature: Studies Presented to Håkan Ringbom*, eds Roger D. Sell et al. (English Department Publications 4, Åbo Akademi University, 2001), 261–80.

31. Roger D. Sell, “Blessings, benefactions and bear’s services: *Great Expectations* and communicational narratology,” *The European Journal of English Studies* 8 (2004): 49–30.

32. Roger D. Sell, “How much should history weigh? Mediating criticism and the discourse of conflict,” in *Poetics, linguistics and history: Discourse of war and conflict*, eds Ina Biermann and Annette Combrink (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University: 2001), 274–93.

33. The Shakespeare article became Chapter 2 in *Communicational criticism* (51–81): “Henry V and the strength and weakness of words”. The Wordsworth articles became Chapter 4 in *Communicational criticism* (151–194): “Wordsworth’s genuineness”. The Churchill article became Chapter 7 in *Communicational criticism* (239–258): “Churchill’s *My Early Life* and communicational ethics”. The Orwell article became Chapter 8 in *Communicational criticism* (259–275): “Orwell’s *Coming Up For Air* and the communal negotiation of feelings.” The piece on communicational narratology became Chapter 5 in *Communicational criticism* (195–221): “*Great Expectations* and the Dickens community”. The piece on mediating versus conflictual discourse became Chapter 6 in *Communicational criticism* (223–237): “*The Waste Land* and the discourse of mediation.”

paragraph, the adjective “post-postmodern” is applied explicitly. In later papers, post-postmodernity and the other main themes are distributed in varying proportions, with detailed examples representing a wide range of anglophone literary writers – from Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and other poets and dramatists of the early modern period, through Wordsworth and Coleridge, to Dickens, Pinter, and Rushdie.

In some of the most recent papers selected, three interrelated aims are beginning to be specially prominent: to compare and contrast literature’s formal pleasures with its pleasures of dialogical interaction; to emphasize the non-holistic immediacy of both these kinds of pleasure, so challenging accounts of literary artistry that are homogenizing rationalizations after the experiential event; and to argue that both literary ethics and literary hedonics not only manifest themselves in mutable historical particulars, but also reflect universals that are timelessly anthropological. When, back in the 1970s, I first began thinking of literature in terms of communication, literary formalist critics were, as noted, still saying that literature provided pleasurable, ahistorical, aesthetic wholes, and various kinds of historicist critic were already reacting to this by joylessly reducing literary works to their historical contexts of production. In these latest efforts of mine, I have been trying to suggest how, by further developing the account of men and women as social individuals, the more valid insights of both the formalist and the historicist camps can be rehabilitated and combined. Helpful here, it seems to me, is an understanding of human beings as, paradoxically, for ever historically differentiated and for ever existentially the same.

The nineteen papers are presented almost exactly as they were first written. There are few additions, all of them either identified in the footnotes or set within square brackets, and the silent corrections of error and improvements in style are also on a minor scale. Although the papers are arranged in chronological order of composition, which could help any reader wishing to trace an overall trajectory, they can in fact be read in any order at all, since each of them seeks to explain everything necessary to an understanding of it. In practice this has meant that very many ideas, phrases, and examples have been extensively repeated in several different papers. My hope is that, for readers trying to get to grips with my line of thought, the repetitions will be less of a hindrance than a help, or will at least be a price worth paying for a book which explores one and the same set of ideas across a fairly broad range of literary phenomena.

Postmodernity, literary pragmatics, mediating criticism

Meanings within a large circle of communicants¹

1.

The sweeping socioeconomic and political changes associated with the condition of postmodernity have had consequences for literature.² Distinctions between high-brow and lowbrow, between the Arts (*sic*) and popular culture, are being levelled; new constituencies of writers have found their voice and audience; and the range of texts regarded as literary is therefore open to extension. We have not yet reached the point at which “literature” ceases to be a useful category. The term is actually regaining some of the breadth it had before its nineteenth- and twentieth century specialization. This in turn affects what can now be said about the topic of the present book [i.e. *Regeln der Bedeutung*]: literature and meaning.

In order to throw the change into sharper relief, I shall here be concentrating mostly on literature in the narrow nineteenth- and twentieth century sense, which is after all still fairly current. What I shall usually have in mind is poems, plays, and novels of widely acknowledged merit, plus a number of special cases involving other genres – *Pilgrim’s Progress*, for instance. A book about atomic physics or symphonic structure would not belong to literature so conceived, but neither would most biographies, histories, and travelogues, though some certainly do, and a few more are seen as borderline cases. Essays could definitely belong, but would not be literature prototypically.

What is it, then, that essays lack? Well, nothing, really. Their literary marginality for nineteenth- and twentieth century readers stemmed, not from a deficiency, but from an excess: an excess of conspicuous argument. Just like books about atomic physics, most essays have an argument which can be summarized in the form of

1. [First published in *Regeln der Bedeutung: Zur Theorie der Bedeutung literarischer Texte*, eds Fotis Jannidis et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 103–127. The last three paragraphs of Section 2 are an addition written in 2019, when this essay was being prepared for re-publication in the present selection.]

2. See Roger D. Sell, *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000), 253–279.

propositional statements. Poems can have this as well, of course. But for Victorian and Modernist readers, a poem was not to be read nearly so much *for the sake of* its argument as was a book about atomic physics or even an essay, and most readers would probably have felt that a summary of “O Rose, thou art sick”, and of many less intensely symbolist poems as well, would diminish them as poems and in any case fail to do justice to what they mean – fail in a way that a competent summary of a book about atomic physics would not fail. As for an overall propositional meaning of *King Lear*, how had anyone ever dreamed of wanting such a thing? Even in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, an allegory which certainly could be paraphrased, the argument had become the least interesting thing of all.

But readers do feel, I think, that literature “has something to say”. Even when pre-postmoderns most admired a literary text for its artistry, they also valued something else as well, which is still important for us today. Even if nowadays we are far from thinking of literature as straightforwardly mimetic, we surely turn to it out of a willingness to compare notes. We expect it to embody perceptions and intuitions which we can correlate with our own, and our engagement in such comparisons can, I think, be quite without prejudice. Keen to surrender ourselves to experiences and viewpoints not our own, we are of course still willing to disagree, yet at least as willing to agree, and even to be illuminated. So there *is* a sense of meanings at work and, *pace* Derrida’s suspicions of logocentric certainties, these meanings relate to what our everyday mind still thinks of as reality. To use a Leavisian expression, the sense conveyed by literature is of *felt life*. Meanings of this order are underwritten on the one hand by a writer’s accurate observation and rational intellect, and on the other hand by qualities of feeling and moral sensitivity, qualities which are by no means peculiar to literary writing, being just as likely in books about history or sociology. Above all, they are qualities we appreciate in human beings in the life outside of books.

Then again, at the sentence-by-sentence micro-level a reader is obviously dealing with meanings all the time. Even if in a novel, for instance, most meanings flout Grice’s cooperative maxim of quality through being fictional in character, plenty of them will be unironically propositional. To read a literary work without processing this constant flow of meanings is simply not possible, and any larger meaning of felt life presumably emerges as their ultimate effect, be they fictional or not.

So what about the possibility of semantic and pragmatic rules for *limiting* the proliferation of meaning in literature? This question, the main one posed by the editors of the present volume [i.e. *Regeln der Bedeutung*], will probably elicit different kinds of response from different kinds of scholar. Empiricists may want to examine what readers do in practice. Do readers themselves already apply some such rules? Is this a standard part of the reading process? Some reader-response critics and poststructuralist theoreticians, by contrast, may reject the editors’ proposition altogether. To them, any notion of limits will be anathema – and long live semiosis!

Then again, some philologists, literary historians, and historical critics might say that literary meanings have been allowed to proliferate far too much already. Seeing their own work as a necessary check, such scholars might also welcome help from other quarters, keenly co-opting any promising-looking semanticists or pragmatists into their club of true readers.

In my own view, scholarly aspirations to police literature's meanings are frankly misplaced. Literature's most important meanings, meanings in the sense of felt life, are not exactly ineffable, but they do work by opening discussion up, whereas attempts at definitive re-statement tend to close discussion down, and to ignore, as well, the basic fact of literary pragmatics: that when readers come to their reading, they do so from within many different life-worlds, so arriving at many different kinds of conclusion as well. Scholarly policing could actually smack of pre-postmodern elitism, and of the more malign forms of twentieth-century academic professionalism. All too easily, it could make non-scholarly readers think of their own responses as a kind of criminal deviance. It might even scare some novices away from literature for good.

Nevertheless, I do strongly champion attempts to be faithful to an author's perceptible intention. For reasons which will soon emerge, I regard this as the *sine qua non* of all good reading practice. By the same token, I also think that readers should read a literary text in the fullest possible awareness of the historically relevant semantics and pragmatics of the language in which it was written – what the words “meant” when the author used them, and how that “meaning” was affected by the circumstances within which they originally had to be contextualized.

If this seems too much at odds with my reservations about scholarly policing, the reason may be that I understand all kinds of meaning as collective in nature, a point which discussion hitherto has sometimes missed. To state it in a brief, preliminary way, every meaning is predicated on ethical relationships between those for whom it is that the meaning means, and between every such meaner and what is meant. That is why, in examining the meanings of literature, I shall focus on their symbiotic relationship with literary community.

The literary hermeneutician E. D. Hirsch may seem to have been thinking along these lines when he made his well known distinction between “meaning” and “significance”.

Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable.³

3. E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 8, his italics.

Certainly, although “meaning” here is being thought of as the author’s hard and fast prerogative, “significance” can clearly involve more than just some single context, so that a text could have one significance for the author who wrote it in the original context, but other, quite different significances for people differently placed.

But does the meaning-significance disjunction really hold? To represent something surely *is* to enter into a relationship with it, and many of the actual words and phrases which would allegedly contribute to a meaning by being representational are also relational in and of themselves, quite clearly connoting assessments, even if the precise assessment connoted can vary according to context of use.

Still more to the point, even if we persevered with Hirsch’s artificial disjunction many utterances, and not least many literary texts, would prove to be so complex in expression, or so genuinely hospitable to assessment by envisaged respondents, that couplings of hard and fast authorial meanings to equally hard and fast authorial significances would in any case never materialize. Literary authors can be so radically undogmatic that their literary activity becomes a matter of their turning to respondents precisely in a spirit of uncertainty, basically in the hope of bringing their problematic perceptions, intuitions, and judgements into discussion within a wider community. Any *unequivocal* meanings and significances a literary work might seem to convey could merely belong to the contemporary opinions, attitudes, and prejudices on which its author has drawn in constructing its addresser- and addressee personae, avatars which are nothing more than communication’s starting-point.

2.

As a concept, meaning really is something of a hold-all. It not only resists the split between what Hirsch calls meaning and significance by rolling cognitive content and emotional or evaluative implications into one. With a literary text, for instance, these heterogeneous meanings can also be thought of as potentially having three different sources. There can be meanings inherent to the mind, speech, or deeds of divine, human, or animal characters represented “in the story”. There can be authorial meanings. And there can be meanings as derived from the text by any number of different respondents.

The meanings of characters in, say, a novel or a play will be a central focus of attention both for the author and for anyone who responds to it. That is why old-fashioned character criticism was so profoundly natural, and also why, after so much twentieth century criticism tended to undervalue it, there is now an urgent need for its refurbishment.

Some of the most important lessons to be drawn from the twentieth century arguments about it are that characters in literature, even when they seem larger than

life, are not actually real people but artistic creations; that they may also be strongly coloured by their creator's own intentions or ideology; but that authors may also depict human beings as very complex and difficult to pin down. Indeed, attempts to pin down a character's "essence" would nowadays often be seen as inappropriate. Human identity itself has been problematized, and characters in literature are now usually viewed as so many cases in point. So much so, that postcolonial writers whose specialization on the condition of hybridity could once seem very new and strange can now seem less remarkable.

So insistently can a literary work revolve around its *dramatis personae* that to try and understand them in all their simplicities or complexities of meaning is a reader's main challenge. In *Paradise Lost*, what at any given point does God mean? What does Satan mean? What does Adam mean? What does Eve mean? Readers find themselves having to penetrate the different characters' meanings of the various kinds at each and every point. This is something which anyone interested in limiting the proliferation of literary meaning would, I think, find hard to brush aside. Throughout a reader's processing of the text, all the different character meanings will be essential input, sometimes making for suggestive depth, sometimes for utter confusion.

Then again, good readers, as they deserve to be called, try to understand the cognitive, emotional and evaluative thrust of meanings they think of as authorial. They will do so mainly for altruistic reasons, since the author must be allowed that universal human right to respect and fair treatment which was defined by Kant.⁴ But readers can also be forgivably selfish as well, since the author may be able to give them pleasure and/or to do them some good. The author's very otherness may prove to be a *significant* otherness for them.

So any hermeneutic rules coming into play would certainly have to include, as a kind of categorical imperative, "Try to read and contextualize the author's words in a way as faithful as possible to the author's likely intention; try to grasp the semantics and pragmatics of the language as used within the author's context of writing, and within the contexts 'in the story' as the author represents them." The here-and-now-ism of respondents who have no genuine interest in authorial meanings emanating from some constellation of time, place, and culture other than their own can only turn interpretation into an arrogant solipsism. An account of *Paradise Lost* which does not squarely recognize that Milton was aiming to justify the ways of God to man does not deserve serious consideration, even if that aim has often been perceived as actually out of sync with the poem's felt life.

As this example also makes clear, authorial meanings can often be thought of as the author's assessment of character meanings. Above all, Milton is weighing

4. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* [1785] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

up his God against his Satan. But readers, too, assess character meanings, and they assess authorial meanings as well. To repeat, readers do inevitably read texts in their own way. They have their own personal and historical positionalities, involving their own ranges of knowledge, emotion, and value. And they are no less entitled than the author to influence the final result of the confrontation as they see fit. Scholars hoping to rein literature in by means of a historical or cultural purism which restricts the scope of an author's words to their original context grossly underestimate readers' ability to think, feel, and evaluate in more than one way at a time. This seriously detracts from the human dignity of readers here and now, and from literature's most rewarding dialogicalities. At best, literature is very much an interactive process, in which the parties on either side of the exchange are entitled to a sacrosanct human parity.

That is why potentially restrictive semantic and pragmatic rules relating to the language as used or represented in the text would always have to be supplemented by the firm reservation, "Feel free to respond to what you take to be the author's intention in whatever way is appropriate to your own world-view and preserves your own integrity." When Blake said that as far as he was concerned Milton was of the devil's party without knowing it, this was appropriate to what, from his own point of view and in his own time and place, he perceived as the poem's felt life, and he was perfectly within his rights. A literary work which did not continually come in for such re-appraisal would be a work no longer seriously read. It would actually have lost its literary status.

Nor is it as if a concern to regiment meanings of the various kinds and sources has anything like the same prominence during a process of ordinary reading as during the long-drawn-out deliberations of many professional literary scholars and critics. In trying to develop elaborate pragmatic or semantic rules which could limit literary meaning, scholars might easily fall into an inappropriate scientism, or make themselves guilty, out of a sheer eagerness to tell other people what to think, of the scholastic's typical power bid. In this worst-case scenario, they would be arrogating to universities and other institutions of learning the right to decide on literature's reception and very future. At the same time they could all too easily help to kill literature as a real and ongoing process of continuing change within the culture at large. In any search for strictly definitive meanings, they could easily lose sight of goals that are far more fundamental.

I do not mean that literary scholarship and criticism have no real function. Nor am I saying that, in our roles as scholars and critics, we ought to forget all about meanings and switch to some kind of populist mumbo-jumbo. The point is rather that we should bear in mind the full range of literary experience, and not indulge in an inflated view of our own professional importance. In a nutshell, my suggestions would be that literature is one among other kinds of real communication; that real

communication is never simply a matter of interchanging meanings; that literature's most important meanings in any case feed in to discussions which are in principle uncurtailable; and that literary scholars and critics perform one of their most valuable tasks when, renouncing all pretensions to authoritative readings, they humbly seek to mediate between people variously placed.

Seen this way, literature does involve meanings, of all the different kinds and sources. After all, it involves the use of words, and words invite interpretation. So in one way, meanings are any communicant's primary concern. When we ourselves produce words, we do think of this as an attempt to say something – to say something in particular. Conversely, the call to interpret the words of other people is always instantaneous and unavoidable. Yet in another way, meanings are secondary, since an exchange of words can ultimately be seen as communication in the etymological sense, as a making common, a making of community, even when community gets no further than a riot of meanings allowing no agreement but an agreement to disagree.

The paradox is that communication involves plural meanings, yet can result in a single community. Literary communication is no exception. Especially with the help of scholarly and critical mediators, literary texts, though giving rise to manifold readings, may be the means by which their writers and all those responding to them are drawn into just a single circle of communicating participants.

3.

When the postmodern challenge to traditional legitimacies is said to have resulted in culture wars, and in many different literary canons for many different readerships, the circle of participants engaged in literary activity is thought of as strictly delimited along lines of colour, class, ethnicity, gender, religion and so on. In post-modern society so imagined, there will be many such circles, and they will not be coterminous.

This is plausible enough. The idea of a very large community including a text's writer and readers of many different kinds can certainly strain belief. Respondents coming to literature from their many different quarters and arriving at their many different conclusions about it may actually remain *out of* communication with each other. Any suggestion to the contrary may seem politically incorrect, a nostalgic harking back to the hegemony which, in the maelstrom of postmodern polyculturality, has been beneficially battered.

Yet to claim that a circle of communicants can be altogether more inclusive than postmodern commentators often suggest takes no reactionary denial of socio-cultural difference. All it calls for is a reasonably unpessimistic account of human

nature itself. True, men and women are nothing if not *social* animals. Their social formation is so much a part of what they are that to think of them in some quintessential form abstracted from society is imaginatively taxing to say the least. True, too, earlier attempts at such quintessentializations often certainly were an ideological corollary of political oppression. Yet even so, people are still social *individuals*, with at least some degree of personal will, creativity, and intellect. As Raymond Tallis puts it, much twentieth-century structuralist and poststructuralist theory ignored the following words of de Saussure, its founding father:

Language [*langue*] is not a function of the speaker; it is a product that is passively assimilated by the individual Speech [*parole*], on the contrary, is an individual act. It is wilful and intellectual.⁵

No matter whether the structured system be that of the psyche, language, society, or culture, human beings can *operate* it, and are not to be entirely conflated with it. Without wishing to re-instate “the transparent, self-possessed, controlling Cartesian *cogito*”, what Tallis objects to is Lévi-Strauss’s influential talk of myths which “think themselves out in the men and without men’s knowledge”.⁶ Tallis’s own project is to re-assert

the centrality of individual consciousness, of undeceived deliberateness, in the daily life of human beings. We are not absolutely transparent to ourselves but we are not utterly opaque either; we are not totally self-present in all our actions but nor are we absent from them; we are not complete masters of our fates, shaping our lives according to our utterly unique and original wishes, but neither are we the empty playthings of historical, political, social, semiological or instinctual forces.⁷

This same relative independence enables human beings to empathize with people whose formation is not the same as their own. And although the movement of empathy can in principle go hand in hand with a critical self-distancing from the other person’s otherness, there may also be occasions when empathy, having tried on the otherness for size, as it were, becomes something more like sympathy, indicating that the positionality from which the empathetic movement started out is amenable to modification, even if there are still areas where the parties agree to differ. At the very least, people of different circumstances and orientations will have

5. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in general linguistics* [1916] (London: Fontana, 1978), 14.

6. Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Overture to *Le Cru et le Cuit*” [1964], in *Structuralism*, ed. Jacques Ehrmann (Garden City: Anchor-Doubleday, 1970), 31–55. esp. 46.

7. Raymond Tallis, *Enemies of hope: A critique of contemporary pessimism, irrationalism, anti-Humanism and counter-Enlightenment* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 228.

compared notes, which in itself is an advance in mutual understanding, and thereby in community-formation as well.

In other words, our account of communicational pragmatics, though it is bound to be firmly historical, need not carry this to the point of historicist determinism. And our ideas about the pragmatics of literary communication can be continuous with this historical but non-deterministic pragmatics of communication in general.

On the one hand, communication, including the writing and reading of literary texts, is fundamentally affected by differences between the contexts within which the different participants are functional. Even two people apparently sharing one and the same positionality will always represent it in somewhat different inflections. When they enter into communication with each other, the knowledge, memories, experiences, attitudes, values, prejudices they bring to the process will not be identical. No matter how great the extent of what they already have in common, the contexts within which they operate will not be completely coterminous.

On the other hand, any difficulties resulting from contextual disparities do not make communication impossible. On the contrary, the inevitable contextual disparities, no matter how small or great, are the very stimulus to communication in the first place. The relative independence and flexibility of the human mind is very well equipped to deal with them, and one possible communicative outcome is that the amount of contextual overlap will actually have increased. Even in a case of persisting and extensive disagreement, the new measure of understanding can strengthen human bonds.

4.

In the twentieth century, a theory so centrally emphasizing that the responsibility for communicative outcomes rests with participants on both sides, and that both kinds of participant operate within their own contexts, was hardly to be found. Language use in general was often taken to involve a situation whose structure was binary, with an active participant – a sender, a speaker, a writer, a narrator – trying to convey a message to a participant who was a good deal more passive – a receiver, a listener, a reader, a narratee. The only thing the more passive participant had to do was to interpret the message by placing the signifiers of its linguistic signs in a context, which was thought of as a unitary context, single and equally present for both participants. It was within context so conceived that the signs were thought to be used, and herein was said to lie the key to the message's meaning, since within the context the signifier-signified relationship was also conventional. There was no earthly reason why a canine quadruped should be called a *dog* or *chien* or *Hund* or *koira*. But to be able to understand English or French or German or Finnish was

to be able to operate in the culture where those particular meaning conventions obtained. Furthermore, since twentieth century linguistics was for many decades predominantly synchronic in orientation, there was little sense that meaning conventions might be unstable or negotiable. In short, a piece of language was thought to be open to only one understanding. This applied, not just to a single seme like canine quadruped, but to semes in combination, and within texts of every kind and length.

Many scholars would have said that literary texts were no exception. Literary authors were often seen as sending a message to a reader-receiver who, by relating it to what was (most often tacitly) thought of as a shared, unitary context, could arrive at only a single interpretation.

Then in 1968 Barthes announced the death of the author and, for the many scholars he persuaded, agency was transferred elsewhere.⁸ Within the pyrotechnics of much reader-response criticism, it was now the readers who were seen as in control. What a literary text meant was up to them, and the person who had written it had less of a say. Not that readers' readings were seen as individualistic. On the contrary, in structuralist or poststructuralist commentary readers' responses were taken to reflect protocols already established within the culture or language at large, so that interpretations were not readers' own doing, but involved a process of semiotic proliferation that was basically a-personal. Writers, too, could be viewed as a mere channel for meanings and values always already extant within society, and because distinctions between contexts of writing and contexts of reading continued to be ignored, literary texts were seen as simply the products of a unitary context within which they were both brought into existence and interpreted. In fact society, language, and culture were even described animistically, as if they were living forces of which literature was merely one expression. Alternatively, but at just as high a level of abstraction, literary culture was assimilated to a phenomenon of a really quite different kind: to an anonymous, collective orature.⁹ And to much the same effect, parallels were drawn between literary theory and current linguistic thought, as when society's pre-existent power structures became a central focus in critical discourse analysis.¹⁰

This entire development was of a piece with postmodern critics' deterministic stereotyping of the various parties to the culture wars, and of their many allegedly

8. Roland Barthes, "The death of the author" [1968], in his *Image-music-text: Essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), 142–148.

9. Cf. Sell, *Literature as communication*, 200–205.

10. Norman Fairclough, *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language* (Longman: London, 1995).

incompatible literary canons. In every case, the net result was to disempower human subjects by exaggerating their social dimension at the expense of the individual.

Especially from an author's point of view, early-twentieth-century accounts of an authorial message being sent for interpretation by a reader had been likely to seem intuitively right. From a reader's point of view, the subsequent emphasis on the element of readerly agency could seem right as well. Common sense suggested that an interpretation of a text was the net result of what its author put into it and what the particular interpreter managed to get out of it, even if some third party could often show the authorial input and the reader's reading to be widely divergent. Both authors and readers were also likely to concede that a great deal of what happens during literary writing and reading certainly does depend on the context within which those activities are taking place. And even if, as I am now emphasizing, the contexts of writing and reading are never completely unitary, they must obviously be at least partially coterminous, involving, for instance, shared knowledge of the particular language and of how it works or has worked, since otherwise communication would not be possible at all.

What was programmatically *non*-common-sensical was the late twentieth century's deterministic decentring of human beings. Among its chief academic supports was a denial of the readily observable facts that, in writing and reading literature no less than in other forms of interchange, people are perfectly capable of challenging, and even changing, their own social grouping's life-world, and really can enter into communication across lines of sociocultural difference. According to J. Hillis Miller, difference was simply "all the way down", which meant that, for him, a postmodern university could only be a "university of dissensus", just as programmatically postmodern literature boxed writers and readers in to their own particular sociocultural constituency.¹¹ The period's gloomy determinism portrayed intellectual life in general as inevitably replicating the ghettoization of the large postmodern city.

5.

But if our theorizing is to be true to the interactive reciprocity of literary communication, we not only need to move away from late-twentieth-century determinism, but also to go back beyond the earlier model of an active-passive binarism as well. And we must reject, too, the unitary context assumption which both the earlier and the later accounts tended to share. Our main assumption must be an altogether

11. J. Hillis Miller, "The university of dissensus," *The Oxford Literary Review* 17 (1995): 121–143.

more ancient one, preserved and reinvigorated in the twentieth century by a school of philosophy within which all such de-humanization of the humanities was positively resisted: Gadamerian hermeneutics.

Gadamer can help us to see that communicative situations are triangular, and in a way directly corresponding to a literary text's three sources of meaning – characters, author, readers. In any process of communication, the set-up will be the same. There will always be some “third” entity, often animate, about which the two main parties will be in negotiation, and they will always negotiate across some greater or lesser contextual divide, involving different horizons of expectation, which are in principle always capable of merging into a *tertium quid* of greater understanding. Here, then, is a model within which the ethical relationships between various meaners, and between meaners and the meant, can be duly acknowledged.

One metaphor Gadamerians have sometimes used for human interaction between different contexts is the metaphor of ... metaphor! The point is that the semantic movement between a metaphor's vehicle and tenor is not as uni-directional as often assumed.¹² Take, for instance, the sentence, “George is a lone wolf.” As Max Black once pointed out, “[i]f to call a man a wolf is to put him in a special light, we must not forget that the metaphor makes the wolf seem more human than he otherwise would”.¹³ When metaphors bring the tenor's *x* and the vehicle's *y* together, they raise possibilities, open up new perceptions, generate enquiry. One human being's encounter with another, likewise, can be experienced as placing both parties under review, which is exactly how literary encounters work. It is at least as much the author who reads the reader, so to speak, as the reader who reads the author. Good readers of an old or alien text are often struck by a continuing potentiality it will suggest for their own psychic formation. It makes them more fully aware of all the richness and poverty of their own milieu and moment, in this way providing an impetus to consolidation or change.

The triangular model still applies even when the two negotiating parties are the two halves of one and the same self-communing individual, as when we talk to ourselves or write a diary, and even when the third entity under discussion also includes one or both of the communicating parties, who in that case speak of “me” or “you” or “us”. Equally well, the two parties may not be in direct contact with each other. A responding party may have no feed-back channel by which to convey reactions to the initiating party and, as I say, the initiating party may in any case belong to a completely different life-world or be long since dead and buried, in

12. Joel Weinsheimer, *Philosophical hermeneutics and critical theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

13. Max Black, “Metaphor,” in *Philosophy looks at the arts: Contemporary readings in aesthetics*, ed. Joseph Margolis (New York: Scribner's, 1962), 216–235, esp. 232.

which case the offer of communication will have been preserved in some recorded form of words. Then again, the third entity can also be somebody or something quite unconnected with the communicants themselves, and can very well involve an element of hypotheticality or even fiction. Fictionality, though very typical of the texts which in the nineteenth- and twentieth centuries were regarded as literary, is by no means peculiar to them, and in no way interferes with genuine processes of interaction. Quite the reverse, in fact. As Aristotle's *Poetics* and Sir Philip Sidney's *A Defence of Poetry* can help us see, a made-up story can very well convey its teller's sense of the way things really are, or ought to be. A fiction can embody a sense of felt life that is intelligently open to experience.

Regardless of the precise manner in which the communicational triangle happens to be realized, the possibility of some change to the status quo is always very present. Any such change will begin as a change in the communicants' perceptions and evaluations of the real, hypothetical, or fictional third entity under discussion. Communication, literary communication as much as any other, can be thought of as a semiotic process by which people try, at least ideally speaking, to negotiate a balanced, and even shared view of that entity. In doing so, they inevitably open themselves to the possibility of mental re-adjustments, whose scope can range from the merely very minimal to the much more comprehensive.

6.

The textual means by which such real-world changes come about are basically simple. Obviously enough, a text will always have to give some textual representation of the third entity under discussion. If it is not put into words, how can it be discussed at all? Then, too, texts textualize and contextualize representations of the two negotiating parties as well. Although many linguists have not yet fully noticed this, the implied writers and implied readers which critics have sometimes identified in literary texts have their counterparts in communicative personae arising within any kind of communication at all. Implicitly or explicitly, there is always this textual modelling of the communicative relationship itself. It is the communicants' way of offering each other a kind of stepping stone to, or latching-on point for, empathetic understanding.

Partly it is achieved through deictic expressions: features by which language regularly "points to" all three apexes of the communicative situation. Person deixis assigns first- and second-person roles to the initiating and responding participants, and a third person role to the third entity under discussion. Time deixis and place deixis offer to set the initiator, the respondent and the third entity within temporal and spatial relationships. Social deixis marks the degrees of respect the initiator

conceives as being demanded or manifested by various parties. And in complementarity to deixis, the communicative personae are also built up through explicit statements of information, attitude, and response, and through expressions whose workings are more subliminal. For one thing, and as noted earlier, many words carry evaluative and emotional connotations, even if these will vary in accordance with the particular co-text. For another thing, there are the resources of modality: the surprisingly varied range of linguistic means by which initiators indicate to respondents some degree of commitment or hesitation as to the truth, probability, or desirability of whatever they happen to be talking about.

One slight but common complication is plural address. Any text, written or spoken, that is not addressed to some particular individual will include, at the very least, a respondent persona which is broadly enough defined for more than one receiver to contemplate empathizing with it. Some texts actually include more than one respondent persona. Children's books, for instance, often seem to be written both for children, and for the adults who select and read them aloud for child listeners.¹⁴

A somewhat greater complication, perhaps, is irony, when the initiator purports to think something which he or she does not really think, and/or represents the respondent as thinking something which the respondent is unlikely to think. But in such cases, ironic personae can be thought of as intermediate between the basic initiator and respondent personae by which the communication is modelled, and they are actually part of the content which comes under negotiation.

In everyday conversation, even non-ironic personae can be negotiated. Sometimes we simply do not recognize ourselves in the implied hearer our conversation partner is offering us, in which case we may retort: "Hey, wait a minute! You've got me wrong. I don't think like that." The much more important point, however, is that we do not always seize this opportunity. Why not? Because our powers of imaginative empathy are quite sufficient to enable us to identify, for the purposes and duration of communication, with a respondent persona that is quite unlike our own self-image. In the case of written texts which are not personalized to particular respondents, or which are personalized to some respondent other than ourselves, we do this all the time. With however little enjoyment or approval, a feminist is perfectly capable of reading a text which is written as from one male chauvinist pig to another. No feminist is likely to change into a male chauvinist pig on a permanent basis. Yet especially, though not only, while reading, we do try on new personae for size, as it were, and in any kind of communication at all this

14. See Barbara Wall, *The narrator's voice: The dilemma of children's literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991); Roger D. Sell, "Introduction," in *Children's literature as communication: The ChilPA project* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002), 1–26, esp. 7–8.

is one of the most crucial catalysts to change, since the respondent persona may represent a possibility for human life which in some way influences us. In the case of literary texts from some earlier period and/or from some alien cultural tradition, such otherness may be especially challenging.

7.

As will perhaps be obvious, the opinions, attitudes, evaluations, and emotions which a real initiator builds into the implied respondent persona are carriers of the main rhetorical thrust. They always correspond to the impact the initiator is hoping to have on a real respondent – correspond, that is, to an immediate change the initiator is hoping to bring about to the status quo.

Yet if such changes are to be successfully accomplished, they will never involve absolute separations between one historical state and another, but will be more a matter of gradual co-adaptations between the old and the new, the social and the individual. Any communicant whatever, including a literary author, may partly acquiesce in generally accepted norms as a way of getting other people to take an interest in less usual viewpoints. Dickens set up both initiator and respondent personae who kowtowed to Mrs Grundy, but only in the course of trying to persuade his readers that Mrs Grundy's proprieties were hypocritical humbug. The fundamental principle was spelled out by Aristotle, when he advised orators to present themselves to their listeners as reassuringly ordinary. Initiators who want to be effective have to meet respondents half-way, which means making some concessions.

Even then, their control over perlocutionary effect can be very tenuous. Particularly when the context of current response is very distant from the context of initiation, rhetoric can positively backfire. A skilful writer who once set out to win readers over to the proposition *p* will have done so partly by making every tolerable concession to the proposition not-*p*. But when, under different circumstances, the writer is read by readers who are already convinced of the wisdom of *p*, then *p* itself can act as a concession to them, during an interpretative process which results in their seeing some virtue in not-*p*. Nowadays, we perhaps like to think we have reached a stage of political and sexual liberation that is infinitely preferable to Victorian mores. But a sensitive reading of Dickens, with all his ample concessions to Mrs Grundy, may well leave us wondering whether our liberty really makes us any happier. Without wishing to sacrifice anything we may have gained, we can perhaps ask whether the Victorians understood some important point which we now overlook. Oddly enough, then, a faithful reading of an old or alien author can come to different conclusions from the author's own conclusions, quite simply because the topic under discussion has a different relevance in the new context of reading.

The rhetorical necessity of co-adaptive concessions always makes any bull-at-the-gate directness of authorial message more apparent than real. Like other communicative gestures, literary texts do *leave room* for negotiation within the culture. Milton did want to justify the ways of God to man. Wanted to very badly, in fact – when Satan is allowed to open his mouth, we are usually forewarned that his arguments will be false. But Blake, Shelley, Empson and others have not been sure that even Milton was convinced by this, and the debate is bound to continue. Dickens did want to dethrone Mrs Grundy, similarly. But both he and his readers did kowtow to her as well. In fact a literary text, like any well known text, and also like a public figure or building or ceremony, is a kind of communal symbol, whose significance and affective power are at once polysemous and cumulative, the meanings of its felt life stimulating interminable discussion.¹⁵ As contexts of reading change, new interpretations and new evaluations are for ever evolving, and older ones can also be recycled.¹⁶ In practice, by challenging readers to process the cognitive, emotive, and evaluative meanings associated with both characters, the author, and readers themselves, a literary work implicates them in a hermeneutic effort which continues throughout – and after – reading, and is sometimes very demanding. *King Lear* is in principle representative here. Typically, a literary work will *not* invite some overarching interpretation of its text in its entirety, and agreement with some overarching authorial meaning is certainly not enforced. Scholars and critics who expound such holistic readings are rationalizing after the event.

Milton's epic involves a lot of theology, cosmology, and other seventeenth century learning, which has been felt to call for a lot of explication even over and above his own explication, precisely because the issues always do leave so much open to discussion. And although Milton also passes judgement on his characters' direct speech, he nevertheless does dramatize them, making none of them less than energetic and eloquent, so that their meanings really do come into dialogue with each other, and really do give rise to dialogue with his own authorial meanings, and with many different reader-meanings. In much the same way, a Dickens novel of intrusively omniscient presentation can be no less equivocal than the Jamesian novels of dramatic presentation praised by the Modernist critic Percy Lubbock.¹⁷ To find easier literary experiences, readers can turn to mediaeval allegories or morality

15. Cf. Balz Engler, *Poetry and community* (Tübingen: Stauffenberg Verlag, 1990), 23–41.

16. Roger D. Sell, "Literary gossip, literary theory, literary pragmatics," in *Literature and the new interdisciplinarity: Poetics, linguistics, history*, ed. Roger D. Sell and Peter Verdonk (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 221–241 [= item 13 in Roger D. Sell, *A humanizing literary pragmatics: Theory, criticism, education: Selected papers 1985-2002* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2019), 159–177].

17. Percy Lubbock, *The craft of fiction* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1921).

plays, where dramatization is likely to be more thoroughly monologic. But even there, readers are free to form their own opinion, and although some of them would allow such works only a limited currency, as little more than period pieces, others may perceive in their very simplicities a challenge to the degenerate sophistication of a later age. As for literary works involving no dramatized non-authorial characters at all, a category including many lyric poems, they too can seem straightforward at first glance, and may even be – to adapt Keats’s phrase about Wordsworth – sublimely egotistical.¹⁸ Yet Wordsworth’s own “My heart leaps up / When I behold / A rainbow in the sky”, for instance, is not as naively one-track-minded as may appear. For any alert reader, its ostensible argument that the child is, and can remain, the father of the man is radically and permanently problematic. It could never have been proposed with such emphasis except in dialogue with a very different view. In Wordsworth’s own day, the poem apparently agreed with Rousseau in challenging centuries of Western thought, including, in the last analysis, the Christian church’s doctrine of original sin. More recently, the Rousseauistic view of childhood as a quite separate spiritual and moral preserve, an idea so convincing, or at least attractive, to Victorians, has itself been freshly challenged, not only by the Freudian hypothesis of infantile sexuality, but by growing concerns about child criminals. And from the moment of its publication onwards, the poem’s hope of a pure and joyful adult life was an even greater challenge to readers’ sense of real life possibilities. If Wordsworth himself had not been profoundly aware of such difficulties, he would not have written it in the first place. The optative modality (“I could wish...”, “So be it...”) is clear enough, and is an explicit resistance to what can only be the all too powerful thought of an adulthood worse than death. As he clings to his hope, such acknowledgements of the grimmer alternative view defuse any suggestion of banality by prompting introspection. Despite the up-beat affirmations of a very audible lyric selfhood, Wordsworth was more profoundly endowed with negative capability than Keats admitted.

8.

When Keats said that Shakespeare had the negative capability to be “in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”,¹⁹ and when Empson saw the power and beauty of great literature in terms of its

18. John Keats, *Selected letters*, ed. Frederick Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 172.

19. Keats, *Letters*, 53.

constant ambiguities of thought, emotion and value,²⁰ they were on to something vital. So was the one major twentieth century critic who grasped our permanent need of character criticism, John Bayley, when he said that Dickens, in sending Daniel Peggotty on an untiring search for his sinful niece, was at once giving vent to fashionable sentimentality and being ruthlessly honest about that sentimentality's sometimes maudlin possessiveness.²¹ Even today, this kind of sharp-sighted openness still appears in Jonathan Bate's *The Genius of Shakespeare* (1997),²² where negative capability is no less central a concept than in Bayley's *The Characters of Love* (1960).²³ Bate's frank introspection into the way his own mind ponders over the identities and meanings of the main players in the sonnets, or is teased out of thought by Hal's rejection of Falstaff, by that precarious balance between right and wrong, between appropriate justice and ungenerous callousness, can remind us that literary experience, like human intercourse in general, resists hard-and-fast meanings and easy answers, and never more so than when readers, doing their utmost to be faithful to an author's intention, try to grasp the semantics and pragmatics of the language as used in the context of writing. Bate's method is a far cry from poststructuralist excesses, and he is not an arrogant solipsist. But his criticism, while solidly based on historical and philological expertise, breathes a negative capability which responds to Shakespeare's own. A nervous reaching after definitive single meanings is not his style.

Coleridge, in seeing creative imagination as reconciling "opposite or discordant qualities",²⁴ and Eliot, in saying that the mind of the poet can bring together the noise of the typewriter, the smell of cooking, and the experiences of reading Spinoza and falling in love,²⁵ were no less aware than Keats, Empson, and Bate of literature's polysemous diversities, yet wanted to think of these as synthesized into new artistic wholes. Interpreters following in their footsteps, therefore, and American New Critics especially, though admirably constating many of a text's heterogeneities, often tended towards a mechanical reductiveness, against which Jonathan Culler

20. William Empson, *Seven types of ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930).

21. John Bayley, *The uses of division: Unity and disharmony in literature* (New York: Viking, 1976), 94.

22. London: Picador, 1997.

23. London: Constable, 1960.

24. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* [1817], ed. George Watson (London: Dent, 1956), 174.

25. T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" [1921], in his *Selected essays* (London: Faber, 1951), 281–291, esp. 287.

and Susan Sontag finally protested.²⁶ This was ironic, since one of New Criticism's foundational texts was entitled "The Heresy of Paraphrase". But Cleanth Brooks, its author, had still cherished the dream of articulating literature's new aesthetic wholes in language of his own. Hence, as he himself wryly confessed,

the frequent occurrence in ... [his *The well wrought urn*] of such terms as "ambiguity", "paradox", "complex of attitudes", and – most frequent of all, and perhaps most annoying to the reader – "irony". I hasten to add that I hold no brief for these terms as such. Perhaps they are inadequate. Perhaps they are misleading. It is to be hoped in that case that we can eventually improve on them.²⁷

Uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts are what literature, like human intercourse in general, for ever floods us with. Coleridge is inferior to Shakespeare precisely because, as Keats remarked, he would "let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining Content with half Knowledge".²⁸ Critics praising a major literary work for its artistry are well advised to leave its loose ends untied. Its permanent interest will lie in its very enigmas, and the human itch for certainties must be no less firmly resisted by those explicating its themes or ideas as well. In the classic debate between Wellek and Leavis, whereas Wellek wanted "to show that the romantic view of the world ... underlies and pervades the poetry of Blake, Wordsworth and Shelley ... [and] elucidates many difficulties", Leavis replied,

"The romantic view of the world", a view common to Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and others – yes, I have heard of it; but what interest can it have for the literary critic? For the critic, for the reader whose primary interest is in poetry, those three poets are so radically different, immediately and finally, from one another that the offer to assimilate them in a common philosophy can only suggest the irrelevance of the philosophic approach.²⁹

Leavis, in turning to writers for their quality of felt life, was behaving like any good reader. And as James had already made clear, felt life is a quality whose exact form can never be predicted in advance:

26. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist poetics: Structuralism, linguistics and the study of literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975); Susan Sontag, *Against interpretation and other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1966).

27. Cleanth Brooks, *The well wrought urn: Studies in the structure of poetry* [1947] (London: Methuen, 1968), 159–160.

28. Keats, *Letters*, 53.

29. F. R. Leavis, *The common pursuit* [1952] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 216.

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative – much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius – it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. The young lady living in a village has only to be a damsel upon whom nothing is lost to make it quite unfair (as it seems to me) to declare to her that she shall have nothing to say about the military. ... [She may well be] blessed with the faculty which when you give it an inch takes an ell, and which for the artist is a much greater source of strength than any accident of residence or of place in the social scale. The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it – this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town and in the most differing stages of education.³⁰

Equally, felt life resists neat summaries in retrospect. No less than Cleanth Brooks, Leavis recognizes the difficulties facing a commentator who tries to capture literature's heterogeneities. But unlike Brooks, he does not make matters worse by talking about artistic form and, unlike Wellek, does not go in for philosophical paraphrases. The Jamesian appeal to experience, and ultimately to life itself, has to suffice. Though a strategy not without its own difficulties, for a critic wishing to avoid reductionism it is the only viable course. In Leavis's own words,

“life” is a large word and doesn't admit of definition. But some of the most important words we have to use don't admit of definition. And this truth holds of literary criticism. Not only can we not, for instance, do without the word “life”; any attempt to think out a major critical issue entails using positively the shifts in force the word is bound to be incurring as it feels its way on and out and in towards its fulfilment. And it would hardly be questioned that there is point in saying that a critic who would be intelligent about the novel must be intelligent about life: no discussion of the novel by any other kind of critic is worth attention.³¹

As critics, James and Leavis meet the challenge of an author's sense of felt life by continuing the discussion, by resisting fossilizing formulae. In this kind of criticism, an author's every thought and perception is constantly experienced afresh, as Eliot was well able to see, even though this openness was something his own, more polemical kind of criticism lacked. “James's critical genius”, he wrote,

30. Henry James, *Selected literary criticism*, ed. Morris Shapiro (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 85–86.

31. F. R. Leavis, “Henry James as a critic,” in Henry James, *Selected literary criticism*, ed. Morris Shapiro (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 13–24, esp. 17.

comes out most tellingly in his mastery over, his baffling escape from, Ideas; a mastery and an escape which are perhaps the last test of a superior intelligence. He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it.³²

9.

Yet in all this one apex of the communicational triangle is being neglected. The openness of James and Leavis's criticism certainly represents a duly ethical stance *vis à vis* character meanings and author meanings. But especially in Leavis, what is totally missing is a sensitivity to the range of possible reader meanings. Not only does Leavis arrogate to himself the intelligence deemed necessary in order to discuss the intelligence of literary writers. He also commits the fallacy so typical of evaluative criticism in general, the one great fallacy which Modernist critics had in common with neo-classicals: the unitary context assumption. Leavis writing on Fielding, no less than Pope writing on Shakespeare, never doubted for a moment that his own access to life and experience was representative of the entire human race, an order of pretension whose absurdity was already somewhat glossed over, as it happened, in James's appeal to the omnipercipient damsel of the village. To "a mind ... demanding more than external action", Leavis thundered, Fielding is superficial, i.e. totally deficient in "marked moral intensity".³³ Leavis clearly thought that mature readers of any time and place ought to agree with him, and that Fielding himself should have known better than to write as he did.

In the post-Augustan period Thomas Warton's *Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser*, and in our own time Bate's book on Shakespeare, richly supply what Pope and Leavis lack: an intuition as to what the sensibility of their own time and place might blind them to. Bate is able to help present-day English monolinguals read Shakespeare through the eyes of admirers in nineteenth century Germany and France, while Warton had the flexibility of mind to see that a taste drawing its legitimation from Homer and Aristotle – from the "example and precept of antiquity" – represented only one set of possible criteria, and that the "romantic manner of poetical composition introduced and established by the Provencial bards" was not mere "Gothic ignorance and barbarity", but had charms and excitements of its own.³⁴

32. T. S. Eliot, "In memory of Henry James" [1918], in *T. S. Eliot: Selected prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975), 151–152.

33. F. R. Leavis, *The great tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 11–12.

34. Thomas Warton, *Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser: The Second Edition*, 2 vols (London: Dodsley and Fletcher, 1762) I 11–12.

So how were those charms and excitements to be highlighted and justified for Warton's own readers? Warton's explicit strategy was to "search" writers contemporary with Spenser himself: to examine "the books on which the peculiarities of his style, taste, and composition, are confessedly founded".³⁵ In elucidating Spenser's own horizon of expectations, he hoped to foster self-awareness as to the preconceptions of his (Warton's) own age, so as to counteract their inhibiting effect on literary appreciation. Gently chiding Pope for reading Shakespeare too much through Augustan spectacles, he commented, "If Shakespeare is worth reading, he is worth explaining,"³⁶ and his entire treatise on Spenser was an exercise in the kind of positive mediation which is self-conscious, deliberately fair-minded, and purposefully oriented towards a future in which people will better understand the people unlike themselves. It was all very well to say that William Caxton and the mediaeval texts he printed were "rude and uncouth." But in "an illiterate and unpolished age he [Caxton] multiplied books, and consequently readers", an observation whose continuing clear fondness for Augustan polish does not, in its full context, patronize Caxton, because Warton has so unashamedly opened himself to the imaginative power of that earlier age's literature as well.³⁷

Since even one and the same positionality can be differently inflected, commentaries on literature always need, it seems to me, something of this humble readiness to mediate, quite regardless of whether the mediation will operate between two different historical epochs, between two or more cultures or subcultures simultaneously embroiled in postmodern culture wars, or just within the here and now of some single culture – if such enclosures still exist. Strengthened, I would hope, by a historical but non-determinist theory of communicational pragmatics, mediating critics will find their ethical impulse, now as always, in the need to discourage self-isolating arrogance and to increase understanding and enjoyment. Here they will be facilitating what are in any case the normal workings of literature in society: the negotiation of multiple meanings of all kinds and sources, and the bonding of a single community of widely diversified participants, all of them endowed with the relative independence of mind necessary to understand each other, all of them sharing the existential lowest common denominators of birth, death, life in society, and human needs, both primary and secondary, all of them personally *interested* in the multifarious ways the existential basics can be realized.

More particularly, mediating critics will nowadays want to move away from the scholastic de-humanization which so clearly marked some twentieth century

35. Warton, *Observations*, II 263–264.

36. Warton, *Observations*, II 265.

37. Warton, *Observations*, II 266.

literary scholarship, preferring instead, not only to take up new concerns, but to rehabilitate and modify approaches which came naturally to Warton – character criticism, literary history, author biography, and philology in the broadest sense. This will be their way to demonstrate, and to foster in other readers, spiritual capacities which fundamentally improve the general quality of life in society: above all, the power of empathy, the generous recognition of human achievement, and hopefulness. In interactivity with a literary author, it will be empathy which requires the faithfulness to author meanings, the awareness of the semantics and pragmatics of the author’s language in the context of writing, and the sensitivity to all the countless character meanings and reader meanings as well. The human achievement to be recognized will be the author’s historical deed of writing itself, and the co-adaptive balance of tact and boldness by which it may have brought about change. As for hopefulness, this quality inspires genuine communication of any kind at all, and includes a hope of communication itself. In the reader of a literary work, hopefulness will be a response to hopefulness in the author, to that quality so much to the fore in “My heart leaps up”, which is ultimately not a hopefulness as regards the author’s own personal future, but a hopefulness which always embraces the lives of the readers whom the act of writing seeks to draw together. Not least when the meanings interchanged are difficult or painful or divisive, good readers warm to an author’s venture, as a widening of the circle of communicants, alive and dead, in dialogue.³⁸

Mediating critics will not pose as gurus or the purveyors of profound insights. But like water dripping on stone, their gentle practice may in the long run bring about a change. Perhaps they could help to encourage a perception that, culturally speaking, postmodernity has gone off at half-cock. Many new constituencies have found their voice, but without coming to be thought of as in full communication *with each other*. This has meant that the meanings of any particular literary text have often been taken as specific to some particular grouping, which necessarily entails that literature’s wavelength becomes politicized. Hence, in critics, a much diminished sensitivity to the types of meaning springing from a sense of felt life, and to qualities of negative capability. James’s “mastery over, his baffling escape from, Ideas” has become so much a thing of the past that Jonathan Bate has few living peers. Postmodern criticism has been all too likely to close discussion down, so underlining sociocultural divisions, and increasing the risk of conflicts potentially dangerous to all parties.

Yet in other respects postmodern developments could not be more promising. Here I am not merely paying deference to the general extension of political,

38. See Sell, *Mediating Criticism*

economic, educational, and cultural enfranchisement. What I also have in mind is one specific potentiality of the postmodern view of literature and literature's meanings. Perhaps inevitably, James and Leavis's way of talking about literature tended to suggest that the intelligence which could supply and appreciate the meanings of felt life and negative capability was the literary author's and the literary critic's prerogative. Given postmodernity's recognition of a wider range of literary genres, that same kind of intelligence, if it can only be rehabilitated, could gradually come to be attributed to writers and readers who, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, would not have been regarded as engaging in literary activity at all. And despite the postmodern levelling of high- and lowbrow to middlebrow, or trends such as new historicist criticism, which undermines the sense of literature as art by applying one and the same ideological analysis to non-literary texts and literary texts alike, there are already signs that writers and their readers will not be permanently satisfied by a criticism which leaves artistry to one side.³⁹ There seems little chance of a return to the New Critical coupling of art with a special kind of holistic meaning. This would nowadays be seen as an elitist obscurantism merely calculated to put a lid on discussion – even if the claim to definitive interpretations was belied by the incontinence of New Critical publishing activity itself. But the future certainly could restore an eighteenth-century-style recognition of good writing in many different forms, and of a widely distributed human wisdom as well. In which case, the meanings of literature would be more fully appreciated as having the same kind of human value and relevance as meanings elsewhere, while other uses of language, conversely, would not necessarily be regarded as artistically inferior to literature. Not to put too fine a point on it, the nineteenth- and twentieth century's snobbishly narrow concept of literature would have become finally untenable, and the circle of heterogeneous participants in bonding communication would be that much larger. The world would be a safer, happier place.

39. Richard Shusterman, "Don't believe the hype: Animadversions on the critique of popular art," *Poetics Today* 14 (1993):101–122.

What is literary communication and what is a literary community?¹

The emergent literatures discussed in this present volume [i.e. *Emergent literatures and globalisation*] are the literatures of various groupings of people: of people who live in some particular place, speak and write some particular language or languages, and have a certain range of sociocultural affinity. Indeed, the emergence of such a grouping's literature can probably be taken as a sign that the grouping itself is emerging. Emerging in what sense? Well, sometimes, I suppose, emerging from unselfconsciousness into the kind of self-awareness that can attach to a group identity. And always, I would think, emerging from a state of imperceptibility to *other* groupings, so as to become a grouping whose profile is more widely recognized at large. The emergence of the grouping's literature itself sets a seal on the grouping's very existence and importance.

During the early modern era – in the Europe, that is to say, of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – the emergence of new literatures in the various vernaculars was, we could perhaps say, a straightforward process. Would-be poets, in particular, were still usually men. Any vernacular poet worth his salt wanted to make the literature of his own language as great as the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. And in order to do that, his writing career would still include particular classical genres, and in a certain order. To take English examples, Spenser and Milton, just like Virgil long before them, began with pastoral and in later life turned to epic. Their readers recognized and understood what they were doing.

We ourselves belong to the postmodern era. The three hierarchical distinctions involved in those early-modern literary emergences – the intellectual superiority of men to women, the cultural superiority of the ancient classical world to modern Europe, and the superiority of pastoral, epic and (of course) tragedy to, say, satire or comedy – no longer survive. Nowadays there are very obviously both men and women writers. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries European and American military and cultural imperialisms far surpassed those of Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar, but have by now been roundly challenged by the postcolonial “writing back” of the peoples dominated. And given the postmodern challenge to

1. [First published in *Emergent literatures and globalisation: Theory, society, politics*, eds Sonia Faessel and Michel Pérez (Paris: In Press Editions, 2004), 39–45.]

elitist legitimations of every kind, given the steady levelling of highbrow and lowbrow to middlebrow, the idea that some genres of literature would be higher than others, or indeed the idea that literature as a whole would be sharply distinguishable from other writing as Literature or Art with a capital “L” or capital “A”, no longer really holds up. Today, it is impossible to predict what kind of person a writer will be, impossible to say in which regions of the world writing is most likely to take place, and impossible to know what form writing will take. All of which, though it makes the situation for an emergent literature much more complicated, actually makes it much more relaxed and easy as well. Spenser and Milton, in every line they wrote, had to mark their own masculinity, could feel Virgil breathing down their necks, and were anxious not to slip into stylistic impurities.

The hierarchical thinking of the early modern period is very clear in a sonnet written by Sir John Beaumont to praise Sir Thomas Hawkins’s verse translations of Horace, which were published in 1625.

What shall I first commend? your happy choice
 Of this most usefull *Poet*? or your skill
 To make the *Eccho* equall with the voice,
 And trace the Lines drawne by the *Authors* quill?
 The *Latine* Writers by unlearned hands,
 In forraine Robes unwillingly are drest,
 But thus invited into other Lands,
 Are glad to change their tongue at such request.
 The good, which in our minds their labours breed,
 Layes open to their Fame a larger way.
 These strangers *England* with rich plentie feed,
 Which with our Countreys freedome we repay:
 When sitting in pure Language like a Throne,
 They prove as great with us, as with their owne.²

Beaumont unhesitatingly uses that word which postmodern thinkers such as Barthes and Foucault have thrown into question: “author”. He hero-worships classical authors as “great”, in a way which, perhaps since Lytton Strachey’s debunking of the great Victorians, and certainly since the Hitler phenomenon, has been more or less taboo in English-language cultures. There is a sharp contrast between the “unlearned hands” of other translators and the intellectual superiority of the elite to which Hawkins and Beaumont himself belong, and just as sharp a contrast between Hawkins’s “pure language” and those rivals’ linguistic impurities.

2. *The shorter poems of Sir John Beaumont: A critical edition with an introduction and commentary*, ed. Roger D. Sell [= Acta Academiae Aboensis, ser. A, vol. 49] (Åbo: Åbo Akademi Press, 1974), 177.

Yet even in the early modern era, the emergence of a new literature such as English literature did not leave the hierarchical discriminations of the status quo unchanged. The climax of Beaumont's sonnet tells how, thanks to Hawkins's translations, there is a new mutuality, a giving and taking, between contemporary English readers and ancient classic writers. Horace and others can now feed England "with rich plentie", and English people can "repay" them by granting them the freedom of the country and enthroning them in the new language. In effect Beaumont is saying, "The classic writers become one of us, and we one of them." Even by imitating classic writers as dutifully as possible, even by merely translating them, the early modern vernacular writer could, to Beaumont's perception, bring about an enlargement of literary community which undermined, not only the historical and geographical boundaries of different times and places, but the kind of ideological boundaries instantiated by his own sonnet's hierarchical binarisms.

In our postmodern era, when those ideological boundaries have disappeared, an emergent literature should in principle be able to enlarge the literary community world-wide. The great paradox of emergent literatures – of emergent literatures during any period of history at all, but especially in our own postmodern age – is that on the one hand an emergent literature defines and gives a voice to the particular grouping of people from within which it emerges, but that on the other hand that very voicing can simultaneously undermine the boundary it defines, by improving audibility, as one might say, between one grouping and another.

Twentieth century literary theory gave us no way to talk about such communal self-definition and boundary-transgressing enlargement. And that was because it had so little to say about literature as one among other forms of communication. Or to put this slightly differently, twentieth century theoreticians, even if they did sometimes purport to discuss literature as communication, did not consider what is surely communication's most fundamental dimension, to which the term's etymology is itself the key: communication as *community-making*. In my own recent work, I have therefore tried to develop an account of *literary* communication or community-making,³ a task which has led me to give special emphasis to three main points.

3. E.g. *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000); *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001); "Henry V and the Strength and Weakness of Words: Shakespearian Philology, Historicist Criticism, Communicative Pragmatics," in *Shakespeare and Scandinavia: A collection of nordic essays*, ed. Gunnar Sorelius (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 108–41; "Communication: A counterbalance to professional specialization," in *Innovation and continuity in English studies: A critical jubilee*, ed. Herbert Grabes (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2001), 73–89; "A Historical but non-deterministic pragmatics of literary communication," *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 2 (2001):1–32; "Postmodernity, literary pragmatics, mediating criticism: Meanings within a large

First, genuine communication is not, as so many linguists, semioticians, narratologists, and literary theoreticians of the twentieth century suggested, a one-way process by which a sender sends a message to a receiver. On all too many occasions in real life, communication certainly does have this monologic form. But this, in my terminology, is not genuine or true communication. Here I have gained help from Habermas, much of whose most important writing is about the ways in which communication can be distorted by inequalities of power. I, too, see these kinds of ethical consideration at work.⁴ In genuine communication, neither party enjoys a monopoly of agency, and neither party is relegated to a mainly passive role in the way suggested by the sender/receiver binarism. Genuine communication is a meeting of autonomous minds which conceive of each other as equally empowered. So what happens can be thought of, less in terms of something being sent from the one to the other, than in terms of the two of them comparing notes about some third entity. The communicational situation is not a bi-polarity, but a tri-polarity, even when the third entity under discussion is one or both of the participants themselves, even when, as so often with the texts we call literary texts, the third entity involves fictionality, even when, as typically in literature, there is no direct feedback channel from the responding participant to the initiating participant (who can well be dead and buried), and even when, as in the case of literature, the use of language and the textual structure are sometimes very different from those of most other kinds of communication.

Secondly, and again contrary to most linguists, semioticians, narratologists, and literary theoreticians of the twentieth century, but *not* contrary to the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer, communication always takes place within a dual context.

circle of communicants” [= item 1 in the present selection]; and “Blessings, benefactions, bear’s services: Great Expectations and a communicational narratology,” *European Journal of English Studies*, forthcoming [8 (2004): 49–80]. See also Roger D. Sell (ed.), *Children’s literature as communication: The ChilPA project* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002).

4. [Postscript, 2019. In some more recent work I still draw a strong contrast between coercive and non-coercive communication, but conceptualize this as a contrast between, on the one hand, a transitive sending of something (a message) to be interpreted within a single context proposed by the sender and, on the other hand, an intransitive process of comparing notes about something as seen from within the initiator’s and respondent’s two different life-worlds. People engaged in intransitive communication are far more likely to respect each other’s human autonomy than people communicating transitively. But I am nowadays careful to recognize that transitivity can be ethically unimpeachable, for instance as a swift and practical response to a dangerous situation, or when the something communicated is something worth knowing in and of itself. Conversely, intransitive communication can be mimicked for ulterior motives, for instance by spies or salespeople, whose success can depend on their ability to create a false appearance of fellowship with those they are targeting. In addition, pseudo-intransitivity can be an effective delaying tactic.]

In the twentieth century's binary model of communication, the sender and the receiver were usually assumed to be operating within just some single, unitary context, by reference to which the receiver would be able to decode the otherwise quite arbitrary relationship of the sender's signifiers to particular signifieds. In fact, however, every time two communicants enter into negotiation of some third entity they approach that entity from different, however minimally different, points of view. Otherwise, they would have no need to discuss it at all. Even a pair of identical twins who have had a to all intents and purposes identical upbringing from time to time feel a need to talk to each other, because they do not completely share one and the same world of experience, memories, attitudes, interests. They have, we might say, the same biological and social formation, but with slightly different inflections. But conversely, two people with completely different biological and social backgrounds can nevertheless communicate with each other, when their two contexts of operation are not completely separate. To underline the point: communicational contexts are not unitary, and are not two separate contexts either, but are a duality of two different contexts which at least partly overlap. If there were no overlap at all, if the two people did not at least share experience of the existential fundamentals of human life in the world, they would be unable to meet each other at all. In the case of a literary text, the precise structure of the contextual duality will vary in harmony with the relationship between the writer's positionality and the varying positionality of each new reader, not least in terms of the reader's age.

Thirdly, the result of genuine communication is that the area of contextual overlap increases. The two parties are not completely determined by their own positionality. They have sufficient intelligence, imagination and will-power to empathize their way into the minds of people who are different from themselves. They get to know more about each other's worlds, in that sense actually sharing them. True, this increase in commonality is not necessarily the same thing as agreement. If the communication is genuine and undistorted in the sense I have explained, any agreement between the two parties may remain nothing more than an agreement to differ. Yet even so, the increased commonality of knowledge does amount to an increase in mutual understanding for which the term "community" is not a misnomer. The fact is that the community resulting from genuine communication is not at all the same thing as a hegemony. No matter how strange this may at first sound, a genuine community is a social grouping which positively embraces social difference, just as Beaumont still insisted on the translated Horace's distinction as an ancient classic, while welcoming him into the ranks of seventeenth-century speakers of English. Without that element of difference *within* community, there would have been no "rich plentie" for English readers to be fed upon.

By the age of late modernity, by the time of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the European and American empires had well and truly usurped the place

of Horace's Rome, just as Rome had usurped that of Plato's Athens. European and American literatures accordingly came to carry the new cultural hegemonies, which right up until the 1950s and 1960s were reinforced by the notion that such literatures reflected what any true human being would immediately acknowledge as a human universality. Seen this way, those literatures did not leave much room for a reader to disagree with them. The difference between a literary writer's positionality and every new reader's positionality got masked over, and the literary canon was to be admired by a readership thought of as human in the most homogeneous sense.

The early-postmodern critique of modernity changed all that, but not entirely for the better. In the struggles of many groupings to win acknowledgement from other groupings of their fundamental human rights, human beings came to be seen as totally determined by their own sociocultural positionality. Group membership and group identity became so politically important that any deviation from the particular group's social script was frowned upon, with the result that communication with other groups actually deteriorated. This was the stalemate of the so-called culture wars of the 1990s. As far as literature was concerned, there was no longer a canon of world literature, but lots of different canons for lots of different groupings – black writers, black female writers, Jewish writers, gay writers, writers of particular regions, and so on and so on. These were all, in their way, emergent literatures – emerging from within, or in opposition to, an older national or global canon – and sometimes there was a clear implication that each of these new literatures had a different readership which did *not* read the books of other readerships.

But my suggestion is that an emergent literature does not need to work like this. Yes, the group identity will certainly be brought into clearer focus. But also, the voice of that identity can become audible to other groupings and enter into dialogue with them. When such dialogue is genuine and undistorted, and is assisted, as and when necessary, by translators, scholars, critics, and teachers who take upon themselves the role of mediation, then an increasingly large international community can develop of difference within sameness, sameness within difference. So even though postmodern identity scripts could be very cramping, the postmodern rejection of the modern hierarchies in literature did not make universality suddenly unattainable. In the longer term, postmodern critique opened the way for what we can call a new, post-postmodern universality of endless hybridities, rainbow coalitions, and self-division, a joyous, non-hegemonic universality which the ongoing emergence of new literatures still constantly replenishes.

Gadamer, Habermas, and a re-humanized literary scholarship¹

Huge generalizations about the state of scholarship should be taken with a pinch of salt, especially when they are self-congratulatory. But for what it is worth, my impression is that we literary scholars are now leaving some of our twentieth-century shortcomings well behind. During that century vast amounts of literary scholarship were being published, much of it faithfully carrying on the traditional tasks of editing, annotation, commentary, and interpretation, and much of it wonderfully enriching. The long series of attempts to develop a theory of literature led to important new insights, and the sheer professionalization of literary studies brought enormous benefits, ranging from the steadily increasing wealth of bibliographical and other research tools to the rich variety of opportunities for discussion, whether at conferences, through scholarly networks, or in journals and periodicals. The downsides of twentieth-century literary scholarship were that literary theorizing sometimes distanced itself from actual literary texts, and from the human beings who actually write and read them, and that scholarly professionalism could all too easily lead to a publish-or-perish mentality, elitist jargon, and sheer over-specialization – symptomatically, books on literature for the general educated reader were becoming a rarity. I touched on this dehumanizing scholasticism in an interview for *Sobodnost* in 2003,² and have elsewhere tried to suggest some remedies, most extensively in my *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized* (2001).³ Judging from several publications and conference papers of the past two or three years, however, others are now thinking along the same lines. Especially noteworthy, I thought, was Peter Barry's paper at the 2006 Conference of the European Society for the Study of English, in which he argued that it is time to go back to careful close reading, and to a genuine effort of textual, co-textual, contextual and intertextual interpretation. It is against this encouraging background that I shall here try to suggest the possible relevance, for a re-humanized literary scholarship, of Gadamer and Habermas.

1. [First published in *Literary criticism as Metacommunity*, eds Smiljana Komar and Uros Mozetic (Ljubljana: Slovene Association for the Study of English, 2007), 213–220.]

2. Roger D. Sell, Interviewed by Dusanka Zabukovec. *Sobodnost* 67 (2003): 824–32.

3. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

At first my suggestion may seem a non-starter. Gadamer and Habermas have published a fair number of books, some of them very fat, and in difficult language. That there are already extensive commentaries on them would seem to indicate a risk of more mere scholasticism. This risk I must frankly acknowledge, but I personally hope to avoid it by being as clear and concise as I can manage.

Literary scholars undaunted by the prospect of scholasticism may have another objection. Gadamer and Habermas are interested in interpersonal understanding and interpretation, whereas literature – well, *is* literature something to be understood and interpreted? Peter Barry thinks it is, and so do I. But are Peter Barry and I right? Are understanding and interpretation the most appropriate modes to be applied to literature? Or are they the *only* modes, or just *two* of the modes? Do we have to understand and interpret literature first, before we can do anything else with it? Or do we understand and interpret it in parallel processing with some other activity? Or does understanding and interpretation come last? After all, many commentators do seem to have rationalized after the event – whatever the event was.

According to F. R. Leavis, when readers turn to a literary work they are not looking for a line of argument, but for qualities of felt life and experience.⁴ Cleanth Brooks, too, said that literary texts are fundamentally unparaphrasable.⁵ Oddly enough, though, a similar stance is to be found in Gadamer, who discusses literature under the category of the beautiful. A work of art, he says, has to be thought of *as* a work of art. It is not “the bearer of a message”. So he finds Hegel’s approach to art unsatisfactory, because it assumed that “everything that addresses us obscurely and non-conceptually in the particular sensuous language of art was to be recuperated by philosophy in the form of a concept”.⁶ Why, then, we might ask, does Gadamer himself write about art? – unless to say that he *cannot* write about it. About beauty, is there anything hermeneutical really to be said?

By perpetuating, as it would seem, a Kantian sense of aesthetic beauty, Gadamer is surely in danger of dehumanizing literature at least as much as twentieth-century literary formalists did.⁷ And surely his concept of the work of art as a classic could flip over into elitism. True, his point is not that the classic work establishes some

4. F. R. Leavis, “Literary criticism and philosophy,” in his *The common pursuit* [1952] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 211–222.

5. Cleanth Brooks, “The heresy of paraphrase” [1947], in his *The well wrought urn* (London: Methuen, 1968), 157–75.

6. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The relevance of the beautiful and other essays*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 33.

7. A dehumanization discussed in Roger D. Sell, *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000), 29–75.

kind of standard before which admirers must for ever afterwards bow and scrape. Instead, the classic for him is always the same, yet is also always different, depending on how it is freshly perceived by each new audience. The classic is not so much universal as deciduous, so to speak.⁸ Yet in his thinking generally, Gadamer does place a very strong emphasis on tradition, of which the artistic and literary heritage is of course a part. Habermas has not been alone in thinking that this does leave an opening, at least, for authoritarianism.

But then Habermas himself makes a sharp distinction between poetry and communication. Poetry, he says, is not communication but a heightening of rhetoric. In real communication, he continues, such heightening does not occur. In real communication, the role of rhetoric is much more subordinate.⁹

How rhetoric, especially heightened rhetoric, can be anything but oriented to communication is difficult to see. But Habermas's suggestion, so closely akin to the formalist New Critics' disregard of authorial intention and impact on the reader, is typical enough of philosophical hermeneuticians, whose usual starting-point is a concern for ratiocination. Their interest is in meanings, interpretation, understanding, agreement, and disagreement. So they often think of language mainly as a medium for thoughts, for arguments, for ideas, and for real-world truths. Admittedly, they also go well beyond this, making crucial connections between language-use and real-world power. The central concept in much of Habermas is nothing less than "communicative action".¹⁰ He sees communication as a *form* of action, and re-writes sociology entirely on this basis, as a *critical* sociology which examines communicational pragmatics from precisely an ethical point of view. But as far as literature goes, both Habermas and Gadamer think of it as an aesthetic heterocosm that is quite separate.

So on *literary* pragmatics they remain silent, and it is no surprise that they have nothing to say about the pragmatics of fiction. When Gadamer speaks of poetry's aesthetic beauty, and of the impossibility of recuperating art in the form of a concept, there may even be a distant echo of Plato's grouse about the poet as a liar. It is almost as if literary language could engage in no form of action apart from beauty-making and truth-telling, and as if these two activities were mutually exclusive.

8. Joel Weinsheimer, *Philosophical hermeneutics and literary theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 148.

9. Jürgen Habermas, 1998 [1985], "On the distinction between poetic and communicative uses of language," in his *On the pragmatics of communication* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 383–401.

10. Jürgen Habermas, *The theory of communicative action, vols. 1 & 2* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 & 1987), and *On the pragmatics of communication* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press)

A humanized literary scholarship must certainly acknowledge literature's full communicativity in ways that Habermas and Gadamer have explicitly ruled out. What I should like to suggest, however, is that Habermas and Gadamer's most profound insights into communication in general can also be applied to literature, along lines which they themselves have not envisaged.

In what senses, exactly, is the interchange between a literary author and a reader the same as other kinds of communication? My own account, developed in my *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism*,¹¹ runs as follows. When two parties are genuinely communicating, this is not a matter of a message being transmitted from an active sender to a more passive receiver, though – heaven knows! – much communication certainly is depressingly monologic. Genuine communication is more egalitarian, tending, as hinted by the very etymology of the term “communication”, to *make or consolidate a community*. The two parties begin from within their two different positionalities – their two different life-worlds of experience-knowledge-beliefs-thoughts-values which only partly overlap with each other – and the process entered upon is essentially one of comparing notes about some third entity. This third entity can be either the communicants themselves (as when you and I talk about you and me) or somebody or something quite unconnected with the communicants themselves, and it can also involve an element of hypotheticality or even fiction, as in jokes about celebrities, or as in most of the texts nowadays regarded as literary. Nor does what is said or written necessarily involve a paraphrasable argument. What goes on can have less to do with meanings than with feelings, attitudes, affect, and moral sensibility, so that any change to the status quo will begin as a change in the communicants' perceptions, feelings, or evaluations concerning the real, hypothetical or fictional third entity under discussion. Seen this way, communicants, including readers of literature, inevitably lay themselves open to the possibility of mental and emotional re-adjustment, by which the overlap between the two different life-worlds will actually be increased, sometimes very considerably. Even at its most minimal, even when communicants' attempts to empathize with otherness do not result in positive agreement, the expansion of positional overlap is in itself an enlargement of community. A community arising from mutual understanding and respect can be very heterogeneous. It is not at all the same thing as a consensus.

I say this is my own account. But apart from its inclusion of fictionality and unparaphrasability, nothing could be more Gadamerian. It is from Gadamer that I have drawn the crucial point about communication as a dynamic triangularity. It is Gadamer, in other words, who says that communicant A, with his or her own

11. See fn. 7.

context and horizon of expectations, is in communication with communicant *B*, with his or her own context and horizon of expectations, about some third entity. And it is Gadamer who suggests that as a result of negotiating this third entity their two understandings may come closer together, and their different horizons of expectations partly merge.¹²

This means that, despite his own aesthetics, Gadamer can provide a valuable counterbalance to the more dehumanizing forms of literary theory. But this is by no means all. Both he and Habermas can offer us literary scholars other important benefits as well.

For a start, their intense concern for dialogicality can prompt us to steer clear of both arrogant presentism and dry-as-dust historical or cultural purism. On the one hand, they will shame us out of imposing our own values on a writer's there-and-then. On the other hand, as soon as we so much as hint that writers' significance within their own there-and-then represents the sum total of their human interest, Gadamer and Habermas will ridicule our pedantry.

More generally, they can inspire a sheer hopefulness for human communication, thereby making certain trends in twentieth century commentary seem quaintly paranoid. Especially potent will be their antidote to interpretations that were grimly deterministic. Their perception is that human beings are *not* completely shaped by language, culture, society, or history, so that the barrier between one sociocultural grouping and another is *not* completely watertight. They see communication between different formations as a bracing possibility.

In fact for Gadamer and Habermas, sociohistorical differences are not an insuperable obstacle to communication but a positive stimulus. Otherness is exciting, because it may always turn out to be a significant otherness for us, so prompting us to creative self-inspection. Communication, that is to say, is bound up with our very processes of individuation, which are nothing if not dialogical. To speak metaphorically, genuine communication is itself metaphor! It is a juxtaposition of participant *A* and participant *B*, as a result of which they see themselves in each other's light, and so become susceptible to change.

This is *not* how Dickens was read by the Modernist critic Edmund Wilson.¹³ In his essay "Dickens: The two Scrooges" Wilson realized, of course, that Dickens did not belong to the same age as he did, and that he had his own perceptions, ideas, and values. Indeed, one of the strengths of the essay was to point this out. But pointing this out did not in itself make for an engagement with Dickens that

12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and method: Second, revised edition* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989).

13. Edmund Wilson, "Dickens: The two Scrooges", in his *The wound and the bow* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), 1–104.

was dynamically communicational. Rather than entering into open-minded dialogue with him, Wilson himself remained rigidly unchanged, instead making it look as if all the change were taking place in Dickens, who during the course of the essay indeed seemed to be changing beyond all recognition. According to Wilson's gloomily presentist reading, Dickens explored disturbing subconscious traits of the kind identified by Freud or Adler or Jung, plus ideological subterfuges of the kind pinpointed by Marxian analysis. For Wilson, Dickens was now a kindred spirit, whose picture of both human nature and society was very bleak indeed.

Today, largely thanks to Wilson, most people would probably agree that Dickens certainly can be extremely unsettling. Even so, a hermeneutic critic will say: "Fine! That is what Wilson thought about Dickens. What would Dickens have thought about Wilson?" If Wilson disparaged all the fun and cheerful entertainment in Dickens, and questioned, in particular, his belief in the possibility of decent behaviour and sincere human goodness, then surely Dickens would have felt that Wilson and his contemporaries were – perhaps understandably, given the appalling times in which they lived – desperately miserable, far more miserable than was healthy. After a whole century of mandatory cultural pessimism, a present-day hermeneutic critic could at last point to influential thinkers with a very different orientation, thinkers such as the zoologist Matt Ridley, for instance, who says that virtuous behaviour is actually natural – that virtue comes much more readily to our genetic programming than psychoanalysts, Marxists and Modernist literary critics once believed.¹⁴

A further service that a hermeneutic critic can render in a case like this is to probe the element of cultural elitism. As a Modernist critic, Wilson thought of himself as highlighting aspects of Dickens's work which ordinary readers had overlooked. His working assumption was that ordinary readers were too complacent; they simply perpetuated the wide-spread view that Dickens was above all a jovial entertainer – the favourite uncle at every family hearth. But although "Dickens: The two Scrooges" is without question one of the greatest critical essays ever written, the Modernist suspicion of stock responses, prejudices, and common sense could, in its very elitism, become an unreflecting stock response in its own right, deliberately cutting itself off from important ideas and feelings just because they were widely shared and, within the culture of literary studies, still inhibiting discussion, discussion of *Dombey and Son* and *David Copperfield*, for instance, several decades after Modernism's acme.¹⁵

Faced with this, philosophical hermeneuticians can offer a cautious rehabilitation of common sense, and even a carefully hedged apology for prejudice.

14. Matt Ridley, *The origins of virtue* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997).

15. As noted in Roger D. Sell, "Decorum versus indecorum in *Dombey and Son*" and "The pains and pleasures of *David Copperfield*," in Sell, *Mediating criticism*, 165–193, 263–290.

According to Gadamer, we have the common sense and prejudices of our own situationality – of our “thrown-ness”, in Heidegger’s language – and this serves us as a kind of support. Without it, in situations demanding a swift response we should be quite incapacitated, and even when we do have more time to think, common sense and prejudice are still our only starting point. Some commentators have complained that Gadamer is very conservative and even reactionary here. This, though, is unfair, since he also strongly emphasizes that when we do think, and when we face new situations, our common sense and prejudices are open to revision. His idea is that common sense and prejudice are assets deserving a certain respect, but not that our critical faculties should be put on hold. On the contrary, he sees today’s common sense and prejudice as having resulted from a criticism of yesterday’s.

If these insights were more fully to permeate the culture of literary scholarship, scholastic one-up-manship would become, even more rapidly, a thing of the past. The feelings, perceptions, and responses of people who are not themselves professional scholars would win greater respect. Such amateurs would be warmly welcomed as partners in dialogue, whose views might well be open to modification, but might equally well challenge scholars’ own clichés and orthodoxies. The knee-jerk rejection of ordinary ways of thinking so typical of twentieth century literary scholastics – their proclamation of intentional and affective fallacies, their blanket denunciation of stock responses, their routine deconstruction of common sense – would be superseded by a truer scholarly self-knowledge, and some appropriate modesty.

As well as improving the general climate of debate, these same insights could help with certain specific problems in literary discussion. Not least: How are we to talk about the prejudices we find in literary authors themselves? What about T. S. Eliot’s anti-Semitic attitudes, for instance?

Even as a young man, Eliot was not without his snobberies. One of the student essays he wrote at Harvard was about Kipling, an older member of something rather like his own patrician class, but also a very popular writer. When Eliot blamed him for being immature,¹⁶ the foretaste of I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis’s chastisement of stock responses was very marked. A decade or so later, one of the key arguments in the critical essays through which he prepared the ground for his own literary breakthrough was that “it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*” (his italics),¹⁷ a sentence which rapidly became a *locus classicus* of Modernist elitism. Yet the connotations evoked by the Jewish characters in his own early poems can seem at least as facile and unquestioning as Kipling’s alleged jingoism, and they were also, of course, just as acceptable to contemporaries

16. See Christopher Ricks, “Defects of Kipling (1909)”, *Essays in Criticism* 51 (2001): 1–7

17. T. S. Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets” [1921], in his *Selected essays* (London: Faber, 1951), 281–291, esp. 289.

of widely varied class backgrounds. But then again, given the subsequent course of twentieth century history, and given Eliot's indisputable intelligence, and his later, sincere Christian humility, did he remain unswervingly anti-Semitic for the rest of his life? Or did he begin to scrutinize and readjust his own prejudices in the way that Gadamerian hermeneutics suggests is natural? According to Christopher Ricks's *T. S. Eliot and prejudice*, Eliot really did subject his own views to criticism, and from very early on.¹⁸ Ricks's slight handicap, however, is his own apparent unawareness of Gadamer, which means that his own revisionist account of prejudice, courageous and profoundly thoughtful in itself, is more uphill work than it need have been, and correspondingly more open to attack. In the Jewish critic Anthony Julius's *T. S. Eliot, anti-Semitism, and literary form* (1995), Ricks is accused of actually trivializing the issues.¹⁹ For Julius, a prejudice is always evil in itself, and extremely unlikely to be changed. Obviously, he and Ricks are very far apart, and their disagreement will not quickly blow over. But if literary scholars were more widely conversant with Gadamer's *Truth and method*, even in this kind of case there might be some reassessment and rapprochement.

Now in debates about Dickens or Eliot or any other writer, a readership comes into communication, not only with the particular writer, but also with other readerships. As in society at large, newer communicants and their situationalities are for ever commenting on older ones, and receiving in return, as it were, queries or confirmation. A community is not a static consensus, but can be dynamically heterogeneous.

This brings us back to Habermas's insights into communicative ethics, which can be applied, it seems to me, not only to the natural sciences, but to literary texts, to discussions of them, and to *Geisteswissenschaften* and the critical sciences in general. Although Habermas grants the human being a certain autonomy, it is an autonomy that often comes under threat. What he shows is that ethical considerations – of human equality, of truthfulness, of trust, of fairness, and of cooperativeness – are always an integral part of human intercourse, unless, as so often in non-dialogical communication, the process is distorted by some power factor.

One thing this can help literary scholars to think about is literary ethics in the diachronic plane. When it comes to discussions of Dickens, for instance, those who must be allowed their say include, among many others, Dickens himself, Edmund Wilson, and – let's say – a present-day admirer of Matt Ridley. In the mind of anyone interested, their different viewpoints can all co-exist and throw light on each other.

18. London: Faber, 1994.

19. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

But Habermas dwells mainly on the possibility of many different tastes co-existing in one and the same time, within a community that is unitary, albeit poly-cultural. For him, even though Julius profiles himself – postmodern-fashion – as a Jewish critic, to see Ricks and Julius as belonging to two different communities would be an oversimplification. In a disagreement such as theirs, the depth and sincerity of feeling on both sides is perfectly apparent. Yet literature is nevertheless bringing them into communication, which in the end could do much to raise levels of mutual understanding and respect. In the face of differences and disagreements, Habermas is always hopeful. In his great essay “Struggles for recognition in the democratic constitutional state”, he envisages a shared political culture, within which cultural differences at other levels can be readily accommodated.²⁰

From this we literary scholars could take yet another cue. In our own sphere, we, too, can endorse an ethical politics of communication. The kind of intercultural *non-communication* so noticeable in the Rushdie affair, or more generally in the so-called culture wars of the mid-1990s, is not something we can want to see again. Literary texts do “get to” people, and one and the same text can get to different people in different ways, as a form of real human interaction. As literary scholars, we can try to be more sharply aware of this, and to find ways in which our own work can mediate in situations of misunderstanding or even conflict, whether within the present or between the present and the past.

Here our aim will not be to establish a consensus based on so-called definitive interpretations, for then we ourselves would be communicating, not genuinely, but coercively, and thereby depriving literature of necessary air. Rather than closing discussion down, we shall try to ensure its continuation, which in practice means that we shall always work for high levels of mutual understanding and respect, whether between writers and readers, or between one writer and another, or between one reader or group of readers and another. All these different parties can be thought of as belonging to a literary community that is not only indefinitely large but also indefinitely heterogeneous. In fact with a nudge from Gadamer and Habermas, the ongoing re-humanization of literary scholarship could promote a sense of literary communication as at once profoundly universal and profoundly historical. This is what, in their diametrically opposite ways, both Victorian liberal humanists and late-twentieth-century postmodern commentators only partly grasped and only partly failed to grasp.

20. In *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 107–48

Sir John Beaumont and his three audiences¹

1. Biographical considerations

For some members of the broad audience which included James I, Prince Charles, Buckingham, other high-profile courtiers, and members of the aristocracy and gentry at large, Beaumont's poetry must have been most welcome when least explicitly Catholic. To the extent that he deliberately catered for such readers he was, in his own sphere, taking after his father and grandfather, for they, too, compromised the family's high spiritual tone and loyalty to the Old Religion.² His grandfather was the lawyer John Beaumont of Thringstone, Leicestershire, who, even though his wife was later to be a most determined recusant, served as one of Henry VIII's Commissioners for the suppression of his county's religious houses, including Grace Dieu, a very isolated Augustinian nunnery in the heart of the Charnwood Forest, which he himself acquired soon after its dissolution and made into his family home. Nor did his opportunism stop there. Having later risen to become Master of the Rolls, he was in 1553 dismissed from that high office for corruption on a quite spectacular scale, including the appropriation to his own use of £20,871-18-8d of royal revenues. His son, Beaumont's father, Francis Beaumont senior, also a lawyer, was married to a recusant no less adamant than his own mother, but in 1593 was appointed Queen's Justice in the Court of Common Pleas, in which capacity he became notorious among Catholics as an arch-persecutor whose positive relish in

1. [First published in *Religion and writing in England, 1558–1689: Studies in community-making and cultural memory*, eds Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 195–221.]

2. This and the following paragraph summarize information contained in Roger D. Sell, 'Notes on the religious and family background of Francis and Sir John Beaumont', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 76 (1975): 299–307; and Roger D. Sell (ed.) *The shorter poems of Sir John Beaumont: A critical edition with an introduction and commentary*, *Acta Academiae Aboensis*, ser. A, vol. 49 (Åbo, 1974) – henceforth referred to as *Shorter Poems* – 3–23. Francis Beaumont junior, Beaumont's younger brother, the dramatist, seems to have been a conformist in religious matters, either because this corresponded with his own convictions, or for professional convenience, or for a bit of both reasons – we simply do not know. See P. J. Finkelppearl, "Beaumont, Francis (1584/5–1616)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *ODNB*), eds H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford, 2004).

sentencing Jesuits to be hung, drawn and quartered could incite Protestant onlookers to an unpleasantly hostile fervour. As for Beaumont himself, having at the age of thirty-six or thirty-seven been introduced at court by Buckingham in 1620, he versified his considerable enthusiasm on this elevation, and for the rest of his life produced sycophantic occasional poems and panegyrics in a fairly steady stream. In January 1626, roughly a year before his death, he acquired the title of baronet.

A second audience, which was actually one segment of the larger, more heterogeneous audience, consisted of fellow-Catholics, and was the readership with which Beaumont had most in common. The Beaumonts belonged to a whole network of staunchly recusant families in the English midlands, and the family home could still arouse a strong cultural memory of its pre-Reformation occupants. As described by the antiquarian William Burton, one of Beaumont's oldest friends in Leicestershire, Grace Dieu

standeth low in a Valley upon a little Brooke, in a solitary place, compassed round with an high and strong stone wall, within which the Nunnes had made a Garden, in resemblance of that upon Mount *Olivet Gethsemane* whither *Christ*, with *Peter, James* and *John* (a little before he was betrayed) went up to pray.³

Born in 1583 or 1584, Beaumont grew up in a household which repeatedly came under official suspicion of popish practices, and not only his mother and grandmother, but his father, too, Francis senior, that future scourge of recusants, were thought to have sheltered Campion, to have helped their neighbour, Sir George Shirley of Staunton Harold, evade arrest in connection with the Throckmorton plot, and to have given generous relief to recusants in prison. Francis senior's sister, Beaumont's aunt, became the mother of the "Mrs Jennings" (Eleanor Brokesby) and the "Mrs Perkins" (Anne Vaux) associated with the Gunpowder Plot. Beaumont himself, having entered the Inner Temple in 1597, made many friends within London's world of letters, and himself published a lively mock-Ovidian narrative poem in 1603,⁴ yet continued to move in narrower, recusant circles as well, at some point marrying Elizabeth Fortescue, whose parents had frequently sheltered Catholic priests in their home in the gatehouse of the old Blackfriars priory, before finally retiring to St. Omer. In 1607 two thirds of sixteen of his properties in several Leicestershire parishes were seized by the Crown Commissioners as part of the penalty for his

3. William Burton, *The Description of Leicester Shire* (London: John White, 1622), p. 119.

4. *The Metamorphosis of Tabacco* was published anonymously, but the grounds for the usual attribution to Beaumont are fairly strong. *Salmacis and Hermaphoditus*, published anonymously in the same year, is usually attributed to his younger brother, Francis, the dramatist. See Roger D. Sell, "The Authorship of *The Metamorphosis of Tabacco* and *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*," *Notes and Queries*, 117 (1972): 10–14.

own recusancy, and he himself was required to leave London and confine himself within five miles of Grace Dieu. His kinswoman, Mary Villiers *née* Beaumont, who finally helped to put an end to his 13-year rustication by introducing him to her son Buckingham, remained staunchly recusant despite her own advancement. His eldest son, John, who was to be a Royalist colonel, killed at Gloucester in 1644, was also the author of an unpublished Catholic tract. His second son, Francis, became a Jesuit. And he himself was not merely a religious poet but in his own way also a missionary, with a strongly reactionary interest in the spiritual life of the nation as a whole. In a poem of 1621 he recommended to Buckingham the plan of another antiquarian friend from Leicestershire, Edmund Bolton, himself a recusant, for a royal academy of honour which, by celebrating the worthies of the country's historical past, would raise the spiritual tone of the present. More explicitly, his own twelve-book *magnum opus*, *The Crowne of Thornes*, completed some time between May 1625 and his death in April 1627, expressed fervent hopes for the restoration of the one true Church.⁵

In what follows I shall be referring to the narrower, Catholic audience as his primary readership – the readers closest to his own heart. But *was* the larger, more amorphous audience really so secondary? Was there not a risk that in writing for the court he would go even further, in his own field, than his time-serving father and grandfather before him?

Well, accusations of downright worldliness could draw on the poem written by Drayton as part of the preliminaries to *Bosworth-field: with a Taste of the Variety of Other Poems, Left by Sir John Beaumont, Baronet, deceased: Set forth by his Sonne, Sir Iohn Beavmont, Baronet; and dedicated to the Kings most Excellent Maiestie* in 1629. Drayton wrote of a judgement hanging over

... the night
 Of these base times, which not one heroe have,
 Onely an empty Title, which the grave
 Shall soone devoure; whence it no more shall sound,
 Which never got up higher than the ground.

5. *The Crowne of Thornes* is to be published for the first time in my forthcoming edition of the complete poems of Beaumont in the Oxford English Texts series. The sole witness is British Library Additional MS 33,392. For discussion of the attribution to Beaumont, the character of the poem, and paleographical and textual matters, see B. H. Newdigate, "Sir John Beaumont's 'The Crowne of Thornes'", *Review of English Studies*, 18 (1942): 284–90; Ruth Wallerstein, "Sir John Beaumont's *Crowne of Thornes*: A report," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 53 (1954): 410–34; and Roger D. Sell, "The handwriting of Sir John Beaumont and the editing of his poems," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 33 (1970): 284–91.

Addressing his departed friend, Drayton continued:

Thy care for that which was not worth thy breath,
Brought on too soone thy much lamented death.⁶

If Buckingham, and a career made possible by Buckingham's patronage, were indeed the "care" which Drayton thought unworthy of Beaumont's breath, then such an assessment was hardly idiosyncratic, even if coloured by Drayton's own sense of neglected merit, and by an anxiety for his own "with'ring Bayes".⁷ Not many months earlier, parliament had produced the remonstrance which persuaded John Felton that "by killing the Duke he could do his country a great service".⁸ So Beaumont's posthumous collection came out at a time when the memory of that particular title's exceptionally ignominious descent into the grave was still fresh.

But all this notwithstanding, the main point of Drayton's poem is clearly that Beaumont's own death was most untimely, and precisely because his soul was so much loftier than the period's general run. In point of fact, his spiritual preoccupations had never slackened, even though during his last seven years he had been writing religious poetry and more secular poetry side by side. His own view would have been that his court career was just a necessary evil, for he was also targeting yet a third audience, consisting of certain readers belonging to the broader court audience, but as viewed in a particular light: as high and mighty Protestants whom it was his duty to guide into the same fold as his primary, Catholic readership. This brings us back to his mission, in other words, for which his chosen strategy was to make a decisive impact on those at the very summit of temporal power, without whose conversion the nation as a whole could never be restored to pristine spirituality as he himself understood it. By the same token, this third readership was the one which presented the greatest challenge to his powers of community-making. His acute consciousness that these readers belonged to the different church, coupled with his passionate desire to convert them, only made him all the more alert to their superiority to himself in terms of rank. The net result was that he had enormous difficulties in trying to bond with them, as was paradoxically confirmed by the fate of the one text in which he fully rose to the challenge. It was only in *The Crowne of Thornes* that he managed to throw religious self-censorship and social inhibition aside, and the resultant text was much too frank for printed publication. It ended up channelling his influence through manuscript circulation only, as far as we can guess mainly among his primary, Catholic readership.

6. Drayton, in Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 64.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 183, 191. [It was Felton who, on August 23rd, 1628, assassinated Buckingham.]

2. The broadest audience

In court poetry which did *not* reflect his Counter-Reformation ambition, Beaumont could well have modelled his addressivity on that of Jonson, much of whose writing was not explicitly Christian, but in whose emulation of Horace and Martial the spiritual and moral values of a religious-minded man were sufficiently clear, often interwoven with the most warm-hearted of feelings towards his addressees. In a poem such as “Penhurst Place”, Jonson saw himself as operating within a civilized and congenial circle of humanist fellow-spirits.⁹ Although the men and women he apostrophized were far superior to himself in terms of social rank, in terms of temper and mentality they were, he seemed to be saying, his own equals. Despite his pecuniary dependence on their good-will, he was not flattering them any more than he would have flattered himself. True, he praised them. But his praise came across as a delighted salutation of spiritual kinsfolk. His implication, at once wittily self-confident and elegantly polite, was that for the duration of any particular poem the demarcations of social hierarchy, though real enough, played second fiddle to an intellectual familiarity. Dextrously evoking a shared cultural memory of classical antiquity, he forged a new community within which contemporary perceptions of high and low no longer quite applied.

Beaumont, too, often emphasized features of positionality and cultural memory which were widely shared, by both Catholics and Protestants, and at both the highest and somewhat lower levels of society. His appeal was to the commonalities of Stuart political ideology, of national and genealogical history, of humanistic immersion in the mythology, history, and literature of ancient Greece and Rome, of more modern, scientific learning, and of elegant aesthetic taste, with just that dash of erotic, sometimes homoerotic sensuality which was such a persistent interface between the high culture of early Stuart England and the imageries of the Counter-Reformation. Indeed, another clear commonality was of biblical knowledge, and of religious beliefs and practices of an ecumenically Christian character.

The conviviality of address was sometimes undisturbed even in poems which strongly emphasized his own social inferiority to his addressees. These are the poems where religious concerns were suppressed most firmly of all, leaving not even the slightest hint that worldly greatness does not always correlate with true nobility of spirit. “The Shepherdess”, for instance, is court pastoral at its most sycophantic.¹⁰ It tells how in the summer of 1621 Beaumont’s wife Elizabeth, “[a] Shepherdess,

9. See Graham Parry’s chapter on him as “Britain’s Roman Poet” in his *Seventeenth-Century Poetry: The Social Context* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), 17–41.

10. For “The Shepherdess”, see Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, pp. 119–21. The poem’s historical context is more fully documented on pages 13–16.

who long had kept her flocks / On stony *Charnwoods* dry and barren rocks”, seeks fresh pasture in the vales below and eventually finds her way to Garendon, a “Palace full of glorious light”, to which Francis and Cecily Manners, Earl and Countess of Rutland, have withdrawn with Manners’s daughter Katherine and her husband, Buckingham, after the festivities of a royal progress through the midlands. This quartet of godlike beings welcomes Elizabeth, a shy country maid, and invites her to sing, because Katherine has already condescended to listen to her once before, at a shepherds’ festival where she had won the prize. Honoured with such gracious encouragement, Elizabeth afterwards returns home to Beaumont, “her Love, a simple Shepherd Swaine; / Yet in the Plaines he had a Poets name”. Since he is the scholarly type and has read Hesiod’s *Theogony*, he is able to satisfy her curiosity about her divine hosts at Garendon. Katherine, he explains, is the happiest of creatures, because her husband is her equal both in “wealth” – a word which could still mean simply “well-being” but which was already acquiring its modern financial sense, perhaps offering Buckingham’s reluctant father-in-law some food for thought – and in “beauty”. Indeed, all the nymphs, and even Iris, positively pine for Buckingham, a motif first introduced, as it happened, in Beaumont’s epithalamium of the previous year, when Van Dyck had been portraying Katherine as a voluptuous Venus to Buckingham’s scantily clad Adonis;¹¹ one thinks, too, of Buckingham as painted by Rubens,¹² or as he must have looked when first singled out by the eye of James. Katherine’s father, the swain continues, “high in honour and descent / Commands the Sylvans on the Northside *Trent*”, a gentle reminder to Rutland that he has Buckingham to thank for resigning to him the Chief Justiceship in Eyre North of the Trent. Pan (i.e. James) has just shown his high estimation of Rutland by accepting his hospitality at Belvoir – no need to rub it in that he had first visited Buckingham’s Burley-on-the-Hill and received more original entertainment there. But Rutland has now left his “ascending seate” – perhaps a pun on Belvoir’s hilltop position and on the Manners family’s elevation through the alliance with Buckingham – to grace the dales with his presence. His wife, widely loved for her great virtues, is there as well, and Elizabeth’s eyes were also blessed with the sight of a third lady, wise, bountiful, modest, beautiful, who “found me singing *Floraes* native dowres, / And made me sing before the heav’nly pow’rs”, a reference to Mary Villiers *née* Beaumont and her sponsorship of the epithalamium and some verses of welcome to the King at Burley, Beaumont’s first court poetry, “[f]or which great favour, till my voice be done, / I sing of her, and her thrice-noble son”. The poem could thus please everyone. But in particular, it served Buckingham, a professing Protestant, in his still delicate relations

11. Private collection. Reproduced in ODNB, “MacDonnell [*née* Manners; *other married name* Villiers], Katherine.”

12. Palazzo Pitti, Florence

with Rutland, a Catholic convert, not least by leaving such religious considerations entirely unspoken. Although it succinctly hinted at former services rendered and hopes of continuing favour, similarly, the writing knew its own place. Any authorial aspirations to greater influence were well muffled by the poetical swain's declarations of rustic powerlessness.

Two of the finest court poems are companion pieces in which Beaumont expounds his thoughts about poetry, probably written at least a year or two later than "The Shepherdess", when his position was more established. Certainly they are far less obsequious. Although the one "concerning the true forme of English poetry" was addressed to James, and the one on "the excellent use of Poems" to Charles, Beaumont presents himself, not, of course, as having anything remotely close to royal rank, but as nevertheless so strongly sharing his addressees' intellectual and political interests that, at least in this sense, he can reasonably regard himself as their fellow.¹³

The poem for James begins with a tribute to him as the supreme ruler and protector of the nation, but then moves quickly on to visualize him as "descending from that spacious reach" in order to give guidance to English poets. Beaumont's own self-description is as an English poet grateful to be a writer "[w]hen your judicious rules have been my guide". James's *Reulis and Cautelis to be observit and aschewit in Scottis Poesie* (Edinburgh, 1584) does not seem to have shaped his thinking in any great detail. But the deferential gesture was understandable, and his own advice to poets was unlikely to attract royal disapproval, even though it reflected that spirit of Baconian modernity which was already moving Jacobean culture in general, though not the king himself, in the direction of the Royal Society.¹⁴ Granted, James's own poetic output, taken together with all the advice he had offered to love poets, and with his comment that "materis of common weil" and other serious subjects can be "to [*sic*] graue materis for a Poet to mell in",¹⁵ suggests a far less lofty view of poetry than Beaumont's, which may explain the division of the latter's *ars poetica* into the poem on form for James and the poem on function for Charles. But even James himself had written a poem on the victory over the Turks at Lepanto, a topic which, we shall see, was close to Beaumont's interests in *The Crowne of Thornes*, and which may partly account for the emphasis, even in the poem about poetic form, on the importance of a "noble subject".

13. Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 122–124 and 133–1355.

14. See Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restor'd: The culture of the Stuart court, 1603–42* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), 29–31.

15. James VI, *The Essayes of a Prentise, in the Divine Art of Poesie* (Edinbrugh [*sic*]: Thomas Vautroullier, 1584), sigs Mii^v-Miii^f.

In the poem on poetic function, Charles is first hailed as “Divine example of obedient heirs”, wonderful son of wonderful father, exalted by God upon “this earthly stage”, but is then complimented in a slightly more business-like fashion on his wisdom, judgement, and taste in poetry, the art refined by his father, and as a great patron of literature *in spe*, a prediction plausibly grounded on his already evident interest in the arts in general. Here and throughout, Beaumont strongly intimates that his addressee is the future ruler. And in synthesizing modern ideas about the social function of literature and history as put forward by Bacon, Daniel, Chapman, and Jonson, and as further developed in Bolton’s plans for a royal academy of honour, he suggests, politely but very firmly, that poetry could actually enhance Charles’s royal power. Poets are the “Priests of greatness”. They may “quiet sit / Amid’st the silent children of their wit”. They may not have suitors, or be ambitiously involved in affairs of state. But appearances can be deceptive. Poets

... are not idle, when their sight they rayse
Beyond the present time to future daies;
And brave examples, sage instructions bring
In pleasing verses, which our sonnes may sing.

By their music, they make “celestial things / More fit for humane eares”, they “enrich the understanding part”, and they refine the language. Even more to the point, they help to rid the commonwealth of “barb’rous deeds”.

The sev’rall sounds in harmony combin’d
Knit chaines of vertue in the hearers mind.

As all “civill men that live / By Law and rule” will readily acknowledge, the verse in which Tyrtaeus celebrated the former glories of Sparta inspired that city to new conquests, so that the “poore lame *Poet* hath equall praise / With Captaines, and with States-men of his dayes”. Verse itself is like a fort, and the only pity is that cowardly wits of more recent times have begun to claim that prose “is a castle easier to defend”. The reign of Charles, Beaumont foresees, will be poetry’s new golden age, a prophecy which carries not the slightest suggestion of a deontic thrust, because the entire poem has so strongly cemented its spiritual kinship with its addressee. The poet has complete confidence in the patron king-to-be.

The same robust solidarity with courtly addressees informs Beaumont’s epyllion “Bosworth Field”.¹⁶ True, sycophancy is again not completely absent. In accordance with Stuart ideology, Henry Tudor, by putting an end to the Wars of the Roses, is a type of James VI and I, peacemaker, all-powerful unifier of the Britannic realms, and Henry’s legitimate heir – and “Bosworth Field”, unlike a panegyric on

16. Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 66–83.

James's accession by the luckless Drayton, does not deal with pedigrees in the kind of detail that could bring to mind the claims for Arabella Stuart.¹⁷ On the night before the battle Henry even has a dream vision of his glorious descendent, beneath whose foot Envy whets her sting in vain, together with Charles, the heir who, *deo volente*, will inherit the diadem late but retain it long. In such gestures, however, Beaumont was no more flattering than any courtier was bound to be. Nor were these praises an awkward cover or substitute for criticisms of the high and mighty. Granted, the poem's concern with moral and spiritual values is clear enough, and is exactly what the poem on the true function of poetry, or the poem in support of Bolton's plan for a royal academy of honour, would lead us to expect. But the "brave examples, sage instruction" arise directly from history as re-told, and are pitched at an aristocratic audience that is taken to be already sympathetic, an audience which, regardless of any internal religious disagreements, here quite unmentioned, is assumed to be as totally homogeneous in its devotion to the ancient virtues of courage and generosity as were their mighty forebears on that battlefield of 1485, quite regardless of whether their rose was the white one or the red. The battle becomes a cautionary image of the sheer folly of dissensus, with a whole series of episodes, none of them with precedent in Beaumont's sources, in which a noble warrior on the one side pities a noble warrior at a disadvantage on the other, "though in armes his foe / In heart his friend". And whereas the spiritual aura surrounding blue blood is gently sentimentalized, as when the young Lord Strange, reprieved from death, is like a sacrificial steer sent back from burning altars and allowed to breathe the air in peace, the common soldiers are described in large masses, and accorded individual mention only for acts of special despicability towards their betters. When "rude hands" are laid upon "that noble flower", the Earl of Surrey, whose bravery Beaumont further idealizes by making it, contrary to historical fact, that of a warrior young and unfledged, the relish is considerable as Surrey sends "the Peasants arme to kisse the ground". Even greater contempt is reserved for Richard III, figured as the reason for of the noble warriors' continued discord, quite human enough in his fears and aspirations to arouse interest and understanding, yet unmistakably the hell-bound villain that his role in Tudor-Stuart historiography required, and thereby further strengthening the bond between Beaumont and his court readership in the 1620s. That literary bond would hardly be loosened by a possible hint, in the mention of grim punishments awaiting the fiendish Richard, of a Catholic *dies irae*, and for the most part the poem moved briskly along without sensationalism, strongly appealing to the same modern rationalist taste as was championed by the poem on poetic form.

17. Michael Drayton, *To the Maiestie of King James. A gratulatorie Poem* (London: T. M[an] and H. L[ownes], 1603), esp. sigs. B1^r–B2^f.

The warm response which Beaumont's Jonsonian addressivity could win from courtiers of every colour is well suggested by Jonson's own magnificent tribute to the posthumous collection of 1629. Well placed to recognise Beaumont's essential modernity, Jonson saw him as firmly consolidating the status of serious poetry. Paying him the ultimate compliment of imitation, he takes up Beaumont's own metaphor (in the poem on poetic function) of poetry as a fort in the war against barbarism, and applies it to the 1629 volume itself. Envy's redoubts, dikes, stakes, trenches, batteries will be to no avail.

'[T]is not of men
 This Fort of so impregnable accesse,
 But higher power, as spight could not make lesse,
 Nor flatt'ry! But secur'd by the Authors Name,
 Defies what's crosse to Piety, or good Fame.
 And like a hallow'd Temple, free from taint
 Of Ethnicisme, makes his Muse a Saint.¹⁸

In affirming that God was on Beaumont's side, that his poetic fort was also a sacred temple spotlessly free from paganism ("Ethnicisme"), and that his muse was a saint, Jonson was coming as close as close could be to challenging Protestant readers aware of Beaumont's Catholicism to disagree with him. But in the same breath he also firmly implied that, despite the imagery of embattlement, Beaumont's writing could be no less ecumenically eirenic than, let's say, the work discussed by Anthony Johnson in the present volume,¹⁹ or than James's own domestic and foreign policy, or, for that matter, than James's *Lepanto*, which after all gave credit where credit was due: to Don John, whose victory over the Turks brought an end to years of conflict, even though he himself was but a "forraine Papist bastard".²⁰

The only poem by Beaumont openly voicing sympathy for Catholics which had come even close to publication in the 1629 volume was in the event cancelled from all surviving copies: "On the death of many good People slaine by the fall of a floore att a Catholike Sermon in Black Friers",²¹ a dignified elegy on a tragic

18. In Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, p. 63.

19. [Anthony W. Johnson, "Jonson's Eirenic Community: The Case of *The Masque of Auguers* (1622)," in *Writing and Religion in England, 1558–1689: Studies in Community-Making and Cultural Memory*, eds Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 169–193.]

20. James I, *Lepanto, or heroical song being part of his poeticall excercises at vacant houres* [1584] (London: Simon Stafford and Henry Hooke, 1603), sig. A2^f.

21. *Shorter Poems*, pp. 158–9. The poem survives in British Library MS Stowe 960, to be described at the beginning of section III below. The first letters of each line of the poem correspond with

accident of 1623 in which roughly a hundred people lost their lives, and which, occurring as it did on November 5th (N. S.), had been seen by Protestant pamphleteers as a punishment for the Gunpowder Plot,²² an accusation Beaumont junior or his printer may not have wanted to revive. His father's two other most overtly Catholic poems that we know of, a beautiful short lyric "On the Assumption of our Blessed Lady" and the twelve books of *The Crowne of Thornes*, remained in manuscript.²³ The title of *The Crowne of Thornes* did appear in the 1629 book, once in Beaumont's fine elegy on the death of Southampton, its patron, and again in one of two prefatory poems by Sir Thomas Hawkins, the translator of Horace and another of Beaumont's recusant friends.²⁴ Hawkins's words, at least to readers in the know about his own allegiances, would have seemed clearly Catholic in sentiment, and the same colouring might also have emerged from the tribute by the unidentified "Ja. Cl.", who sounds as if he could have been a Jesuit in hiding. But such recognitions would hardly have forced themselves on readers to whom they were unwelcome, and much the same applied to the volume's funeral elegies and epitaphs by Beaumont himself. Most of them were tributes to outstanding members of the Catholic community, and some of their imagery and motifs came close to those of his most explicitly Catholic writing. But non-Catholic readers would also have found much beauty here – flower symbolism was not exclusively Catholic,

the letters still visible on the cancel stub of one of the Bodleian copies of the 1629 volume. This identification was made by F. G. Kenyon, "Some Missing Poems of Sir John Beaumont," *The Athenaeum* (1889): 524, 635.

22. E.g. anon., *Something Written by occasion of that Fatall memorable accident in Blacke-Friers on Sunday, being the 26. of October 1623. stilo antiquo, and the 5. of Nouember stilo nouo, or Romano* (London: [publisher unknown] 1623). More impartial comment included T[homas] G[oad], *The Doleful Even-Song* (London: William Barret and Richard Whitaker, 1623), addressed "To the Christian moderate Reader" (sig. A3); W[illiam] C[?rashaw], *The Fatall Vesper* (London: Richard Whitaker, 1623); Richard Hord, *Black-Fryers: Elegia de Admiranda clade* (London: I. Marriot and I. Grismand, 1625). See Alexandra Walsham, "'The Fatall Vesper': Providentialism and Anti-Popery in late Jacobean London," *Past & Present*, 144/1 (1994): 36–87. Openly Catholic responses included John Floyd, *A word of comfort, or, A discourse concerning the late lamentable accident of the fall of a room at a Catholicke sermon, in the Blackfriars* ([St Omer]: [English College Press], 1623). About 300 people had assembled for the religious service in an upper room at the French ambassador's residence, Hunsdon House. The sermon, on the subject of charity, was being preached by the Jesuit, Robert Drury, who together with the other officiating Jesuit, William Whittingham, was among those to be killed instantly.

23. The sole witness to "On the Assumption of our Blessed Lady" is British Library MS Stowe 960. It was first printed in 1889 (in Kenyon, "Some Missing Poems of Sir John Beaumont"), and more recently in Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 177–178.

24. In Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 156–158 and 58–60.

for instance – and the nobility and pathos of the lives celebrated could strike a chord in any decent breast. As for the prefatory tributes by Sir Thomas Neville, Beaumont's sons John and Francis, and George Fortescue, his brother-in-law and himself a distinguished recusant writer, stylistic or thematic clues to their authors' Catholicism were completely absent.

To readers sampling the 1629 volume's "Taste of the Variety" of poems on moral and religious themes, Beaumont will have come across as an able translator or imitator of the classical Greek and Roman poets most valued by any humanist of a Christian-Stoical temper and, more distinctively, as a religious poet whose stance was unproblematically that of a Christian addressing God or of a Christian addressing other Christians. This was writing which did not take a holier-than-thou attitude towards its readers, but was not deferential either. Questions of the spiritual or social superiority of one human being to another did not arise, since all were equal before God in somewhat the same way as "Bosworth Field" and the poems on the form and function of poetry seemed to emanate from a camaraderie of intellect, except that there the social hierarchy still retained at least a token role. Sometimes confessing the highs and lows of his own spiritual life, sometimes discussing metaphysical mysteries, Feast Days, or episodes from the New Testament in a more expository, celebratory, sacerdotal manner, Beaumont seemed to be leaving disputed points of doctrine in the background, so as to explore ideas, memories, and experiences shared by Christians of differing traditions. Although he mentioned the dangers of profane love, and lamented the relative neglect of divine love as a theme for poetry, and although his starting point here was undoubtedly the Counter-Reformation poetics of Southwell, the same concern was also voiced by Herbert and Vaughan. Similarly, his own fluctuation between extreme, black desolation and consciousness of sin and, on the other hand, a state of salvation so ecstatic as to be fearful did express itself in clearly Ignatian terms, and Ignatian exercises, especially the movement from "composition of place" to vicarious participation in a meditated holy narrative, did structure his more sacerdotal poems, but as was long ago established by Louis L. Martz, non-Catholics, too, relied on such techniques,²⁵ a point that is further developed by Graham Parry in the present volume.²⁶ So Beaumont's imagery of symbolical colours and flowers, of incense, of the steps in a Solomonic temple, of processions and demonstrative gesticulation, while obviously appealing to Catholic readers, would also have spoken to the growing

25. Louis L. Martz, *The poetry of meditation: A study in English religious literature of the seventeenth century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954).

26. [Graham Parry, "High-Church devotion in the Church of England, 1620–1642", in *Writing and Religion in England, 1558–1689: Studies in Community-Making and Cultural Memory*, eds Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 239–252.]

Laudian party, and might even have been tolerated by some plainer Protestants as well. Many of the book's other religious motifs were after all totally uncontroversial, and as long a religious poem seemed to offer a modicum of spiritual sustenance, many readers were not particularly fussy. As shrewdly observed by Alison Shell, "No one would argue that readerly engagement with religious verse at this period was other than intense and discriminating; but readers of a poem are not answerable for it in the same way that authors are, and do not face internal interlocutors to the same degree." Protestant devotional literature, she continues, "borrowed from Catholic sources with only minor alterations: an exchange facilitated both by broad areas of similarity between the two traditions, and by the fact that devotional differences between Protestant and Catholic are less often simple opposites than matters of degree, level and addition."²⁷

Beaumont's last poem, written just before his death, and surely one of the finest Catholic poems in English between Southwell and Crashaw, was "Upon the two great Feasts of the Annunciation and Resurrection falling on the same day, March 25. 1627". Especially in its final lines, images and motifs cluster together in a way that makes the religious affiliation more or less unmistakable.

Let faithful soules this double Feast attend
 In two Processions: let the first descend
 The Temples staires, and with a downe-cast eye
 Upon the lowest pavement prostrate lie,
 In creeping Violets, white Lillies shine,
 Their humble thoughts, and ev'ry pure designe;
 The other troope shall climbe with sacred heate,
 The rich degrees of *Salomons* bright seate,
 In glowing Roses fervent zeale they beare,
 And in the Azure Flowre de-lis appeare
 Celestiall contemplations, which aspire
 Above the skie, up to th'immortall Quire.²⁸

But perhaps not even this would have been found too exclusively or provocatively Catholic. Unlike the cancelled elegy on the Catholics killed in the Blackfriars accident, this poem was at least deemed fit – presumably by both Sir John junior and the printer – to remain in the 1629 collection. Its "Temple" could hardly have been more "hallow'd", and what might also have wooed any doubtful readers was its sheer eclecticism of style. It still had the movement and force which Jonson must

27. Alison Shell, "What is a Catholic poem? Explicitness and censorship in Tudor and Stuart religious verse," in *Literature and censorship in Renaissance England*, ed. Andrew Hadfield, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 95–111, esp. 104.

28. Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 99.

have admired in “Bosworth Field” and in the poems on the form and function of poetry. Whereas Jonson complained of “*Womens-Poets*” who

...write a verse, as smooth, as soft, as creame;
In which there is no torrent, nor scarce streame,²⁹

Beaumont advocated, and was here more than ever writing, couplets which “like a milky torrent flow”,³⁰ an alliance of force to smoothness which anticipated Denham’s emulation of the Thames – “Strong without rage, without ore-flowing full”³¹ – and the regularities and antithetical structures of the heroic couplet as written by Pope. Although this was still a poetry of rationalist clarity, similarly, Beaumont has repented in his distaste for “dusky clouds” of Metaphysical conceits,³² and has clearly been inspired by the devout wit of none other than Donne himself, in “Upon the Annunciation and Passion falling upon one day. 1608” – a poem not printed until the posthumous collection of 1633, but already widely known in manuscript. Both poems conceive of the two New Testament events as if happening on one and the same day; both wittily develop the strong contrasts and paradoxes arising from the juxtaposition; both include cartographical conceits; both play with the traditional view of Mary and Mary’s womb as a place of physical residence for Christ; and no less Donne-like is Beaumont’s trope of the Annunciation and Resurrection as the morning and night of a great wedding-day, by which he turns the poem into a kind of sacred epithalamium:

Thrice happy day, which sweetly do’st combine
Two Hemispheres in th’ Equinoctiall line:
The one debasing God to earthly paine,
The other raising man to endless raigne.
Christs humble steps declining to the wombe,
Touch heav’nly scales erected on his Tombe:
We first with Gabriel must this Prince convey
Into his chamber of the marriage day,
Then with the other Angels cloth’d in white,
We will adore him in this conqu’ring Night.³³

29. *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols. eds C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925–1952), VIII, 585.

30. “Concerning the true forme of English poetry”, Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 123, line 31.

31. Sir John Denham, “Cooper’s Hill”, in his *Poems and translations with the Sophy* (London: H. Herringman, 1668), 1–22, esp. 12.

32. “Concerning the true forme of English poetry”, Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 123, line 13.

33. Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 98.

3. The audience of fellow-Catholics

But even if “Of the two great Feasts...” could have appealed to the many devout Protestants who already admired Jonson and Donne, and not least to those who also relished what it seemed to hint about the style of poetry in the future, for Protestants a lot plainer than Laud it would not have been favourite reading matter. Perhaps the most natural setting for such a poem was not in a printed volume directed towards the court and a broad general public, but in manuscript collections put together for specifically Catholic readers.

One striking compilation of this kind still survives: the British Library’s MS Stowe 960, a beautifully produced volume whose sole contents are twenty-two poems by Beaumont, plus a short envoi by another writer, who could be Sir John Beaumont junior. Most of the poems were also printed in the 1629 volume, but with few exceptions they show Beaumont at his most intensely religious, and MS Stowe 960 is also *testis unicus* to both the censored elegy on the Catholics killed in the Blackfriars accident and that beautiful short lyric “On the Assumption of our Blessed Lady”. The last Beaumont poem in the manuscript is “Of the two great Feasts...”, followed only by the compiler’s envoi, which links back to that poem’s concluding aspiration to the immortal choir above the sky:

Expect no more: this latest line contains
 The bounds and scope of all his former straines
 Who justly from that place his ending drew
 Where shortlie he begins to singe anewe [.]
 But whie doe I attribute to this line
 The honour all his poems doe combyne
 Since heaven hath seiz’d upon his better parte
 And bids him their employ his curious Arte
 Whoe fearinge least a Mortall should aspire
 To match her musicke joynes him to her Quire.³⁴

In the verse preface Sir John junior wrote for the posthumous printed selection of his father’s poems in 1629, the ideas are similar to those of this Envoi to MS Stowe 960, but differently phrased. There, too, it is claimed that the dead poet’s better part has survived, and that he now sings in a celestial choir. But the language is just a shade more humanistic: Beaumont’s better part is still alive, but alive in the 1629 book itself, a “Flame / Which lights the entrance to eternall Fame”; and now “*Parnassus* him containes, plast in the Quire / With Poets”. Whereas this introduces the printed book to Charles and his court as if it were a conventionally literary

34. This envoi is cited and discussed in Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 210.

achievement, the Stowe manuscript's envoi, taken together with the immediately preceding "Of the two great Feasts...", would have allowed a Catholic readership to imagine Beaumont transported to a more explicitly Christian heaven, for the sake of his poetry's distinctive spiritual value.

Such readers were also targeted by *The Crowne of Thornes*, whose 11,000 lines of pentameter couplets in twelve books are obviously from the same pen as "Of the two great Feasts...". The type of interest it must have had for them can be deduced from even the briefest summary:

- Book 1 The suffering of Christ as he is crowned with thorns and crucified,
- Book 2 The culpability of the Romans,
- Book 3 The culpability of the Jews,
- Book 4 Christian worship and priesthood,
- Book 5 The perfection of circular forms (such as the crown of thorns),
- Book 6 The disputation between the Sea and the Earth about which of them is to be praised for having provided the reed and the thorns which figure in the Passion,
- Book 7 The doctrine of sin,
- Book 8 Old Testament types of Christ and his crown,
- Book 9 The twelve apostles, linked to twelve stones and the signs of the zodiac,
- Book 10 The need to embrace suffering,
- Book 11 Great defenders of the faith,
- Book 12 The one Church triumphant.

For readers of our own time, this huge poem's more detailed progression – if that is the right word – may seem rather baffling. Its starting-point is the Crucifixion, but this is treated as a narrative only in Book 1, and even there only at sporadic intervals. The writing and the invited response are mainly meditational and devotional, and at first sight do not involve a line of thought that is steadily maintained and developed. Rather, each book could be seen as a labelled file in which Beaumont has stored a large number of ideas, images, and historical, mythological and biblical references, all of them in some way relevant to the file's label, but joined together into a text by a thought-sequence that is meandering, circling, and swerving, with endless repetitions of key motifs. A comparison that nowadays might come to mind is with the last section of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Molly Bloom's stream of consciousness as she is falling asleep. Locally, the poem has a kind of logic by association, much of it typological, analogical, symbolic, numerological. But although one and the same basic leitmotif can continue at great length, when reading any given page readers of today may well find it difficult to remember quite how they got to it from, say, three pages earlier on.

But Beaumont was not addressing himself to readers of today, and the discourse he was offering his Catholic contemporaries was in effect an extension of modes of prayer and prayerfulness with which they were familiar. Here was a sheer time-filling continuum of Catholic devotion, thought, feeling, and, above all, fellowship. Not exactly telling a story, not exactly making an argument, he was inviting his readers to share a whole universe of Catholic memory, learning, ideas, sensibility, experience. His main hope was that co-religionists would join him in his love and worship of a Jesus who was persecuted for the sake of true believers. All subsequent trials and tribulations endured for the sake of religion only mirrored that first and far more grievous agony, and would in a future time be superseded by a new state of purest joy. Sympathy in sorrows, comfort, togetherness, resilience, hope: these were the main qualities he was offering his primary readership, and in places the writing rose to considerable beauty, dignity and power – a most signal instance of the Catholic literary imagination as described by Alison Shell:

English Catholics were not braver than English Protestants But Catholics had to be brave for longer, and their imaginative techniques for stimulating bravery are consequently more sophisticated than anything that English Protestantism can show. Their consistency in behaving like the saints they venerated, at trial, in prison and on the scaffold, was perhaps the supreme achievement of the [for present-day readers] controversial [literary] imagination, turning worldly defeat into spiritual success; and however incredible the idea of suffering and dying for one's faith has become to the late-twentieth-century European academic, to acknowledge Catholic success in these theatres is the least that an un-zealous posterity can do.³⁵

Book 10 of Beaumont's poem, on how to welcome suffering, was clearly especially central to his purpose.

As compared with the shorter religious poems in the printed selection of 1629, *The Crowne of Thornes* has a far more stress on explicit Catholic markers. They were the very essence of the enterprise, since Beaumont could fully elaborate them in the interests of contemplation, devotion, and consolidation of spiritual identity. In Book 7, for instance, Catholic doctrine is learnedly debated in contrast with Protestant and other, earlier heresies, the Reformation being seen as anything but a true reformation. In the opening of Book 12, on the one true Church, the same point is made again, but in terms of the devout Catholic's own personal experience, here the experience of the Catholic poet himself, after which Beaumont's own "I" characteristically modulates into the "we" of the particular community within which he is writing, as he consolidates its cultural memory of persecution

35. Alison Shell, *Catholicism, controversy and the English literary imagination, 1558–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 226–7.

by alluding to the captivity similarly recalled in Psalm 137.³⁶ Having, as it were, poetically crowned Christ in the previous eleven Books, how can he possibly go on to adore Christ's spouse, the true Church,

... when mine eye
could never yett that glorious staite espie,
Which shee enioyes, in nations where shee raignes;
nor ever felt her sweetness but her paines.

...

... [O]ft our fainting soules crye out, how long
shall wee, in Babel, sing a mournfull song?³⁷

Later in the same book, the Blessed Virgin Mary on her heavenly throne, theme of that lovely short lyric in MS Stowe 960, is adored at far greater length, and also mentioned, alongside many Virgins, Saints, Martyrs, and Doctors of the Church, are two other Marias very dear to English Catholics, the one a tragic cultural memory, the other a present hope, here typologically joined together within the poem's overarching narrative of the one true Church's survival, not in "material" buildings, but in "nue temples in religious harts":

Shall we forget our glorie of the north,
Triumphant Marye, who dispercing forth
her beames from snowie Calidonian hills,
this happie Ile with princly offspring fills;
while two large realmes, vnited in her sonne,
laments the wrongs which they to her haue done;
when Scotland clos'd in walls her freeborne breath,
and England stood astonish't att her death.
The blood which shee from kingly vaines receiu'd,
confirm'd that faith, to which her parents cleau'd.
The miners of Gods house distroyd this wall;
and ioynd her murder to our churches fall;
but hee who firmnesse to his rocke imparts,
erects nue temples in religious harts;
as hee hath chang'd her short, and earthly raigne,
for heavenly crownes, which noe foule hand can staine;
soe though with vs material churches faile,

36. Cf. Hannibal Hamlin, *Psalm culture and early modern English literature* (Cambridge, 2004).

37. MS Additional 33,392 B, 113. The first six books and the beginning of the seventh book of *The Crowne of Thornes* are written in an Italic hand and are paginated from 1 to 168. The remainder of the poem is in a secretary hand and is paginated from 11 (*sic*) to 131. Here I refer to the first pagination as "*The Crowne of Thornes, A*", and to the second as "*The Crowne of Thornes, B*".

Devotion liues and shall, at last, prevaile.
 Expecting now a farr securer life,
 for thee our second Marie, vertuous wife
 of mightie Charles, and daughter of those kings,
 by whose braiue acts our Saviours lillie springs,
 amidst the thornes, and fostered by theire showers,
 in spight of foes displayes her beauteous flowers.³⁸

Given such plentiful and open expressions of communal distinctiveness, many images and sentiments which Protestant readers of the 1629 collection might have let pass as Laudian or just ecumenical would now take on an undeniably Counter-Reformation glow: the symbolism of rich colours, flowers and precious stones; grim intimations of devils and hell's flames, the kind of mediaeval iconography glimpsed only fleetingly in the treatment of Richard III in "Bosworth Field"; and above all Christ, his physical beauty, his blood, his sweat, his tears, his crown of thorns.

It is impossible to guess the exact size of the Catholic audience these features will have bonded together. Beaumont's elegy on Southampton, the poem's patron, says that he died before it was completed, but he had presumably read it in part. And it must surely have been known to readers such as: Mary Villiers *née* Beaumont; Buckingham's wife, Katherine *née* Manners; Katherine's father and stepmother, the Earl and Countess of Rutland; other court Catholics; members of Beaumont's own immediate family; other Catholic families in the midlands, such as the Skipwiths, Shirleys and Nevilles; George Fortescue; the Leicester physician and antiquarian Philip Kynder; Robert Clarke and other English Catholics in continental Europe; and for all we know both Drayton and Jonson.³⁹ What we know for certain is how the bonding worked for one typical target reader, Sir Thomas Hawkins:

Like to the Bee, thou didd'st those Flow'rs select,
 That most the tastefull palate might affect,
 With pious relishes of things Divine,
 And discomposed sence with peace combine.
 Which (in thy *Crowne of Thornes*) we may discerne,
 Fram'd as a Modell for the best to learne:
 That Verse may Vertue teach, as well as Prose,
 And minds with native force to Good dispose,
 Devotion stirre, and quicken cold Desires,
 To entertaine the warmth of holy Fires.

38. *The Crowne of Thornes*, B, 127.

39. This list, which could be longer, is based on links established at various points in my editorial introduction, commentary and appendix to *Shorter Poems*.

There may we see thy Soule exspaciate,
 And with true fervor sweetly meditate
 Upon our Saviours sufferings; that while
 Thou seeks't his painefull torments to beguile,
 With well-tun'd Accents of thy zealous Song,
 Breath'd from a soule transfix'd, a Passion strong,
 We better knowledge of his woes attain,
 Fall into Teares with thee, and then againe,
 Rise with thy Verse to celebrate the Flood
 Of those eternall Torrents of his Blood.⁴⁰

4. The audience of potential converts in high places

Now as noted earlier, these lines of Hawkins occur in one of two prefatory tributes he wrote for the volume of 1629, and some courtly readers may have turned a deaf ear to their Catholic vibration. But equally, there were the other members of the courtly audience who also belonged, like Hawkins himself, to Beaumont's primary, Catholic readership. They may already have known from manuscript some of the religious and moralizing poems printed in 1629, and some of the funeral elegies on fellow-religionists as well. If they had also read *The Crowne of Thornes*, they would naturally have identified with Hawkins's "we" when he bears witness to the qualities "we may discern" in it.

The possibilities for overlappings of different readerships did not stop there, however, since some of the *non*-Catholics reading Hawkins's words could also have felt themselves included in what I am calling Beaumont's third readership, made up of powerful individuals not yet belonging to his primary readership, but whose crossing over into that community would have realized his highest dream. For such readers, if they allowed themselves to think about it, Hawkins's "we" could have had the character of an invitation.

The individuals whose spiritual improvement and conversion to Catholicism would have had the most decisive influence were obviously James, Charles, and Buckingham. If Beaumont's community-making had been successful on this front, then the whole course of English history would have turned out very differently. With the wisdom of hindsight, we can see that this was never to be. Protestantism had achieved a political, institutional, and cultural momentum that could no longer be reversed. But there was also a more immediately obvious difficulty, of which Beaumont was sometimes cripplingly aware. On the one hand, in order to win

40. Hawkins, in Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 59.

the attention of such high and mighty addressees he could not afford to criticize them. On the other hand, if he refrained from expressing or implying his dissatisfaction with them as they were at present, then his missionary goal would never be achieved. He had to praise, but he also had to blame. His message was, “You are good. You are not good enough.”

Unless we are critically self-conscious about our own position in time, our verdict on this work, and also on his more purely encomiastic verse, may be too damning. Some of the poems in which he praises Buckingham may have been written before he had really had a chance to understand the man’s character and its likely consequences. In praising him, he may at first have seen himself as merely applying the lesson he had learned from the death of “the fairest and most vertuous Lady, the Lady Clifton” in 1613:

We let our friends passe idly like our time,
Till they be gone, and then we see our crime,
And thinke what worth in them might have beene known,
What duties done, and what affection showne:
Untimely knowledge, which so deare doth cost,
And then beginnes when the thing knowne is lost;
Yet this cold love, this envie, this neglect,
Proclaimes us modest while our due respect
To goodness is restrain’d by servile feare,
Lest to the world, it flatt’ry should appeare.⁴¹

In fact there is a poem in manuscript in which he tells Buckingham himself that “[b]ecause at Court you build high roofs of Fame” he had initially hesitated to call him truly good, but that

... when your temper, innocencie, truth
(Now famous all) I balance with your youth
I cann not thinke it sinne or flatterie then
To write you in the roule of honest men:
And hurle my vow that once we may behold
A great man yong remaine a good man old.⁴²

To use Drayton’s word, then, his earliest “care” for Buckingham could have involved some genuine admiration. But it was an admiration which Drayton, only a few years later, already had no reason to share, and which we in 2008 may also not endorse. If we tried to imagine writing a panegyric for Buckingham ourselves, we might

41. Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 154.

42. Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 180.

expect to be inhibited by a sense of our own insincerity, whereas for Beaumont the situation was possibly different. In the case of James, similarly, some of us may still be partly blinded by the glaring flaws on which detractors were so quick to seize: the drunken filthiness and debauch, the enslavement to minions, the shambling clownishness, the pompous pride of intellect. Beaumont's fine funeral elegy on James captures the man's true stature, praising his consistent and internationally influential eirenicism in terms which W. B. Patterson's *King James VI and I and the reunion of Christendom* has only recently begun to make intelligible again.⁴³

When Beaumont is urging his addressees actually to mend their ways, a further word of mitigation is in order, since here he faced a problem that has been noted by rhetoricians from classical antiquity onwards. To be persuasive, speakers and writers have to present themselves as the kind of person their addressees will trust and listen to. However reluctantly, however provisionally, they have to meet their audience half-way by becoming more like them. For Beaumont here, then, a certain amount of self-compromise was communicationaly unavoidable, just as compromise was unavoidable in the daily lives, not only of Beaumont himself during those last seven years, but of other court Catholics as well, including, we may suspect, Southampton (the scion of a firmly recusant line who, after officially coming out as a Protestant, continued to patronize Catholic artists and writers, and whose patronage of *The Crowne of Thornes* was perhaps brought about through the good offices of Beaumont's recusant mother-in-law, Southampton's kinswoman), and certainly including Katherine *née* Manners, wife of Buckingham (on whom John Williams's attempt to explain the beauty of Anglican worship, a service for which James raised him to the Deanery of Westminster, was not permanently effective). As is clear from the last two books of *The Crowne of Thornes*, the community built on such pragmatic compromises was very irking to Beaumont. But it must also have made a very strong claim on his acquiescence. Few communities are a totally homogeneous consensus, and many of us are unable to maintain just some single hard-and-fast identity or allegiance in each and every set of social circumstances. The embarrassing disjunction which could arise in Beaumont's writing for the third audience between a reluctant praise and an equally reluctant blame is fairly typical of human social life in general. If we are tempted to think otherwise, we may be overestimating our own spiritual and moral consistency.

Then there was the further problem that persuasiveness, as a communicational property, is intrinsically unwelcome, and rather less common in human discourse than rhetoricians and linguists have often assumed. The assumption has been that persuasion is part of the function of human intercourse in general, and

43. W. B. Patterson, *King James VI and I and the reunion of Christendom* (Cambridge, 1997).

that therefore communication always basically takes the form of a message that is transmitted from a more active communicant to a more passive one, who through interpreting it by reference to a context that is also set by the more active communicant is supposed to accept it. In the real world, communication of this kind is certainly very frequent. But no less characteristic of human beings is a type of communication in which the parties show greater mutual respect and, instead of telling each other what to think or what to do, welcome the chance to compare notes about this and that as seen from within their different life-worlds. As a result of such genuine dialogicality, the parties may well end up agreeing with each other, but even if they do not, the communication will have been communication in the full etymological sense of “community-making”, thanks to an expansion in their areas of mutual understanding, which may help them peaceably *agree* to disagree. Nor need the dialogicality be literally dialogical in form. Often it occurs, not face to face, but through written media with no immediate feedback channel. Writers, literary or otherwise, have ample scope to address readers in a way which, by respecting their human autonomy, is dialogical in spirit. In short, then, dialogical communication tends to make for human solidarity in spite of differences, whereas persuasion, spoken or written, is a type of speech act which even at the best of times invites challenge, resistance, antagonism. Although there have always been many contexts within which prophets, preachers and counsellors have enjoyed high public esteem, we can be sure that many an addressee’s first response to them, however much subsequently disciplined, has been an angry unwillingness to be influenced.

In addressing Buckingham, James, and Charles, Beaumont was embarking on the most difficult kind of persuasion of all. In each case, he was trying to persuade a social superior on whom he himself, though arrogating the high didactic ground, was materially dependent. Both persuasive and sycophantic discourse are essentially non-dialogical in spirit, since they both undermine the human autonomy of the party taken as having less power. In sycophantic discourse, that party is the communicant who actually initiates the process, the flatterer, whereas in persuasive discourse things are more naturally the other way round. To tell somebody else what they ought to do or ought to be, you do normally need to have some kind of authority over them, or alternatively to appeal to the authority of some individual or institution already revered – a consideration which also applied to the religious instruction offered by Donne in both *Satire III* and the *Sermons*, as discussed in the present volume by Tony Cousins and Maria Salenius respectively.⁴⁴ The more

44. [Tony Cousins, “Satire III and the Satires: John Donne on true religion”, and Maria Salenius, “... those marks are upon me’: John Donne’s *Sermons* for a community in transition”, in *Writing and religion in England, 1558–1689: Studies in community-making and cultural memory*, eds Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 127–149 and 151–167.]

democratic a society becomes, the more likely authority is to be a matter of superior knowledge and insight, which you can hope the other person will come to recognize and respect. But even in democratic societies there can still be strong survivals of the kind of authority by station which Beaumont's third-readership addressees held over him. If you are *not* trying to persuade your superior in rank to do something or to become a certain kind of human being, then the spirit of the communication in which you engage them may even turn out to be dialogical, as with Jonson's addressivity *vis à vis* the family of Penhurst Place, whose spiritual tone he, fortunately for him, found admirable, and as with Beaumont's own addressivity in court verse such as "Bosworth Field" and the poems on the form and function of poetry. A powerful person can indeed be generously courteous towards a less powerful. A less powerful person can be respectfully frank towards a more powerful. But this does involve the premise of shared values, and calls for intelligent powers of judgement on both sides – perhaps exceptionally intelligent. Certainly in Beaumont's day, the risks, for the powerful, of seeming to surrender power and, for the less powerful, of seeming to aspire to it would have been strongly deterrent. And if a subordinate really was hoping to persuade a superior to take some course of action or to undergo a personal change, and if there were no special circumstances whereby the normal workings of social rank could be short-circuited, then the subordinate was well advised to remember that any such persuasion would go against the social grain. Imprudence in this matter could be very costly.

In both the elegy on Lady Clifton and the manuscript poem to Buckingham, we have already seen Beaumont self-consciously wrestling with the difference between flattery and justified praise. But when to this dilemma were added all the difficulties of trying to persuade a great one to reform and convert, his praise was more than ever likely to sound hollow. In "Of true Greatnesse: to my Lord Marquesse of Buckingham", he basically wanted to warn his mighty patron against worldliness, on Christian-Stoical grounds which also served as an argument through which, in addressing his primary, Catholic readership, he regularly offered consolation in worldly sufferings and deprivations. The poem's concluding twenty lines could easily have come from Book 10 of *The Crowne of Thornes* and, in isolation, might have struck Drayton, for instance, as firm and dignified enough. But the poem from which these lines do come opens with a sycophancy even more blatant than that of "The Shepherdesse". Of the poem's two clearly separate parts, the first introduces the moral and spiritual persuasion of the second as a statement with which Buckingham, here figured as belonging to a fraternity of *viri boni* extending from his own high rank right down to Beaumont's, would already agree, finding in it little more than a sketch of his own impeccable character. So the poem's fundamental awkwardness is that, having oppositionally polarized its didactic impulse and its encomiastic impulse to its second part and its first part respectively, it praises

Buckingham in a way all too likely to encourage in him exactly that pride of place which the more persuasive argumentation so roundly deplores. Then there is the further problem that the social distance between the poet and the addressee, far from being subsumed in a larger fellowship of either humanist conviviality or Christian humility before God, is extremely prominent, and more embarrassingly so than in “The Shepherdesse”, because here Beaumont is at the same time positioning himself as higher than Buckingham, as a judge whose verdict on him, though ostensibly so favourable, could in theory have turned out otherwise, if it were not for the facts, well known to every possible reader, that Buckingham was actually higher all the same, at least in rank, and that rank was usually what counted.

Elsewhere, Beaumont’s approach to his third audience turned out very differently. Perhaps rather surprisingly, *The Crowne of Thornes*, in addition to his primary, Catholic readership, also targeted readers who, though not professedly Catholic, were serious-minded enough to consider what he has to say and, at best, be influenced. Indeed, their position is specially highlighted, with convertibility becoming an integral part of the entire thematics. Book 2 lengthily emphasizes that Rome, despite its complicity in the death of Christ, later became his Church’s earthly headquarters. Book 3 rounds off its long survey of the Jews’ even greater culpability with the hope that they, too, will finally repent. Still more to the point, when the poem directly addresses potential converts in its own time, it is truly dialogical in spirit. Beaumont does not arrogate spiritually higher ground. Neither does he abase himself by too much flattery.

Admittedly, he does speak of his own proneness to sin, and not just to sin in general, but to author’s vanity and that desire for worldly advancement of which we could well suspect him as the scion of his father and grandfather before him. If he were to be over-enamoured of his own “slight works” of poetry, if his thoughts were to be incited by “the ambitious sting / of human nature”, he hopes that Christ “on my head his thornie crowne would presse”. But first he no less clearly mentions the possible sin of his addressee, and indicates that sinners can actually assist each other, tit for tat, along the path to spiritual health. Perhaps the words of his own poem will helpfully “leauve sharpe stings in some relenting hart.”⁴⁵

Even in Book 11, where after a wide-ranging survey of truly Christian rulers he for the first time directly addresses his ultimate non-Catholic target-reader, James I and VI, he and his king are, as sinners before God, absolute equals. He may again, as in “Bosworth Field” and “Concerning the true forme of English poetry”, prostrate himself before the unifier of the Britannic realms. But once that formality has been seen to, he issues an injunction that is remarkably forthright, without the slightest

45. *The Crowne of Thornes*, B, 130.

prevarication or apology. Here he is simply one Christian doing his duty, in his own sphere of life, by firmly trying to help another Christian, in a very different sphere, to do his:

To greater workes prepare thy glorious hand,
 of which these pledges and invitments stand.
 Pull vppe these roots of schisme, let none divide
 the married realmes, from Christs vnspotted bride.
 behold the name of Christ in peeces torne,
 with errorrs, which daire chalenge to be borne
 from ventrous sailing into scepters flood
 and are not quencht, but fedd with christian bloud.
 To thee their peaceful eyes all good men raise,
 and pray thee to restore those goulden dayes
 when faith, and practice of religious grownds
 was generall, and not fastned to the bounds
 of severall staites; then charitie shall heale
 our mutual raige, and wee, possesst with zeale,
 shall whet our swords against the faithlesse Turkes,
 and fill all Asia with our glorious workes.⁴⁶

Here was a rousing prospect, perhaps calculated to remind James of his own poem about Don John's victory over the Ottoman navy at Lepanto. As it happens, the next line makes a very abrupt transition. It turns out that, "while this booke lyes hidden from the day"; James has actually died, and Beaumont is understandably shaken, wondering whether his poem, "this infant, strangled in the womb", will "be dead vnborne, and buried in his [James's] tomb". Soon, though, he is hoping that new lustre will be shed upon his lines by "our second Phebus Charles"; after which token sycophancy his address to the new monarch is just as man-to-man as it has been to the old:

The slightest act which is by princes done
 is publicke, and conspicuous as the sunne.
 into their closets light through chinkes appeares;
 their secret whispers rouch their subiects eares;
 when they offend their bad examples cause
 more harme, then can be mended by their lawes;
 for as their trumpets so their manners lead
 whole armies, ioying in their pathes to tread.⁴⁷

46. *The Crowne of Thornes*, B, 110.

47. *The Crowne of Thornes*, B, 111.

Nor is the court nobility let off the hook. Beaumont has a fully articulated theory of monarchs under God, and of nobility under monarchs. The entire court, at length and unabashedly, is told to do its duty.

So all this was not only *about* royals or aristocrats, but actually *addressed* to both King and courtiers. And this did not make it court poetry of the entirely secular or unexceptionably religious kind to be found in the posthumous printed book of 1629. It was Counter-Reformation poetry through and through, to the point of being, by official English standards, provocatively sectarian. As with “Upon the two great Feasts...”, the quite exceptional importance for Beaumont of his religious theme, and his powerful sense of being one of God’s earthly servants, far from giving rise to the undialogical self-abasement of sycophancy, tended to short-circuit the normal workings of earthly rank. But whereas that shorter poem’s imagery, though Catholic in flavour, might still have been publicly acceptable to a broader court readership, *The Crowne of Thornes* was quite blatant in its political incorrectness. For all we know, James, Charles, Buckingham, and other professing Protestants of high rank could have read it even so. But Beaumont’s own observation that “this booke lyes hidden from the day” may have acknowledged that printed publication was impossible. It is impossible to imagine Jonson publicly recommending *The Crowne of Thornes* in quite the same terms as he used for the book of 1629.

The contrast with that volume’s “A Panegyrick at the Coronation of our Sovereigne Lord King Charles” is representative.⁴⁸ The same theory of monarchy which in *The Crowne of Thornes* leads to very concrete suggestions for royal behaviour and policy is here the cue to effusive praise. There is nothing *but* praise, nothing but prophecy of future greatness, which all sounds suspiciously like self-reassurance. Needless to say, hyperbolic praise is precisely what we expect from a panegyric. But here there is none of the detailed corroboration that made the funeral elogy on James ring so true, none of that camaraderie and trust which made the poem for Charles on the function of poetry so Jonsonian. The last twelve lines hail the new King as so incontestably divine as to be incapable of discussion by his obedient, mortal subjects, a proposition which, stripped of its fancy dress, surely reveals a troubled recognition, not only of the yawning social gap between himself and Charles, but of real disagreement. What about? For one thing, perhaps, Bolton’s proposal for a royal academy of honour. Whereas James had offered suggestions for actually increasing its planned scope and authority, Charles, who was to deprive Sir Robert Cotton of his library and send Selden to the Tower, seems to have taken no interest whatever.⁴⁹

48. Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 127–129.

49. Ethel M. Portal, “The Academ Roial of King James I”, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, [7] (1915–1916): 189–208; D. R. Woolf, “Bolton, Edmund Mary”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eds H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Finally, in March 1627, the same month in which he wrote “Upon the two great Feasts...” and very shortly before his own death, he wrote a funeral elegy on the first-born son of Buckingham and Katherine. His paean for this same child’s birth in 1625 had addressed Buckingham in terms which will come as no surprise, and which Drayton might have found outrageous:

Instinct of gen’rous Nature oft propounds
(Great Duke) your active graces to his [the child’s] sight,
As objects full of wonder and delight.

The new poem is more religious in temper, and in looking back on the earlier poem Beaumont all but comments, as in that passage in *The Crowne of Thornes*, on authorly “vaine glorie, and selfe loue”:

Sweet Babe, whose Birth inspir’d me with a Song,
And call’d my Muse to trace thy dayes along;
Attending riper yeeres, with hope to finde
Such brave endeavours of thy noble Minde,
As might deserve triumphant line, and make
My Fore-head bold a Lawrell Crowne to take.⁵⁰

– also lines which Drayton may have noted. The title of the poem speaks of the child’s departure from “us”, and one of its first readers was likely to have been the father. But Buckingham is not addressed directly. Beaumont speaks only to the dead infant, who:

... cam’st into this world a little Spie,
Where all things that could please the eare and eye,
Were set before thee, but thou found’st them toys,
And flew’st with scornfull smiles t’eternall joyes.
...
The sparke infuse’d by God departs away,
And bids the earthly weake companion stay
With patience in that nurs’ry of the ground,
Where first the seeds of *Adams* limbes were found:
For time shall come when these divided friends
Shall joyne againe, and know no sev’rall ends,
But change this short and momentary kisse
To strict embraces of Celestiall blisse.⁵¹

50. Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 144–145.

51. Beaumont, *Shorter Poems*, 145–146.

By not flattering the parents, by not ruling out a judgement on the life-style they could “set before” their son, by the communal embrace of that “us” in the title, by that magical conceit of the child’s life as a “short and momentary kisse” of body and soul, by so confidently anticipating a blissful after-life: in all these ways Beaumont was arguably treating Buckingham and Katherine as if from now on they both – not only the steadfast Katherine – were members of his primary, Catholic readership, a community within which rank and worldliness had no place, and in which sufferings such as those they felt on their present bereavement were relieved by fellowship. Perhaps, then, the death of a son had knocked Buckingham off balance, making him more malleable to his protégé’s high dream.

Or perhaps not. Any sense of Buckingham’s having come into the fold could equally well have been Beaumont’s wishful thinking. Or perhaps Beaumont’s thoughts were in any case mainly with the child, en route to that realm where, as the envoi in MS Stowe 960 puts it, he himself would soon be “joined” to the great chorus. We cannot know. But given his own track record, if his mind really was turning in that direction, then the prospect of singing in a true dialogue of different voices, in a choir that was its own audience, single but all-embracing, would surely have been a very restful one. The art of persuasion, so arduous here on earth, in heaven would not be needed. Community, instead of having to be made, would at last just *be*: a communion perfected and eternal.

Dialogicality and ethics

Four cases of literary address¹

1. Towards a humanized dialogue analysis

In common parlance, a dialogue is an interchange in which two people are talking with each other face to face and with frequent turn-switching. But even if an interchange of this kind can still be regarded as the prototype of dialogue, linguists have long been aware of an element of dialogicality in uses of language, both spoken and written, which involve more than two people, and/or which are not face to face, and/or which do not involve turn-taking. In fact the launch of *Language and Dialogue* is to be welcomed as consolidating an increasingly widespread sense, tellingly captured in a recent book by its founding editor Edda Weigand,² of the dialogicality of any use of language at all.

This insight can now enter into synergy with those of linguists who have ethical concerns. Research such as Weigand's is itself investigating how human beings, in their use and processing of language, are actually *behaving* towards each other. The "What?" of this must be described with the same accuracy as we expect in any kind of linguistics, and once the description is in place it will have the same intrinsic value as any other factual statement within the realm of scholarly learning. But the ethical "*So what?*" is also food for thought. By conceiving of language practices as basically dialogical in nature, linguists will be able to enrich and diversify their already significant use of notions such as fairness, equality, recognition, access to resources, and freedom from exploitation.

As this list of terms can remind us, linguists' ethical concerns have often had a political dimension. Scholars have recorded and protected languages or language varieties which have been threatened with extinction, and have championed their speakers as well. They have supported the language rights movement. And they have engaged with issues of language policy, particularly those relating to minorities and marginalized groupings. Especially noteworthy, too, has been critical discourse analysis, and its specializations in the forms of feminist linguistics, queer linguistics,

1. [First published in *Language and Dialogue* 1 (2011): 79–104.]

2. Edda Weigand, *Language as Dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2009).

and postcolonial linguistics, which have done much to de-naturalize the injustices built into many previously quite standard uses of language.

Given the continuing and systematic imperfections of our human world, all these lines of concern are still topical. And as for the likely synergy between ethical interests and the current dialogical turn, this could well consolidate a humanized dialogue analysis which, rather than focusing mainly on interest groupings and asymmetries of power, would assess the ethical character of any kind of interchange quite regardless of whether such political factors play a role. After all, most people would probably say that dialogue is at its best when the participants are treating each other as human equals. Certainly the ultimate goal of a humanized dialogue analysis could be to promote, in society at large, a dialogicality of precisely that order. In its own way, such an approach would be no less ameliorative than the more directly political types of linguistics.

It would also be much concerned with thick description of contexts. Consider, for instance, Weigand's study entitled "The argumentative power of words: Or how to move other people's minds with words". What this clearly demonstrates is that various techniques for exercising influence depend upon a dialogical "process of adaptation and negotiation" between one person's mind and another's.³ One way to link this observation to ethical concerns is simply to ask whether, in some particular instance of argumentative power, the kind of interaction described by Weigand could be regarded as dialogical in an ethically high sense. Yet this question cannot be answered without a clear knowledge of what is actually going on in the interchange. Since the argumentative process of mental adaptation and negotiation requires that the person seeking to exercise power strongly empathizes with the mind-set of the person on whom the power is being brought to bear, we might jump to the conclusion that the persuasion taking place is fundamentally benign. Empathy, we like to think, is straightforwardly virtuous. To go out of one's way to understand other people, to put oneself in their shoes, is to be singularly unselfish, we tend to assume. In fact, though, in argumentative persuasion the persuader's empathetic sensitivity is put to the service of a coercion which is not necessarily unselfish in the least. If I advised a colleague with a bad flu to go home and spend a day or two in bed, and if as part of that interchange I encouraged her to imagine how much more enjoyably she would afterwards be able to meet the challenges she likes to set herself, I could well be as altruistic as a saint. But if I had a personal reason for desiring her temporary absence from our workplace, if, for instance, it would remove the only obstacle to my pushing through some decision at a meeting of the Faculty Board, then my empathetic adaptation to, and negotiation with her mind-set might deserve to be classed as a Machiavellian abuse of

3. Weigand, *Language as Dialogue*, 373.

human understanding. If my persuasive initiative were to come under the purview of a humanized dialogue analysis, attention would have to be paid to the entire set of circumstances within which my colleague and I were communicating, so as to ensure a reasonable degree of certainty as to my motives.

As I say, another distinctive feature of such an approach would be that, while it never excluded the possibility that a political explanation will be appropriate or partly appropriate, it would also explore other avenues as well. Granted, if I really did empathetically persuade a female colleague to spend a day or two away from work for my own ulterior motives, this might well seem to corroborate a feminist-linguistic analysis in terms of the patriarchy, since it so happens that I am a senior male professor. But what if, as is perfectly possible, a male colleague of equal rank and seniority to my own were empathetically to persuade *me* to stay at home for the sake of *his* ulterior motives? Or what if, as is no less possible, I were so persuaded by a junior female colleague? All political questions may well be basically ethical, but not all ethical questions are basically political. They can well arise even between people belonging to one and the same interest grouping, and of equal power status. And a person of inferior power status can behave either well or badly towards a superior, and a superior can behave either well or badly towards an inferior. These are all considerations which a humanized dialogue analysis would have to bear in mind.

But if its case-by-case particularism would prevent over-hasty conclusions about what is actually happening in an interchange, its most important ethical touchstone could nevertheless be very general and simple. It need be nothing more, though it cannot be anything less, than the Kantian notion, so central to the high modern and postmodern sense of justice, of the universal human right to respect and fair treatment.⁴ Is the addresser, is the respondent, being genuinely human in what is the only way possible: by duly recognising the autonomy of the human other? Or is the addresser, is the respondent, being less than genuinely human, by tending to infringe on that autonomy?

As my way of putting this already hints, the task of an humanized dialogue analysis could be conveniently divided between complementary foci on the ethics of address and the ethics of response, even though both types of study will have the same touchstone, and will share the goal of increasing the likelihood of ethically acceptable communication in the world at large. The focus on address could be said to result in “communicational criticism”, and the focus on response in “mediating criticism”. *Communicational* criticism: because here the scholar is examining an instance of language in use *as* communication, *as* an address to a human other.

4. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* [1785] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Mediating criticism: because here one way to think of the scholar's role is as potentially that of a helpful intermediary between addresser and respondent.

Since my ideas about mediating criticism have been explained and applied elsewhere,⁵ I shall here be very brief. A central point is that, although my own attempts at mediating criticism have aimed to help readers responding to literary texts, there are reasons, presented in Section 2 below, for seeing literary activity as one form, albeit an especially interesting form, of communicational dialogicality among others. Irrespective of the precise nature of the language use to which respondents are responding, mediating criticism's main concern is with the conditions for empathetic understanding and dialogical fair-mindedness. On the one hand, the respondent is humanly obliged to give the addresser a fair hearing. If there are wide gaps between the addresser's and the respondent's positionalities which make this difficult, or which tempt the respondent to misinterpret the addresser by imposing his or her own world-view as the only relevant context, then a mediating critic may be able to illuminate differences of society, culture and ideology, and in this way foster a sense of human otherness as a stimulus to self-scrutiny, and to self-renewing mergings of horizon along lines suggested in Gadamerian hermeneutics: "To recognize one's own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of spirit, whose being consists only in returning to itself from the other"⁶ On the other hand, respondents are humanly entitled to thoughts, emotions and values of their own. If their attitude towards the addresser seems too servile, then mediating criticism can perhaps encourage them to an alerter independence. None of which means that mediating critics operate from an Archimedean point outside of history. As in any other attempt to mediate between two parties, no lasting progress will be made unless the mediator's own cards are frankly laid upon the table from the start.

As for communicational criticism and its focus on the ethics of address, here a humanized dialogue analysis could draw on Habermas's description of all communication as morally accountable action.⁷ In doing so, it could also recall an assumption that was already at work in the rhetorical treatises of the ancient world: the idea that some texts are more suitable than others as models to be emulated in language use more generally. But whereas the rhetoricians of earlier ages were often mainly looking for models of style and persuasiveness, communicational criticism will direct most attention to a language-user's way of entering into human relationships,

5. Roger D. Sell, *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000) and *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001).

6. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and method: Second, revised edition* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989), 14.

7. Jürgen Habermas, *The theory of communicative action*, 2 vols (Boston: Beacon, 1984 and 1987).

whether with individuals or groupings. It is by promoting a new self-consciousness about the connections between language use and human relationships that communicational criticism may somewhat improve the chances for peaceful coexistence, and for fruitful cooperation in the world at large.

The promotion of self-consciousness is already the main goal in a branch of present-day rhetorical studies which goes under the name of communication (*sic!*) criticism. In rhetorical studies generally, there has been a very marked development beyond the traditional focus on the argumentation and style of public speaking. All types of language use can now come under investigation, plus a very wide range of phenomena which, in Kenneth Burke's sense of the term, are more broadly symbolic.⁸ Many different kinds of message and media are viewed as thoroughly permeated with social, cultural, and ideological symbolism, and rhetoric is seen as comprising, in the words of Karyn Charles Rybacki and Donald J. Rybacki, "all the ways in which human symbol can exert influence over humanity".⁹ Communication (*sic*) criticism explores such omnipresent influence by commandeering the analytical arsenals of many different kinds of literary, cultural, social and ideological critique, laying special emphasis on its own credentials as an awareness-raiser. Its aim is to "uncover how the powerful elite use rhetorical activity to maintain their hegemonic power".¹⁰ In this way it tries to help people guard against "being victimized".¹¹

As an attempt to prevent citizens from turning into easily manipulable zombies, communication (*sic*) criticism is obviously welcome. A clear difference from the communicational (*sic*) criticism I am describing here, however, is that critics such as Rybacki and Rybacki are largely dealing with some of the more narrowly political dimensions of ethics, along the same lines as critical discourse analysts and their descendants in feminist, queer and postcolonial linguistics. Also, the way they go about this could well expose them to accusations of paranoid suspiciousness and far-fetched conspiracy theory. Their general tone is certainly rather censorious.

Assuming, as we surely can, that Aristotle was right to claim that human beings learn the best way to do things by imitating examples, there is a permanent need for a linguistic criticism with a rather different emphasis: a criticism which appreciates and affirms communicational good practice. In what I am calling communicational

8. Sonja K. Foss 2009. *Rhetorical criticism: Exploration and practice*, Fourth Edition (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland, 2009), and Roderick P. Hart and Suzanne Doughton, *Modern rhetorical criticism* (Boston: Pearson, 2005).

9. Karyn Charles Rybacki and Donald Jay Rybacki, *Communication criticism: Approaches and genres* (Boston: Pearson, 2002), 2–3.

10. Rybacki and Rybacki, *Communication Criticism*, 225.

11. Malcolm O. Sillars and Bruce E. Gronbeck, *Communication criticism: Rhetoric, social codes, cultural studies* (Waveland: Long Grove, Illinois, 2001), 4–5

(*sic*) criticism, this upbeat task is central. Cases of communicational good practice are identified, discussed, and held up for emulation.

It is perfectly true that there has always been a very great deal of human interaction in which dialogicality is at a minimum, or in which, as I noted earlier, the element of empathetic dialogicality is actually manipulative. These are uses of language which are so coercively monologic in spirit that they seem to corroborate the model of communication assumed by most semioticians and linguists during the last century and still invoked by many scholars with literary and more broadly cultural interests today, including communication (*sic*) critics such as Rybacki and Rybacki: the model, that is to say, of communication as a strongly transitive and persuasive event; as the transmission of a message from a sender to a receiver, from a speaker to a listener, from a writer or author to a reader, from a narrator to a narratee; as a uni-directional process, in other words, in which one party is more active, and would perhaps lay claim to a higher ideological status, while the other is more passive, perhaps more ideologically marginalized, and unable to grasp the more active party's meaning, message, or intention except by pragmatically decoding the text in relation to just a single context, also imposed, in effect, by the more active party. Rybacki and Rybacki endorse this model as follows:

All rhetorical acts have three common elements: rhetor, rhetorical text, and receiver. The *rhetor* is the person or persons who created the message – the symbols that make up the *rhetorical text*. This rhetorical text is the collection of symbols used in a given act of communication. The *receiver*, commonly called “audience”, is the person or persons influenced by the rhetorical text.¹²

In line with this, Rybacki and Rybacki also say that, when their work focuses on narrative, it examines a given story's ability “to serve as a reliable and desirable guide for belief and behaviour”,¹³ as if the best narratives were always an allegorical dress for philosophical, religious, and ethical instruction. In Rybacki and Rybacki's kind of scholarship, this is where literature's “aesthetic properties” come in, in alliance with the “persuasive powers of argumentation”.

In many of the countless cases when an instance of communication does fit this kind of model, some of them helpfully analysed by Rybacki and Rybacki and their colleagues, we can actually speak, with Habermas, of distorted communication: of communication which does not involve a fair-minded mutual respect, but is skewed by some real or assumed disparity between the participants.¹⁴ This is not to deny

12. Rybacki and Rybacki, *Communication criticism*, 4.

13. Rybacki and Rybacki, *Communication criticism*, 12.

14. Jürgen Habermas, “Systematically distorted communication,” *Inquiry* 13 (1970): 205–218.

that, especially when we find ourselves in positions of responsibility, a reduction of dialogicality may be almost unavoidable. Nor, in practice, need this be at all sinister. A tourist bombarded with directions to local beauty spots, or a child firmly ordered to stay on the pavement in a street of fast-moving traffic, can have reasons for gratitude. But no matter how well-intentioned at best, communication which is uni-directional in spirit always tends to undermine the principle of human equality. All too often, it is a form of address adopted for that very reason.

Distorted communication will always be with us. But a humanized dialogue analysis would draw attention to another phenomenon: to something we can call genuine communication, in which the different parties truly respect each other's human autonomy. Although human history is often said to have been an endless tale of violence, injustice, oppression and war, and although there is more than enough truth in this to account for the frequency, and indeed the widespread institutionalization of distorted communication in symbiosis with various forms of coercion, divisiveness, and conflict, a very substantial record could also be compiled of peaceful coexistence: of human tolerance and cooperation in countless different kinds of context, within all of which the communicational situation has been, not so much a binarism of sender-receiver within a unitary context imposed by a domineering sender, as a triangular relationship between two human equals and someone or something else about whom or which they are comparing notes, both of them approaching this process from within their own different lifeworlds.

Not that they initially had nothing in common at all. In order to communicate, genuine communicators have had to share, not only some competence in the actual means of communication, but experience of the existential basics of human life in general: the facts of birth and death, of human needs, both primary and secondary, of social allegiance and social tension, of personal relationships. These commonalities, though so variously realized in the successive phases of history's manifold cultural traditions, have always been a launching-pad for flights of imaginative empathy with otherness, and human beings have sufficient moral and intellectual self-control to step outside their own sociohistorical position and to understand some other point of view, even in the innumerable cases where the final result does not turn out to be a consensus. Very often people agree to disagree. But their genuine communication certainly extends the overlap of their two lifeworlds in terms of knowledge and understanding.

This is how communication becomes communication in the etymological sense, a "community-making": not because it forces everybody into line, but because it promotes a widening circle of discussion from many different points of view. The community resulting from genuine communication is in principle indefinitely large and indefinitely heterogeneous. To dialogue analysts who undertook an ameliorative communicational criticism this would be of particular interest.

2. The dialogicality of literature

Since all language use involves an element of dialogicality, humanized dialogue analysis could be applied to many different types of interchange. In what follows here, I shall concentrate on the writing and reading of literary texts, and not only because of my own personal interest in literature. Although literary authors are often much admired for a distinctively personal force, what the best of them also give a reader is the chance to compare notes with them about whatever happens to be their story or topic. When readers accept that invitation in the open-minded spirit in which it is offered, what takes place is not merely one among other forms of genuinely communicational dialogue. It is arguably the form of genuine communication whose ethical dimensions are most directly decisive for its own social function and status, and which thereby most clearly highlights the ethics of dialogicality in general.

A huge number of readers do not continue to award a text the literary cachet over a long period of time unless a certain kind of relationship has developed between them and its writer, a relationship involving an appropriately ethical address on the part of the writer and an appropriately ethical response on the part of readers. The genuineness of this writer-reader relationship is not a *sufficient* precondition for a text to be assigned to the category of literature, not only because genuineness often occurs in other kinds of communication as well, but also because readers have always applied additional, more exclusively “literary” criteria specific to their own particular phase of culture. But an appropriately ethical relationship is certainly a *necessary* precondition – a *sine qua non* – for high literary status, even though it is very seldom singled out for explicit comment by reviewers, literary critics, or scholars.

One scholar who perhaps failed to grasp literature’s ethical dimension was Gadamer, who was too deeply rooted in nineteenth century aesthetics to think of it as communicational in any such real sense.¹⁵ Yet within a framework of literary-communicational theory such as the one I developed in *Literature as communication*, the discursal features which for nineteenth-century and many early-twentieth-century thinkers ensured a special aesthetic status for literature can indeed be de-mythologized. Literature’s beauties and pleasures; the fictionality of

15. Roger D. Sell, “Simulative panhumanism: A challenge to current linguistic and literary thought,” *Modern Language Review* 88 (1993) 545–558 [= item 11 in Roger D. Sell, *A humanizing literary pragmatics: Criticism, theory, education: Selected papers 1985–2002* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2019), 133–149]. [See also Roger D. Sell, “Gadamer, Habermas, and a re-humanized literary scholarship,” in *Literary criticism as Metacommunity*, eds Smiljana Komar and Uros Mozetic (Ljubljana: Slovene Association for the Study of English, 2007), 213–220 (= item 3 in the present selection)].

many literary texts; literature's lack of a feedback channel from readers to writers: all such characteristics, which Gadamer and his predecessors thought of as almost peculiarly literary and rather foreign to other kinds of discourse, are in fact communicationally regular.

Beauties and pleasures are themselves communicational phenomena, and can arise from non-literary uses of language as well – conversation analysts have long been studying the “poetics of talk”.¹⁶ Although a work of literary art can have an attraction that is psychologically very real for us, so real that we experience it as something positively “there” in the work, and although this impression will certainly not occur unless there are features in the work which give rise to it, a great deal also depends on our own prior conditioning, on what we ourselves bring to our appreciation. As pragmatist aestheticians have helped to explain, there are social contracts as to what shall count as agreeable.¹⁷ Our pleasures occur within the sphere of an essentially dialogical valency, which encompasses the writer, ourselves, and other readers as well. Enjoyment arises from our membership of a community within which matters of taste and value are under constant negotiation.

Fictionality, too, is an element in everyday, non-literary uses of language whose communicational function nobody would question. Communication is not, in fact, confined to the statement of hard and fast facts, opinions and feelings. Especially by making up stories, a communicant can explore and question general or moral truths which go beyond the detail of particular empirical cases, and opinions and feelings which have yet to be socially stabilized into constant attitudes.¹⁸ In most literature which readers have felt worthy of the name, the invitation extended by any fictional elements to a dialogical comparing of notes is very powerful. By the same token, when high literary status is accorded to fictional works that are allegorical and didactic, they will often be found to have exposed their dogma to challenge from its own inversion, a circumstance which Rybacki and Rybacki's account of narrative (see Section 1 above) quite fails to recognize. Although Sir Guyon, the champion of Temperance in *The Fairie Queene*, resists the temptations of the Bower

16. Deborah Tannen, “Repetition in conversation: Towards a poetics of talk,” *Journal of the Linguistics Society of America* 63 (1987): 574–605, and “Ordinary conversation and literary discourse: Coherence and the poetics of repetition,” in *The Uses of Linguistics*, ed. Edward H. Bendix (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1990), 15–32.

17. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist aesthetics: Living beauty, rethinking art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

18. Roger D. Sell, “Blessings, benefactions and bear's services: *Great Expectations* and communicational narratology,” *The European Journal of English Studies* 8 (2004): 49–30 [revised as “Chapter 5: *Great Expectations* and the Dickens community,” in Roger D. Sell, *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam, 2011), 195–221].

of Bliss according to plan, Spenser has made them so voluptuous that few readers would have been surprised if he had failed, and some may even have used them to fuel sexual fantasies of their own. Nor have Blake and Shelley been the only readers of *Paradise Lost* to feel that Milton was on the Devil's side without knowing it.

As for literature's lack of an obvious feedback channel from addressee to writer, scholars persuaded by Edda Weigand's findings will readily see that this does not diminish literary dialogicality. All writing, like all speech, has addressivity, and the addressivity chosen by literary authors is not solipsistic.¹⁹ Even when they have written under the auspices of a formalist aestheticism, even when they have written dramas to be staged in theatres, they have written with other people in mind, the people to whom they have been offering their work for contemplation. Conversely, just as the stipulations of a last will and testament, whose words so obviously prompt survivors to a conscientious reading, may need to be interpreted by expert lawyers, so the readers of a literary text will sometimes hone their responses to it with the help of, say, literary historians, who thereby begin to serve as mediating critics. Readers' sense of their own human obligation towards an author will at best be very pressing.

Now although the aestheticist strain in literary theory continued down into Modernist New Criticism and literary formalism, in the second half of the twentieth century it came under heavy fire. Some of the new paradigms, however, themselves underestimated literary dialogicality. When postmodern commentators writing under the aegis of Foucault discussed literary texts in terms of an endless ideological battle between a dominant order and potentially subversive threats to it, they often minimized the scope for a responsible acknowledgement of human otherness by transferring agency quite away from human beings themselves to a kind of timelessly universal mechanism, a mechanism to which they sometimes referred, in Marxist fashion, as History, but which was not necessarily very historical at all. More traditional literary scholars complained that post-Marxist, new-historicist, cultural-materialist, postcolonial, feminist, queer or ethnicist reductions of history to some such single ideological agonism could be historically inaccurate. This charge sometimes elicited the poststructuralist reply that historical accuracy in, say, the interpretation of a writer's words was both impossible and undesirable. According to such a view, the interest and significance of a literary text was merely something imposed upon it by particular readers or groupings of readers who were using it for their own ideological ends in their own here and now.²⁰ Any sense of the

19. Sell, *Literature as communication*, 83–88, 158–175.

20. Roger D. Sell, "Henry V and the strength and weakness of words: Shakespearian philology, historicist criticism, communicative pragmatics," in *Shakespeare and Scandinavia: A collection*

text as an invitation to a sincere comparing of notes between a writer and readers of varying positionality was conspicuously absent.

A postmodern paradigm calling for special notice here was the Bakhtinian one. Bakhtin's account (1981) of the dialogic imagination of literary writers involved an understanding of dialogicality that was counter-intuitively specialized and narrow. For him, a literary text was dialogical by itself bodying forth an encounter that was always far less likely to be a friendly conversation than an aggressive confrontation. Within the text, some word or discourse or language or culture was said to be relativized or de-privileged by being placed in sociopolitical tension with some alternative. Thanks to this varied-tonguedness or heteroglossia, the text was said to undermine a monologism that was typical of more authoritarian and absolutist modes of discourse, and thereby to have a bearing on power struggles within society as a whole. So described, literary dialogicality actually relied on the continuing contours of those struggles for its very significance. Indeed, literary texts which ironized by playing off one social voice against another could never reduce, but only further sharpen, the perceived differences between them. Or to put this in other, closely parallel Bakhtinian terms, literature's dialogicality was akin to the topsy-turvydom of carnival: it was a merely temporary letting-off of steam, after which the return to the sociopolitical status quo was all the more emphatic.

What the Bakhtinian paradigm overlooked, in other words, was that, although literature's dialogicality certainly does not exclude sociopolitical antipathies, it does not include them necessarily, and is not merely a textual phenomenon with no ultimate consequences, but involves relationships between authors and readers that are potentially dynamic. On the one hand, any differences which literature brings into play can very well originate from within one and the same sociocultural position. On the other hand, the confluences it sets in motion between representatives or voicings of different positions are not pre-ordinately problematic. In the minds of readers, they can sometimes even result in enriching hybridizations, or in mergings of horizon such as those seen by Gadamer in communication generally.

These late-twentieth-century paradigms were especially inimical to an idea with which the Victorian and Modernist notions of literature's aesthetic heterocosm had been closely interwoven: the liberal humanist idea of the universality of human nature. A work of literary art had been perceived as similarly universal, and the canon of literature as a body of texts to which everybody in the whole world would ideally respond. This in turn had been closely linked to the nineteenth century sense of literary writers' authority, and was thereby doubly disparaging towards original mental activity on the part of readers. If all human beings are basically the

of *Nordic studies*, ed. Gunnar Sorelius (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 108–141 [revised as Chapter 2 in *Communicational Criticism*, 51–81].

same, and if a great author is the very acme of human wisdom, then the scope for independent readings, let alone readings that are positively against the grain, will be nil. Such a mind-set is no longer viable. Thanks to the postmodern critique, most commentators now accept that liberal humanist aestheticism, though appealing to that Kantian sense of human equality which we still endorse, could involve a form of ideological subterfuge, tending to obscure the structures whereby some groupings maintained power over others. In highlighting this deep-seated injustice postmodern commentators performed their greatest service.

Less helpfully, postmodern critique sometimes assumed that literary communication could only be communication of a strongly distorted kind, to use Habermas's term again. This is how, having emphasized the difference between one sociohistorical formation and another, many critics came to say that literature could no longer be thought of as a single canon of great masterpieces for the entire human race, but should rather be seen as many separate canons for many differently positioned communal groupings, most of which were now to be taken as "writing back" against the older order.²¹ This argument, too, was seminal for the process of democratization and cultural empowerment within society as a whole. Yet its valorization of positional difference not only insisted on distinctions between one human grouping and another, but could even suggest that different groupings had so little in common that they were incapable of mutual understanding, as if the differences between them went all the way down.²² This made for a climate of ideas in which truly worthwhile communication could seem to be taking place only between the like-minded, as if, in communication *between* one grouping and another, each grouping would inevitably try to assert itself and eliminate opposition. The feature most highly prized in literary texts, similarly, was a certain tendentiousness on behalf of some particular identity formation: the social script taken to be politically correct within a specific community or sub-community.

Although many of the writings that have aspired to literary status certainly are communicationally distorted, they are unlikely to retain readers' admiration in the long term. And by no means all of the texts which postmodern commentators praised for being, in effect, tendentious in this way really were so, or were so to the extent alleged. When we see literary activity as not only involving many different historical positionalities but also as encouraging dialogical exchanges between

21. Cf. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (eds), *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002).

22. Sell, *Literature as communication*, 8–12, 88–106, and Roger D. Sell, "What's literary communication and what's a literary community?" in *Emergent literatures and globalisation: Theory, society, politics*, eds Sonia Faessel and Michel Pérez (Paris: In Press Editions, 2004), 39–45 [= item 2 in the present selection].

them, we are accepting the most helpful insights, and qualifying the excesses, of both the nineteenth-century universalizations and the postmodern historicizations. Communities of readers do grow up around literary writers, and writers certainly are active within particular historical contexts, addressing particular groupings of readers, and quite possibly strengthening some particular kind of group identity. But they can also have a wider reach than that, tending to make for communities which are much larger, but therefore also much more heterogeneous as well. A literary readership *is* a community, but a community which is less a consensus than a kind of coming-together in dialogue, which may be widely distributed across space and through time.

How is it that this can happen? For one thing, although readers are social beings, they also have that relative independence of imagination, intellect, and will. In combination with their native curiosity, this positively predisposes them to empathetic dialogue with formations unlike their own, a predisposition which a critic who adopts the mediating role will try to nurture. For another thing, authors' modes of address have the ethical strengths which are of interest to communicational critics. Authors, too, enjoy a certain imaginative, intellectual and moral autonomy, and are thereby equipped to empathize with, and appeal to, formations different from their own. Although they may often allude to knowledge and values which are shared only by the readership closest to their own sociocultural position, some things always have to be explained even for the most in-group readers of all, and more things can be explained as well, so as to cater for readers who would otherwise feel excluded. A text directed towards one main historical type of reader, then, is not necessarily restricted to it. Its implied reader will also involve an element of historical plurality, or a more general open-endedness, as one might call it.

What is ultimately at issue here is that, for the writers who come to be recognised as great writers, the autonomy of every human other is as inviolable as it was for Kant. Habermas does not recognize this, because he is just as deeply grounded in nineteenth century aesthetics as Gadamer. Yet here again is a major philosopher whose old-fashioned view of literature has not prevented him from developing insights into communication in general which are far more relevant to literary activity than he himself realizes.²³ The ethical dimension of a great writer's communicative action is something to which readers cannot but respond, and their instinctive concern for their own spiritual freedom was well expressed by Keats. What we really hate, he said, is "poetry that has a palpable design upon us".²⁴ The

23. Sell, "Gadamer, Habermas and a re-humanized literary scholarship." [= item 3 in the present selection].

24. John Keats, *Selected letters of John Keats*, ed. Frederick Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 72.

most wonderful thing about Shakespeare, similarly, was his “negative capability”: the capability “of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”.²⁵

Within communicational criticism, of both literature and other kinds of interaction, Keats’s term deserves a central place, and in now pinpointing instances of negative capability in four different literary genres I shall in fact be discussing the ethics of address in general. Not that this will lead to entirely Keatsian readings. I mentioned earlier that literary authors are often admired for a distinctively personal force. But in Keats’s thinking, negative capability was sometimes almost indistinguishable from a kind of quietist humility. He said about himself, for instance, that because he was a poet he had no personal identity, so that when he was in a room full of people he had no sense of his own self, as if his negative capability were totally absorbed by the pressing reality of so many human others.²⁶ To his way of thinking, Shakespeare was similarly amorphous, a view which anticipated the idealist aestheticizations of Victorian commentators such as Edward Dowden. “Just when we have laid hold of . . . [Shakespeare]”, Dowden wrote, “[he] eludes us, and we hear only distant ironical laughter”. So in Dowden’s view, the best gloss on Shakespeare was a line from *Troilus and Cressida*: “The secrets of nature have not more gift in taciturnity”.²⁷ In point of fact, though, Shakespeare’s work was both historically rooted and deeply personal,²⁸ and the same was far more true of Keats than he himself apparently imagined.²⁹ Great writers’ respect for the human other can go hand in hand with enormous strength and historical representativeness. Indeed, when seen in relation to those two qualities, their negative capability is all the more surprising and exemplary.³⁰

25. Keats, *Letters*, 53.

26. Keats, *Letters*, 172.

27. Edward Dowden, 1906. *Shakspeare* [sic]: *A critical study of his mind and art*, 13th ed. [1875] (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1906), 6.

28. Jonathan Bate, *The genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador 1997), 133–153.

29. John Bayley, *The uses of division: Unity and disharmony in literature* (New York: Viking, 1976), and Christopher Ricks, *Keats and embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

30. The discussions which here follow of Churchill, Wordsworth, Dickens and Pinter are much more fully developed in Sell, *Communicational criticism*: “Churchill’s *My Early Life* and communicational ethics”, 239–258; “Wordsworth’s genuineness”, 151–194; “*Great Expectations* and the Dickens community”, 195–221; and “Communicational ethics and the plays of Harold Pinter”, 293–363.

3. An autobiographer's address

For almost one and a half centuries the aestheticist strain in literary thought tended to specialize the notion of literature mainly to poetry, the novel, and drama. In the eighteenth century, however, high literary status had also been enjoyed by travel writings, by sermons and other public speeches, by several different kinds of scholarship, and especially by historical writing, including biography and autobiography. In our own time, even if postmodern critique has not completely levelled out distinctions between high-, middle-, and low-brow, the notion of literature has certainly become more democratic, and seems to be re-acquiring something of its eighteenth century breadth. Literary-communicational theory's nominalistic definition of literature as the body of written texts to which readers *de facto* award the literary cachet reflects this contemporary trend, and by including autobiography here I am further underlining the scope for literary-communicational scholarship as a central mode of humanized dialogue analysis in general. The point is that autobiography, a genre which once perhaps moved out of the category of literature but which may now be coming back into it, is clearly just as much an arena for negative capability as the genres which have indisputably been there all along. By extension, negative capability can occur in types of interaction which nobody has ever dreamed of describing as literary.

The judges who in 1953 awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature to Winston Churchill either still had their heads in the eighteenth century or were well in advance of their own time. They commended him, not for *Savrola* (1900), his one and only novel, but for his "historical and biographical description as well as for brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values".³¹ Some of the phrasing in the speeches to which the citation refers has entered into the English language as normally used, and Churchill's historical and biographical writings – his record of the Nile campaign, for instance, his histories of the two World Wars, and his biographies of his ancestor, the Duke of Marlborough, and of his own father, Randolph Churchill – have also been widely admired. In the foreground of the Nobel jury's attention was doubtless his golden use of language in these works, together with his magisterial command of facts, of narrative, of argument.

Equally crucial, I suggest, though not commented upon, was his instinctive feel for communicational ethics. At first this may seem a preposterous claim. Was Churchill really so concerned for the human other? Most of his contemporaries, including some close associates, would have laughed at the idea. Not only were his biographies and histories criticized for a frank apologetics on behalf of his own distinguished forbears. There were also allegations of an egotism far more comprehensive, as when Balfour characterized *The World in Crisis*, his history of

31. Nobelprize.org. 25 Aug 2010: "The Nobel Prize for Literature 1953."

the First World War, as “an autobiography disguised as a history of the universe”³² More recent commentators, too, still see an egotism of a “Himalayan vastness”,³³ and in a real autobiography by him one would expect any such trait to be further magnified by the genre’s foregrounding of the individual who is both protagonist and narrator. Yet unless I am mistaken, his *My early life* (1930) is to a high degree negatively capable, thereby raising the possibility of the same quality in his other writings as well.

More specifically, *My early life* deserves praise, it seems to me, for its powers of mediation. Mediation is not merely one of the modes of diplomacy, or of linguistic or literary criticism. It can also occur within many other kinds of interchange, both spoken and written. In his autobiography, Churchill’s turn of mind is mediational in a strong sense, constantly negotiating different sociohistorical positions and different ways of looking at the world, and congenially prompting readers to follow suit. Any intelligent reading of it will be a continuation of mediational processes which Churchill himself has set in motion.

At one point, for instance, he tells how, during his sea passage back from the Sudan campaign, he was already turning his recent memories into the glorious prose of the campaign history he was later to publish. On the ship he also struck up a friendship with “the most brilliant man in journalism I have ever met”, G. W. Stevens. One day

I was working in the saloon of the Indiaman, and had reached an exciting point in my story. The Nile column had just by a forced night march reached Abu Hamed and was about to storm it. I was setting the scene in my most ceremonious style. “The dawn was breaking and the mists, rising from the river and dispersing with the coming of the sun, revealed the outlines of the Dervish town and the half circle of rocky hills behind it. Within this stern amphitheatre one of the minor dramas of war was now to be enacted.” “Ha! Ha!” said Stevens, suddenly peering over my shoulder. “Finish it yourself then,” I said getting up; I went up on deck. I was curious to see how he would do it, and indeed I hoped for a valuable contribution. But when I came down again I found that all he had written on my nice sheet of paper was “Pop-pop! pop-pop! Pop! Pop!” in his tiny handwriting, and then at the bottom of the page printed in big letters “BANG!!” I was disgusted at this levity.³⁴

Perhaps Bakhtin would have described this in terms of a heteroglossic dialogicality whereby the florid discourse of empire is challenged by a pacifistic disrespect, only to emerge with colours still flying and the status quo firmly re-asserted. But Churchill’s sense of ideological conflict is far more dynamic than Bakhtin’s.

32. Geoffrey Best, *Churchill: A study in greatness* (London: Penguin, 2001), 83.

33. Best, *Churchill*, 333.

34. Winston S. Churchill, *My early life: A roving commission* [1930] (London: Collins 1959), 219.

Certainly, writing in 1930, when Britain's continued rule over India was already in doubt, he makes no secret of his nostalgia for the Victorian Pax Britannica, and feels that the moral tone of English life has now seriously declined. In his own self-image, imperialistic bombast is indeed a major strand. At the same time, though, this is consciously old-fashioned, for he is also a realist, who knows that the clock cannot be turned back, and a pragmatist, who crossed the floor of the House of Commons not just once but twice. In mediating between the values of an already distant "then" and those of an urgent "now", he takes for granted that no status quo can ever be fully restored. In fact the self-irony of his frequent alternation, as in this passage, between sublime memories and bathos intimates that the present always conquers the past, even against his own most passionate wish. Readers are unlikely to miss the humorous honesty of this, and are free to choose whatever ideological position they themselves please, or no particular position at all. Not many writers are at once so distinctively individual and so decent towards their readers.

4. A poet's address

Another writer sometimes accused of egotism was Wordsworth. In fact for Keats, Wordsworth's poetic sublime was so badly tainted by egotism that, in marked contrast with Shakespeare's negative capability, it was nothing short of unethical. Here, said Keats, was a poet whose readers are "bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist", a poet who was far too happy to "brood and peacock" over his own speculations.³⁵ It was Wordsworth whom Keats blamed for failing to realize how much we hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us. And certainly, Wordsworth's own personal appearances in his writing could be very blatant, and sometimes difficult to reconcile with lofty notions of poetic impersonality.

During the early twentieth century, his poetry was partly reevaluated in terms of a Modernist aesthetics which paid less attention to explicit statement than to evocative symbol, sharp image, and the epiphanic transvaluation of the everyday. But occasional complaints about his egotism still persisted, and in the postmodern period were sometimes expressed in terms of his perceived allegiance to a patriarchal conservatism.

Yet the plain facts are that Shakespeare's capability is *not* so negative as to leave us entirely to our own devices, and that Wordsworth's sublimity is *not* so egotistical as merely to force upon us his own selfhood. True, we are far more aware of Wordsworth's presence in, say, the amazing passage about crossing the Alps in Book VI of *The Prelude* than of Shakespeare's presence during the equally amazing heath

35. Keats, *Letters*, 71–72.

scenes in *King Lear*. But in no small part this is a consequence of Shakespeare's writing in a dramatic as opposed to an autobiographical mode.

Also relevant here are Wordsworth's deep roots in an eighteenth century conception of polite letters.³⁶ Many of his greatest poems are addressed to his closest friends and loved ones. Here he comes before his readers as a good-humoured companion, frankly saying what he thought and felt as a person of his own background and temperament, but with varying degrees of certainty, and deferentially inviting them to compare notes with him. In all this his mode of address clearly harks back to the thought-world of Fielding's "Essay on conversation":

Good-breeding ..., or the Art of pleasing in Conversation, ... may be reduced to that concise, comprehensive rule in Scripture: Do unto all men as you would they should do unto you.³⁷

Wordsworth's best writing, in short, is both intimate and strongly benevolent.

Even in "Tintern Abbey" (1798), the poem so famous for its sublime passage on the spirit which moves through the whole of created nature, there are the affectionate closing lines to his sister Dorothy:

let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk,
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee; and, in after years,
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! then,
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations!³⁸

36. Roger D. Sell, "Wordsworthian communication," *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 6 (2007): 17–45 [revised as Chapter 4 in *Communicational Criticism* (151–194), "Wordsworth's Genuineness"].

37. Henry Fielding, "An essay on conversation" [1743], in *The writings of Henry Fielding.*, vol. 14, ed. William Ernest Henley (London: Heinemann, 1903), 245–277, esp. 249–250.

38. William Wordsworth, "Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour. July 13, 1798" [1798], in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth: Poems founded on the affections*, 2nd ed., ed. E. de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 259–263, ll. 134–146.

James A. Butler voices the postmodern complaint that Dorothy “is not given her own voice”.³⁹ But if “Tintern Abbey” is not a dialogue in the prototypical sense, at the less superficial level which is of interest to a humanized dialogue analysis its dialogicality is warm and generous.⁴⁰ When Wordsworth fantasizes Dorothy as for ever surrounded by the mountain winds, his implication is not that the winds will caress and make her in any sense – literally or metaphorically – compliant to their breath, but that she herself will be just as free as the winds’ own blowing: “let the misty mountain-winds be free / To blow against thee”. His prepositions are often quietly surprising and semantically crucial,⁴¹ and “against” here, by insisting on the woman’s autonomy at all, and by insisting on it in such a slightly marked, matter-of-fact way, which takes it so very much for granted, is the spontaneously democratic Wordsworth at his most characteristic. Elsewhere in the poem, similarly, rather than trying to bring Dorothy round to his own pantheistic way of thinking, he positively rejoices in her mental difference from himself, which – even if “outside the poem” he protected her as his unmarried sister – he sees as quite unconnected with gender, and as quite possibly a mere difference of age. His only assumption is that human beings really can change over time, as the poem reports that he himself has changed. All in all, then, although he does nothing to dampen down his own powerful identity, it is hard to imagine a mode of expression more friendly or gentle. In places the phrasing is negatively capable even to the extent of acknowledging that his own present philosophical beliefs, firmly held and sublime though they certainly are, may turn out to be mistaken – “If this / Be but a vain belief”, “I would believe”, “If I were not thus taught”.⁴²

5. A novelist’s address

Novelists, too, can be forceful personalities, and perhaps none more so than Dickens. Is any other novelist so rumbustiously self-assertive and intrusively omniscient? Has any other great writer seemed to make such sharp distinctions

39. James A. Butler, “Poetry 1798–1807: *Lyrical ballads and Poems in two volumes*,” in *Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 38–54, esp. 42.

40. Roger D. Sell, “Wordsworth and the spread of genuine communication,” in *Literature and Values: Literature as a medium for representing, disseminating and constructing norms and values*, eds Sibylle Baumbach, Herbert Grabes and Ansgar Nünning (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2009), 125–143.

41. Christopher Ricks, “A sinking inward to ourselves from thought to thought,” in his *The force of poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 117–134.

42. Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey”, ll. 49–50, 87, 112.

between happiness and unhappiness, or between right and wrong? Does any other major novelist write stories which, to borrow the words of E. M. Forster, could appeal so strongly to a “gaping audience of cavemen or ... [a] tyrannical sultan or ... their modern descendant the movie-public”, who only ask, “And then?”⁴³

Yet all these certainties and simplicities can draw readers into mental processes that are very delicate and complex. What do we really think about Pip, for instance, the main character and narrator in *Great Expectations* (1861)? As a young child, he felt an instinctive pity for Magwitch, the escaped convict he met on the moor, and went to enormous trouble to provide him with food. No less clearly, however, he was also acting in sheer terror at the man’s violent threats. On several later occasions, too, his generous instincts seem to be somewhat qualified.

Towards the end of the novel, it finally dawns on Miss Havisham that, by encouraging Pip to fall in love with Estella, the girl she has brought up to break men’s hearts, she may have caused him just as much pain as she herself suffered when long ago jilted at the altar. She “dropped on her knees at my feet; with her folded hands raised to me in the manner in which, when her poor heart was young and fresh and whole, they must often have been raised to Heaven from her mother’s side” and implores his forgiveness.⁴⁴ This he mercifully grants. Yet there *is* a qualification. A page or so later he re-experiences his childhood hallucination of seeing her dead body hanging from a beam in the brewery, and only a page later still, he cannot perform the continuing kindness of rescuing her from the fire which has set her crinoline alight except by being very violent. In his effort to smother the flames, “I still held her forcibly down with all my strength, like a prisoner who might escape”,⁴⁵ almost as if he were avenging himself on her after all.

Then again, when he has finally worked out that Estella’s mother is Molly, the strange serving-woman employed by the lawyer Mr Jaggers, and that her father is none other than Magwitch, and when he also knows, as neither Estella, Molly nor Magwitch knows, that they are all alive, and all resident within a short distance of each other, he has the three of them in the palm of his hand. If he so chooses, he could bring about the kind of family reunion that we expect in a novel by Smollett. Dickens’s plot, that is to say, has brought Pip into a position of absolute power to bestow or withhold what many readers might feel is the most important blessing a human being could wish for. Yet Pip decides not to bestow it, because, having listened

43. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the novel and related writings*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Arnold, 1974), 60.

44. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* [1861], ed. Edgar Rosenberg (New York: Norton, 1999), 297.

45. Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 300.

to the arguments of Jaggers's "wiser head",⁴⁶ he judges that it would actually do very little good. Magwitch would have no joy of Molly now. Molly herself is probably best off as she is, under Jaggers's firm protection and control. And a reunion with these two particular parents, both of them tarnished by a criminal background, would do nothing to help Estella in her already dreadful marriage with the snobbish Drummle. The greatest benefaction he can give all three, Pip concludes, is through doing absolutely nothing, and many readers will perhaps agree that this is the most nobly responsible course of action for him. The only conceivable blessing arising from a family re-union, and one which Jaggers and Pip do not even discuss, is that Magwitch might be pleased to know that his daughter is still alive and has become a lady. But here, precisely, is the qualification. This possible benefit is something an alert reader may easily think about, perhaps wondering whether Pip might at least have considered it as well.

Pip's information about Estella's life and condition is what he uses when he later assumes the role of *deus ex machina* in the life-story of the dying Magwitch. Magwitch's dream was that the young boy who had helped him on the moor should be brought up as a gentleman, and his own money has made that possible. Pip, on his side, is still hopelessly in love with Estella, who is still miserably married to Drummle.

"Dear Magwitch, I must tell you, now at last. You understand what I say?"

A gentle pressure on my hand.

"You had a child once, whom you loved and lost."

A stronger pressure on my hand.

"She lived and found powerful friends. She is living now. She is a lady and very beautiful ..."

And just so that his story will have the fullest happy ending the dying man could wish:

"... And I love her!"⁴⁷

– as as if Estella loved him and were *free* to love him, too, and as if the sound of wedding bells could be confidently expected. Even for less alert readers, Pip's kindness to Magwitch here may be qualified by the element of deception. Some readers may even ask themselves whether his end justified his means.

Despite his firmness on so many other matters, in cases like this Dickens is not telling us what to think. Rather, by exercising his capability of being in uncertainties,

46. Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 303.

47. Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 342.

mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason, he is asking us what we think ourselves. The novel's underlying dialogicality could not be stronger, or more ethically irrefragable.

6. A dramatist's address

I could have phrased the question about how Pip treats other characters in more directly communicational terms: "What is the nature of his communication with them?" Instead, I have reserved this kind of question for drama, where it is even more *à propos*, in that the dramatist is not usually a verbalized presence in a play, so that the characters' voices are apparently the only ones we have.

This, though, does not release a dramatist from ethical accountability. Irrespective of whether we are dealing with an ordinary conversation, an autobiography, a narrative poem, a novel, or a play, a good story communicates by inviting people to compare notes with its teller *about* communication. In fact, then, one way for communicational critics to begin their enquiry is by comparing tellers' own behaviour towards their stories' audience with the communicational relationships which develop between the various characters within the stories themselves. In the case of any particular story, the main question then becomes: How does the teller's ethics of narration tally with the teller's own perceptions of communicational ethics as represented in the story?

Opinions about Harold Pinter's way of treating his theatre audiences are sharply divided. Some commentators have seen him as decidedly coercive, and especially in his so-called political plays. Michael Billington defends what he sees as their lack of complexity by arguing that here Pinter has important points to make.⁴⁸ On the other hand, Pinter himself inimitably re-worded Keats's description of Shakespeare's negative capability. In writing of human life, he commented, Shakespeare is fundamentally dealing with a huge wound. In the wound, "[a]ll postures are contained", and

Shakespeare does not attempt to sew up or re-shape ... [the wound], whose pain he does not attempt to eradicate. He amputates, deadens, aggravates at will, within the limits of a particular piece, but he will not pronounce judgement or cure. Such comment as there is is so variously split up between characters and so contradictory in itself that no central point of opinion or inclining can be determined.⁴⁹

48. Michael Billington, *Harold Pinter* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 288–299.

49. Harold Pinter, "A note on Shakespeare" [1950], in his *Various voices: Sixty years of prose, poetry, politics, 1948–2008* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 14–16, esp. 14–15.

Many critics, including even Billington,⁵⁰ have warmly praised Pinter for similarly abstaining from a palpable design upon us.

As for the characters Pinter puts on stage for us to think about, the verdict has been less equivocal. They have usually been described as human beings who behave towards each other very selfishly and manipulatively. The director Peter Hall speaks of their battles and weaponry, claiming that this “is the way Pinter’s characters operate, as if they were all stalking round a jungle, trying to kill each other, but trying to disguise from one another the fact that they are bent on murder”.⁵¹ Their surface dialogue may be full of mystifying ambiguities and discontinuities. But on this very widespread view, their basic aim, one might say, is to reduce genuine communication to an absolute minimum.

In *Ashes to Ashes*, arguably the finest of the political plays, Rebecca has not herself been sent to a concentration camp, has not herself had a baby snatched from her by a camp guard on the platform of a railway station, and none of her friends has suffered such a fate. Yet she once had a lover who was himself such a guard, who showed her round a factory where there were no lavatories for the workers, and who told her that those same workers would have followed him over the cliff into the sea if he had asked them. With her own eyes, she has seen a huge crowd of human beings walk into the sea on their guards’ command. She has also taken no comfort from the sound of a siren fading away, because she knew “it was becoming louder and louder for somebody else”.⁵²

At the beginning of the play, she is telling her husband Devlin that there was once a time when she would kiss her ominous lover’s fist. Murmuring through his fingers, she would ask him to put his hand round her throat, and he would do so, with a little pressure, so that her body went back, “slowly but truly”, her legs opening.⁵³ Devlin seems extremely interested to hear this, and does not want to discuss the appalling things she has witnessed in the world at large. He wants her to remember that she is happily married to him, that she has a beautiful garden, and that she has a sister and her sister’s children to visit, even if she apparently has no children of her own. He probably does *not* want to hear that her sister is refusing to take her husband back. But he is very keen to remind her that he himself does not try to wriggle out of things. He is “[a] man who doesn’t give a shit. / A man with a

50. Billington, *Pinter*, 94–95.

51. Peter Hall, “Interview,” in *Pinter in the Theatre*, ed. Ian Smith (London: Nick Hern Books, 2005), 131–157, esp. 139.

52. Harold Pinter, *Ashes to Ashes* [1996], in *Harold Pinter: Plays Four* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 389–433, esp. 408.

53. Pinter, *Ashes*, 397.

rigid sense of duty”.⁵⁴ In which, he stresses, there is no contradiction, but much for her to think about. First and foremost, she should now kiss his fist, and let him put his hand round her throat and force her backwards. Her legs should open.

Rebecca, at least as Devlin might express it, ignores these recommendations, telling him instead how she saw still more victims, and empathized with yet another woman whose baby was snatched away, feeling that the baby was her own, and that she herself had suffered its loss. As she is saying this, Devlin’s “*grip loosens.... He takes his hand from her throat*”.⁵⁵ Whether the sinister lover of whom she has told him was, as Katie Mitchell assumes,⁵⁶ another man with whom she had committed adultery, or whether it was in fact, as I believe, Devlin himself in the previous phase of their relationship, the full horror of violence has at last got through to her, and above all its destruction of the most elementary and important of human relationships. A fascistoid male who closes his eyes to this can no longer arouse her desire.

Throughout the play, Devlin’s own, coercive discourse has been a matter of trying to make Rebecca answer the questions in which he himself is particularly interested, and of urging her to accept, in effect, a politically passivizing separation of the domestic from the public. His appeal has been to the good of the body politic itself, to the ideal of marriage, and to the will of God, whose existence and authority cannot be denied, he explains, because that would be “like England playing Brazil at Wembley and not a soul in the stadium. [...] Not a soul watching”.⁵⁷

But if Devlin’s manner of address confirms the widespread view of Pinter’s characters as constantly battling for position, Rebecca’s rejection of his coercion is of an ethically different order. She at no point responds with a direct counter-claim, challenge, or refutation. And why not? Ultimately, I suggest, because she could never champion humane values through a coercive mode of discourse which in and of itself denied them. Instead, her replies will have seemed to Devlin inconsequential in his own terms. He will have thought that she is changing the point all the time, dodging the issue, or simply failing to concentrate, weak-headedly and – which amounts to the same thing in his book – womanishly. What she does is simply to tell him the dreadful things she has seen or thought about, and to give him, too, a chance to react like a human being. Loving him here, not in an erotic sense but charitably, she shows the genuine communicator’s hope that a community of understanding can indeed be achieved, and she allows, because as a

54. Pinter, *Ashes*, 415.

55. Pinter, *Ashes*, 429.

56. Katie Mitchell, “Interview,” in *Pinter in the theatre*, ed. Ian Smith (London: Nick Hern Books, 2005), 191–198, esp. 192.

57. Pinter, *Ashes*, 412.

genuine communicator she cannot do otherwise, full scope to the autonomy of his human otherness. The most remarkable thing about her moral victory over him is its sheer gentleness.

As for Pinter himself here, on the one hand he does put his audience under huge pressure. The play belongs to a tradition of *sensiblerie* which goes back through Tennyson's "Maud" to sentimental novels of the eighteenth century and to a poem such as Pope's "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady". So it is highly emotive, and carries a clear implication that if the audience's feelings do not coincide with Pinter's own, and in particular if they do not share his evident sympathy for Rebecca as opposed to Devlin, then their sensibility is less than fully human. On the other hand, we are in fairness bound to ask whether this implication is not in fact correct, and to acknowledge Pinter's human right to an opinion, plus his human duty, which is our duty as well, to combat man's inhumanity to man whenever possible. Whatever our own position, the play is inviting us to join a community which is not only indefinitely large and indefinitely heterogeneous, but which is in principle fully agreed about Kant's universal touchstone. It most certainly is coercive. But how likely are we to object?

It is not as if Pinter were appealing to the Kantian touchstone as a form of ideological subterfuge. Systematic injustice is something he is trying, not to conceal and perpetuate, but to expose. As a result of his play, no country or sociopolitical grouping stands to win or lose more than any other. Rather, he is writing about what he sees as a universal danger to human beings, once localized in Nazi Germany, but equally possible in today's England, and about a universal remedy. He is seriously alarmed by attempts such as Devlin's to restrict human dialogicality. And although, like Devlin, he very forcefully invokes large ideals, his own ideals are such as to commit him to Rebecca's style of discourse, so that his play is actually far less didactic in manner than Billington suggests. Audiences are left to ponder the contrasts between Devlin's and Rebecca's discursive practice for themselves.

As with some of the greatest moments in Shakespeare and Pinter alike, when Devlin's grip loosens and he takes his hand from Rebecca's throat, the communication taking place on stage is actually beyond words, and Pinter's own address to the audience partakes of that same apophaticism. Through the bodily movement of the actors, the dialogicality between him and his audience becomes virtually mystical in character. Devlin's physical surrender takes on a kind of significance which can be constantly experienced anew, but never completely encapsulated in words.

Pinter, no less than Churchill, Wordsworth and Dickens, is anything but shy, and it is hardly too much to say that in this play he does have a palpable design upon his audience. As Billington says, there is a point he wants to make. Yet even so, his extraordinary force is tempered by a certain respect. Although there is a side of him – we can call it the theatrical performer in him – which readily identifies

with Devlin's awesome energy, he admires Rebecca's gentleness even more. Like Rebecca, he ultimately *trusts* the human other to get the point, to read the signs, to do without words. And communicational criticism's main emphasis can only be that in acknowledging that human other's autonomy and intelligence he provides, again like Churchill, Wordsworth, and Dickens, a model for genuinely communicational address under any circumstances, literary or other.

Encouraging the readers of tomorrow

Books and empathy¹

The main reason why people learn to read is not in order to read books. They need reading for so many other purposes in life, and most of the texts they read are far shorter than a book. Nor are books the most obvious form of communication and understanding in multicultural experience. There is no substitute for actually getting to know real people in their own milieu, and nowadays the major alternative to this is presumably the internet and the social media made possible by digital technology.

A book, after all, does not provide you with a feed-back channel. Normally you just take a book or leave it. The new forms of communication, by contrast, have already broken down traditional distinctions between public and private, and between authority and lay-personhood. Whereas a book seems to be something separate, something that in one way or another is essentially *about* the world, or *about* life, by using Facebook, for instance, you can intensify your feeling of actually being *in* the world, your feeling of actually being alive and in touch with other living people, and this within a social sphere where everyone is equal, and where everybody's knowledge and experience is taken to be equally valuable.

In a digital universe where everyone is using English and exchanging views and information about the same international trends, fashions, hobbies, cuisine, interests, sports, celebrities and so on, the levelling of distinctions between one person and another applies to their cultural markers as well. As a result of this cyberspatial homogenization, the kind of rainbow societies and hybrid identities which men and women of good will are hoping to promote in the world's great metropoli, and in countries with complex ethnic and cultural histories, are perhaps already being realized.

If so, then the book, as a less democratic medium which is not restricted to the world language and which often reaches readers in only one segment of only one society, would perhaps have to be seen as an elitist vehicle of political reactionism. In that case, writing or reading a book would be a way of trying to turn the clock

1. [Plenary lecture at the 2011 World Book Summit in Ljubljana, first printed as Roger D. Sell, "Encouraging the Readers of Tomorrow: Books and Empathy", in *Book: The Bearer of Human Development* (The World Book Summit: Ljubljana, 2011), 53–56.]

back. And to promote reading in the form of reading books, and to do this in the interests of communication and understanding in multicultural experience, would be deeply self-contradictory.

Some champions of the book might reply here that cyberspatial homogenization cannot be nearly as beneficial as this suggests, because it is driven by huge multinational economic interests. But even if the new digital media and interactive technologies are putting astronomical sums of money into somebody's pockets, this would be a price well worth paying for a lasting world peace. If cyberspatial homogenization could remove the differences which are manipulated by politicians when they persuade people to fight wars, we should perhaps be grateful.

Lasting world peace would hardly be worth having, however, if human life were no longer worth living. The only relevant defence of the book, it seems to me, lies in the risk that cyberspatial homogenization, if not counterbalanced by a resilient and widespread bibliophilia, could leave human life seriously impoverished. The cyberspace, by having as its main stock in trade such events, information, enthusiasms, and values as constitute a universal common denominator, is arguably doomed to a superficiality which cannot do justice to any particular life-experience. Think only of the mode of attention it encourages in its users. In terms of the human concentration span, nothing can be more deleterious than surfing or twittering, for instance. To penetrate a topic in a depth that is humanly interesting and valuable, we do perhaps need the time-consuming modes of composition and use that have always been demanded by books.

But if this means that there is indeed a place within national education programmes for promoting the reading of books, the task must now be re-conceptualized. Over the last five or six decades, there has been a huge change in political attitudes, a change prompted by the type of ideological critique often labelled as postmodern, which culminated in the so-called culture wars of the 1990s. Power bases run by people belonging to just a single class, gender, religion, or ethnic background are a thing of the past, and many groupings which were previously marginalized and underprivileged have now found their voice and won recognition. This egalitarian trend in society as a whole is strongly reinforced by contemporary communicational practice, precisely because so many people now live their lives in symbiosis with the new digital media. Cyberspatial levelling and democracy may already be the prototype of all human interaction. And books will never effectively compensate for the new medias' potential superficiality if the promoters of book-reading invoke political attitudes which have lost their legitimacy.

To be more precise, reading education can no longer be an education in something called Literature (capital "L"). Especially during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the notion of Literature was inherently elitist and very narrow in scope. Literature consisted of a number of poems, plays, and novels

which were approved by respected authorities as having sufficient merit to qualify for the literary cachet. The criteria on which these texts were assessed reflected establishment values, or when they did not, reflected the values of an intelligentsia which was critical of the establishment, yet which was in its own way just as strongly established and authoritative. This kind of regime will no longer work, because the potential book readers of tomorrow are today's children, who have been digitally literate since the age of four or five, and who, in cyberspace, are already fully accustomed to finding their own way around. In all their interests and tastes they do make value judgements between things that are good and things that are less good. But they very much have the sense that they are making up their own minds. When they do accept advice, it is from somebody whom they regard as basically like themselves and of their own status, even if the adviser happens to be some sort of celebrity. The traditional teacher of Literature in schools and universities, and the traditional literary critic or reviewer, like all the other old-fashioned kinds of authority figures, are dying breeds.

Two questions I am often asked are: Why is the standard of literacy so high in Finland? And why, relatively speaking, are far more books borrowed from public libraries in Finland than in any other country? Well, one point is that, in Finnish society as a whole, adults have never talked down to children and have never given them unexplained commands. With infinite patience, they have always treated children as adults in the making, who are perfectly capable of using their own brains and learning from their own mistakes. This is something so deeply rooted in Finnish culture that it is not even mentioned in official descriptions of educational aims. It is simply taken for granted. The other point is that Finnish schools have never done all that much to promote book-reading and Literature. Because neither of Finland's national languages is a world language, Finnish children study a total of four or five languages altogether, and because Finland has traditionally believed in a broad-based education there have always been a lot of other subjects to cram into the school timetable as well. Under these circumstances book-reading and Literature have had very little space. In fact questions on literary texts came into the national matriculation examination only a few years ago. In other words, Finnish people have been very likely to use books in the way that their authors have intended. They have not studied them, but have read them, which is a completely different thing. They have not wasted their time trying to come up with a so-called definitive interpretation of a book – the kind of interpretation which would in principle mean that the book no longer needs to be read and discussed – but have really read it, with an open mind, and allowing it to go on challenging them to further thought and questioning. By the same token, they have not been encouraged to think that one particular kind of book is infinitely better any other. That is why, whereas in Britain and America, for instance, most publishers of

books on literary topics regard the general reader as long since dead and buried, and therefore produce books only for literary specialists, in Finland the general reader is alive and well.

If we are really hoping that today's young people will develop the kind of attention span they will need in order to move between surfing the internet and reading a full-length book, we shall indeed have to acknowledge that books can be of many different kinds and on many different topics. To give youngsters a shortlist of recommended reading within a very narrow range of genres would be completely counterproductive. They themselves can easily see that, with millions of highly variegated books being published every year, any such shortlist would be absurdly presumptuous. As adults, parents, educators, our motto can only be, "Let them read around!" Or to put this another way: "Let them make the most of the limitless digital library they can now access through their reading pads!"

To the extent that book-reading does figure within educational programmes, the aim should be to promote an appreciation of human otherness and of ethical communication. One critical mode will be that of a mediating criticism which, by focusing on the ethics of response, seeks to ensure that writers are given a fair hearing. Among other things, mediating criticism will supply any necessary information about differences of society, culture and ideology, and in this way foster a sense of human otherness as a stimulus to self-scrutiny and self-renewing mergings of horizon. The other critical mode will be that of communicational criticism. This focuses on the ethics of address, and will hold up for emulation examples of communicational good practice, i.e. a practice which truly respects the addressee's human autonomy. What the best books of widely different kinds do tend to share is a considerate anticipation of their readers' potential otherness. This empathetic sensitivity is what, at the deepest level, any good book teaches.

Discussed along these lines, books will promote in-depth understanding and communication within a very wide circle. The old notion of Literature involved a canon of great books that were allegedly accessible to the entire human race, because Human Nature was said to be basically the same in any time and place. We might still feel some enthusiasm for this idea, if postmodern critics of the late twentieth century had not shown it to have been an ideological subterfuge which obscured the structures whereby some groupings maintained power over others. But in arguing that literature (small "l" now) could only be thought of as many separate canons for many different groupings, postmodern critics themselves could go too far, almost suggesting that different groupings had so little in common that they were incapable of mutual understanding. The facts are that both authors and readers, although they are social beings, also have a certain relative independence of imagination, intellect and will, and that this predisposes both parties in the author-reader relationship to empathize with formations that are different from their own.

An appropriately post-postmodern way to view the writing and reading of books is not only as involving many different sociohistorical positionalities, but as encouraging interchanges between them. Communities of readers do grow up around books, and a book may have some particular historical context, and specially address some particular grouping of readers. But a book can also have a wider reach than that, and tends to make for a community that is much more openly heterogeneous than that of the new digital media. A book's readership, when distributed across space and through time, is not a homogenized consensus but a coming-together in genuine dialogue.

Dialogue *versus* silencing

Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*¹

1. A communicational tyrant?

Coleridge dreamed of a malleable “other half” who would be equipped “[w]ith answering look a ready ear to lend”, a construct to which he referred as his “Symbol” and “Ideal Object”.² But although he knew it was a figment of his own imagination, a product of his own desire, a partner to the dialogue within his own mind, he was tempted to project the answering look and ready ear of his internal soul-mate onto real friends and loved-ones. So much so, that the difference between them and his idealized image of them could momentarily escape his notice. There was a sense, we can say, in which he silenced them.

Especially during his later years, silencing could be literal. He became notorious for hogging the floor with an amazing flow of language. Madame de Staël remarked that he “is very great in monologue, but he has no idea of dialogue”;³ De Quincey that his talk “defeats the very end of social gatherings”;⁴ and Carlyle that to listen to him was “[t]o sit as a passive bucket and be pumped into”.⁵ Coleridge himself, in one of his letters, readily acknowledged a facility in “*Oneversatione* – as distinct from *conversazioni* or conversations”;⁶ and the stupefying effect of this on his listeners was amusingly caught in Max Beerbohm’s well-known cartoon.

1. [First published in *Literary community-making: The dialogicality of English texts from the seventeenth century to the present*, ed. Roger D. Sell (Amsterdam: Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2012), 91–129.]

2. “Constancy to an Ideal Object” [1828], in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The complete poems*, ed. William Keach (London: Penguin, 1997), 332–333; Samuel Taylor Coleridge *The notebooks*, eds Kathleen Coburn and A. J. Harding, 5 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957–2002), III 3325.

3. Seamus Perry (ed.), *S. T. Coleridge: Interviews and recollections* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 148.

4. Thomas De Quincey, *The posthumous works*, ed. Alexander H. Japp, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1893), II 18.

5. Perry, *S. T. Coleridge*, 237–238.

6. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, IV 790.

As a delightfully ebullient younger man, too, “he talked on for ever”, said Hazlitt; “[h]is voice rolled on the ear like the pealing organ”; it was a spell, an enchantment, from which in 1818 Hazlitt still needed to declare himself released.⁷ By the same token, when he labelled some of the poems he wrote in those early years for his nearest and dearest as “conversation poems”, this was not without its irony.⁸ Although they contain passages of ravishing beauty, as we might loosely say, they can also ravish in a sense slightly closer to the violence hinted by the verb’s etymology. In a way, they are not very conversational at all.

In “The Nightingale”, for instance, the modulation of the late eighteenth century’s more formal, Miltonic style of verse with “the divine Chit-chat of Cowper”;⁹ the resultant intimacy of address; and the sheer loveliness of the natural description: all this is wonderful, and profoundly original. Nor can there be any mistaking the writer’s loving generosity *vis à vis* his immediate addressees, William and Dorothy Wordsworth. Yet the evocation of the magical evening in the countryside is so exquisite that it can seem to be making a claim for its own definitiveness. We may even find ourselves wondering why William and Dorothy were wheeled on as speechless listeners in the first place – listeners, as the poem stages things, not only to the nightingale, but to Coleridge holding forth about the nightingale. There is no need to feel particularly sorry for them, obviously. Outside of Coleridge’s poem, they were perfectly capable of looking after themselves, and of saying or writing whatever they pleased. The point is merely that, whereas John Livingston Lowes claimed that, at least by 1802, and especially in their thoughts and writing on nocturnal themes, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Dorothy had become “an intimate community of observation and expression”,¹⁰ in “The Nightingale” the communal seems rather shakily grounded. Coleridge has the air of wishing to say everything there is to be said himself, and although the poem’s final words, “Once more, farewell, / Sweet Nightingale! Once more, my friends! farewell” can on a charitable reading be taken to convey a sociable man’s reluctance to leave his companions, in the full context they can equally well suggest that he is shooing them off home to bed before they can get a word in edgeways.¹¹ The effect is uncomfortably close to that of the manipulative Duke’s final gesture in Browning’s “My Last Duchess”.

7. William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English poets and Spirit of the age* (London: Dent, 1910), 167.

8. Roger D. Sell, *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011), 182–189.

9. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, I 279.

10. John Livingston Lowes, *The road to Xanadu: A study in the ways of imagination* (London: Constable, 1933), 175.

11. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 247 ll. 109–110.

In *Kubla Khan*, silencing is deliberately taken to a bold extreme. Now offering not the slightest appearance of conversational interchange, Coleridge develops a fantasy of power which readers are wooed into allowing him by the poem's attractions of exotic beauty and excitement. What he would really like is to be accorded the status of a bard. If only he could remember the "symphony and song" of the visionary "damsel with a dulcimer", then he would himself produce a "music loud and long". His auditors would

Cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread.¹²

And in fact the main body of the poem is an incantation likely to leave readers quite astonished and spellbound, with no more scope for independent thought than that allowed to Coleridge himself, if we are to believe his prose preface, by the opium vision from which the poem arose. Just as he claims to have been at the mercy of his trance, so his narrative here is less an invitation to response than an attempt at mesmerism.

Although his prowess is said to have resulted from his own disempowerment as one possessed, this in no way mitigates the poem's force. On the contrary, *Kubla Khan* went on to become one of the main models for that entire strand of nineteenth-century and Modernist aestheticism which, by laying claim to an ineffable separateness from the worlds explored by empirical research or ethical enquiry, was ultimately a sophisticated affront on the general public, not so much drawing the artist's fellow-humans into dialogue, as intimidating them into a belief that the artist was operating on a wavelength entirely different and superior. Coleridge's artistry here already enraptures with some trace of that verb's more sinister meaning. Although as readers we are likely to relish every single word, those words are tending to ravish us of our own speech. Even more frankly than Wordsworth and Dorothy are supposed to be held to a charmed silence in "The Nightingale", we seem expected to be pleasurably dumb-struck.

The fragmentariness of *Kubla Khan* is no more than ostensible. As a speech act it is formidably complete. Although at roughly the mid-point Kubla is said to have heard in the roaring fountain "Ancestral voices prophesying war",¹³ it is impossible to believe that the poem could ever have developed into a lengthy epic of heroic battles. Apart from the fact that it should obviously have been entitled, not

12. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 251 ll. 49–52.

13. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 251 l. 30.

“*Kubla Khan*” but “*Kubla Khan’s Pleasure-Dome*” or just “*The Pleasure-Dome*”, it is perfectly self-contained and coherent as it stands. As to the exact nature of the speech act involved, a clue is given by the behaviour and speech attributed to those imagined auditors: “Weave a circle round him thrice”. They are staking their hopes on a counter-charm to neutralize what is a charm on Coleridge’s own part. This tends to confirm that the entire poem is itself a spell, intended to bring its readers into a state of speechless enchantment.

Yet to describe Coleridge as a communicational tyrant pure and simple would be a travesty. Not only was he, as his letters and notebooks show, aware of his own self-absorption and its social consequences. He actually set great store by companionship and community: by the communal life as lived among close friends with a shared goal, for instance against the backdrop of some happy valley or magic dell.¹⁴ His letters to John Thelwall suggest that, rather than pontificating, he sometimes tried to make profound religious and political differences appear “as nothing more than the subject for a fireside chat”.¹⁵ And as Seamus Perry sees him, his ideal of hospitality – of making the pilgrim or stranger feel welcome and comfortable – and his desire for open-ended conversation anticipated not only Michael Oakshott’s idea of conversation as an end in itself, but Richard Rorty’s account of philosophy in its more “therapeutic” and “edifying” modes: the type of philosophy which, rather than hammering out systems, is anti-rational and fruitfully disordered.¹⁶ In one part of his mind, he passionately believed that “man is truly altered by the co-existence of other men; his faculties cannot be developed in himself alone”.¹⁷ That is why scholars such as Gurion Taussig, David Fairer, and Jon Mee have so closely studied the literary fraternity within which, especially during the revolutionary decade, he bonded with Southey, Wordsworth, Lamb, Charles Lloyd, and Thelwall, an involvement which included his commitment to Pantisocracy in particular.¹⁸ “I love my *Friend*,” as he wrote in a letter, because “such as *he* is, all mankind are or *might be*”.¹⁹

14. Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early visions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) 131.

15. Holmes, *Coleridge*, 131.

16. Seamus Perry, “The talker,” in *The Cambridge companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 103–125, esp. 116–117.

17. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, II 1187,

18. Gurion Taussig, *Coleridge and the idea of friendship, 1789 – 1804* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002); David Fairer, *Organising poetry: The Coleridge circle, 1790–1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jon Mee, *Conversable worlds: Literature, contention, and community 1782–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

19. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, I 86.

After the demise of the Pantisocratic project, he tried to reinvent its congenial communitarianism through an “alternative society of the text”,²⁰ becoming a key player within a culture where friendship was the “organizing principle in a hermeneutic enterprise designed to unite writers and their readers”.²¹ *Biographia Literaria* was talked into life by his dictating it to his friend John Morgan, and the entire treatise itself focused on literary friendships, rising to a lively conversation with Wordsworth which can fairly be described as a dialogue of equals.²² Writing for a public forum could not only loosen up an individuality which might otherwise have been too turned in upon itself, but could also carry communality to lengths which were not widely understood or appreciated. When, as he himself might have put it, some of his lectures embarked on brotherly conversations with Jean-Paul Richter, A. W. Schlegel and Schelling, to outsiders this looked like plagiarism.²³ For Coleridge, claims to originality were of secondary importance, since there was a larger consideration common to all men: the truth. And truth, he said, was “a divine ventriloquist: I care not from whose mouth the sounds are supposed to proceed, if only the words are audible and intelligible”.²⁴ Correspondingly, in his journalistic prose he developed a style in which his own forcefulness was tempered with deference to readers who were envisaged as no less intelligent or important than he himself. What Deirdre Coleman finds in *The Friend* is “a strategy of moving forward stealthily through a symbiotic dialectic between writer and reader involving active and passive motions, attacking and yielding”.²⁵ Nothing could have been more different from what he called the “synodical individuum” of the *Edinburgh Review*, in whose pages anonymous writers could hide behind “the disguise of a pretended Board or Association of critics”.²⁶

20. Jon Klancher, *The making of English reading audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 23.

21. Lucy Newlyn, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge companion to Coleridge* ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–14. esp. 6.

22. Holmes, *Coleridge*, 378–380, 389.

23. Holmes, *Coleridge*, 251–255; Andrew Keanie, “Coleridge, the damaged archangel”, *Essays in Criticism* 56 (2006): 72–93.

24. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* [1817], ed. George Watson (London: Dent, 1956), 89.

25. Deirdre Coleman, “The journalist,” in *The Cambridge companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 126–41, esp. 136.

26. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, 2 vols, ed. Barbara Rooke (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), II 108.

Poetry in particular, he felt, answered a yearning for something or someone other than ourselves – for “a shadow, a sort of prophetic existence present to us, which tells us what we are not”.²⁷ Anticipating objections to “querulous Egotism” and “melancholy” in some of the items collected in his *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796), that book’s preface explained: “The communicativeness of our Nature leads us to describe our sorrows”.²⁸ And in his greatest poetry, the communal certainly wins hands-down. When we study, for instance, the process of revision whereby the conversation poem he wrote for Sara Hutchinson became “Dejection: An Ode”, we can watch self-absorption being transformed into something far wider in its bearings, and far more dignified.²⁹ True, the verse letter to Sara already contained long passages of magnificent writing which won a place in the Ode with very little change. But they were originally surrounded by other passages of agonized self-pity, bitter self-recrimination, cloying nostalgia, wish-fulfilling dream, and self-prostration before Sara herself in her assigned role of Ideal Object. From the final text of the Ode all these embarrassingly intimate materials have been omitted, and so has the direct address to Sara. Instead, the Ode addresses itself to a “Lady”, for whom his feeling is a more impersonal and de-eroticized respect. As for the actual argument, his attention is now mainly directed to relationships between his own mood and the world of nature. And although the desolation is still very intense, the poem’s most powerfully suggestive move is one whereby the writing becomes more fully conversational, more ready, in particular, without becoming positively optimistic, to engage with readers who have a hunch that even the blackest mood may swing. The penultimate stanza turns from brooding on his own joylessness to listen to the raging wind. At first its gusts are so rough and loud that he thinks of

... the rushing of a host in rout,
With groans of trampled men, with smarting wounds –
At once they groan with pain, and shudder in the cold!

But then there is a sudden lull, after which the wind seems to tell

... another tale, with sounds less deep and loud!
A tale of less affright,
And tempered with delight,
As Otway’s self had framed the tender lay,

27. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The collected works: Lectures 1809–1819: On literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), I 224.

28. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems: Second edition* (Bristol: J. Cottle, 1797), xiii-xiv.

29. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge’s “Dejection”: The earliest manuscripts and the earliest printings*, ed. Stephen Maxfield Parrish (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

'Tis of a little child
 Upon a lonesome wild,
 Not far from home, but she hath lost her way:
 And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,
 And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear.³⁰

These lines are about an explicit change from a grimmer kind of weather and story to a weather and story which, though still a cause for anxiety, are moving towards a happy resolution in the possibly not too distant future. The poem's final stanza, though beginning with Coleridge's claim that he himself still has small thoughts of sleep, continues the overall modulation by wishing joy, peace, and rest upon the Lady. So although the poem as a whole is still about a very severe experience of dejection, that distress is now being treated within a larger human world where some other, very different spiritual conditions may not be permanently unachievable.

The lines just quoted do their work through an objectification of Coleridge's own subjectivity. Not only do they project his feelings, and thereby the poem's focus, onto the world of nature. Not only, that is to say, do they develop the pathetic fallacy, far older than the heath scenes in *King Lear*, that the wind can entertain passions which answer to those of a human being. They also take what may be an unprecedented step, by then moving back from the natural phenomenon (the wind) to the human world *without* returning to the same point from which the process had started, *without* returning, that is, to Coleridge's own feelings in the first person singular. Instead, the destination turns out to be the *third* person plural and singular feelings of, respectively, the imagined warriors and the imagined little girl, in their two carefully differentiated sets of circumstances. As readers here, first we digest the image of human suffering that really is pretty grim. Then we move on to the image of suffering which, seen in the given context, is rather less harrowing. As a result of this dyad of narrative vignettes, the poem's mood finally begins to lighten somewhat, but *without* Coleridge saying that he himself is cheering up. The poem is honest, but not self-obsessed.

Then there is *Christabel*, which is far more typical than *Kubla Khan* of the kind of text which comes to be awarded high literary status because, like "Dejection: An Ode", though in its own way, it is fundamentally more conversational. Rather than being, like *Kubla Khan*, an arrogation of communicational power at the expense of its own readers, it open-endedly invites readers to compare notes about precisely such manipulateness as represented within its own text.³¹ Here the silencing is not a charm which Coleridge would like to impose on his own readers, but a charm

30. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 310 ll. 111–113 and 117–125.

31. Sell, *Communicational criticism*, 365–370.

imposed by Geraldine on Christabel. Geraldine casts “a spell / Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!”³² So powerful is Geraldine’s spell that Christabel begins to be positively possessed by her, and “[w]ith forced unconscious sympathy” even begins to look, behave, and sound like the snake that Geraldine symbolically is, while Geraldine is able to seem like the dove that Christabel herself symbolically is.³³ This is all the thanks Christabel gets for acting upon the Coleridgean ideal of hospitality – for protecting, welcoming, nourishing with “cordial wine” the apparent damsel in distress whom she found in the forest.³⁴ And Geraldine’s outrageous domination of Christabel is allowed free rein thanks to the communicational malfunctioning of Christabel’s own father. When Bracy tells how he dreamed of a midnight contest between the dove and the snake, it is Sir Leoline who misinterprets this by attributing the role of dove to Geraldine. Here, too, in fact, hospitality backfires. Sir Leoline’s behaviour towards Geraldine is motivated by “hospitality / To the wrong’d daughter of his friend [i.e. Lord Roland]” as he sees her, but initiates what threatens to be an even sadder communicational impasse between himself and Christabel, his own true dove, than the one he now repents having started through the “words of high disdain” he once exchanged with Lord Roland.³⁵

By bodying forth for contemplation these appalling communicational shortcomings and fouled relationships, *Christabel* brings Coleridge into a far better relationship with his own readers than the relationships between the characters in the story. This, too, is how the texts assigned high literary status most typically work.³⁶ They tend to bring their writers and their readers into an egalitarian community of just the kind that Coleridge, in one part of his mind, always wanted: a community which is not at all the same thing as a consensus, and certainly not a consensus arising from the enchanting coercion of a single individual; but a community in which a man is truly altered, and prepared to be altered, by the co-existence of other men; a community whose members engage in what I have called genuine communication,³⁷ acknowledging each other’s autonomy, and gladly agreeing to differ, quite simply because recognized difference is the communal life-blood.

In the case of *Christabel*, debate can well centre on the Aristotelian – the mimetic – question: How *probable* is this degree of communicational damage – willed or unintentional – in life in general? How *likely* are things to turn out for the better?

32. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 195 ll. 277–278.

33. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 204 l. 609.

34. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 192 l. 191.

35. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 204 ll. 644–5, 201 l. 513.

36. A main theme, this, throughout Sell, *Communicational criticism*.

37. E.g. in Chapter 4 (151–194) of Sell, *Communicational criticism*: “Wordsworth’s Genuineness”.

The poem starts in sorrow, with Christabel anxious in the absence of her lover, and ends in sorrow much greater. Many readers will probably feel that this is realistic: exactly the way things are. Others may see in the poem – in Sir Leoline’s eager scheme for reconciliation with Sir Roland, his one true friend – a hope of something more joyful, and feel drawn to many other readers in sharing that kind of hopefulness themselves.³⁸

Unless I am mistaken, Coleridge knew that the text works this way, and positively endorsed such divergences of assessment. I find the strongest evidence for this in the lines which for William Empson and David Pirie are the most completely irrelevant: “The Conclusion to Part II”, which is the conclusion to the entire poem as we have it.³⁹ A father’s love, these lines suggest, can be so excessive that in the end he has to express it “[w]ith words of unmeant bitterness.” As paternal psychology this at first sounds rather deviant. Yet if the love which so embittered Lear’s curse of Cordelia was unwise, nobody has ever doubted its strength, and Geraldine’s deceptions are far more plausible than Goneril and Reagan’s. To a father whose words are cruel, Coleridge continues,

Perhaps ’tis tender too and pretty
At each wild word to feel within
A sweet recoil of love and pity.⁴⁰

And if Sir Leoline’s unexpected bitterness towards Christabel did secretly prompt his heart to that kind of recoil, then perhaps a happy ending really is on the cards. Coleridge, however, leaves this as a “Perhaps”, as in fact a very big “If”, and this was eminently conversational of him. Rather than putting an end to discussion, it loosens readers’ tongues.

2. The invitation to readers of *The Rime*

If *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is close in its narrative mode to both *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*, in its manner of address it is nevertheless far closer to *Christabel* than to *Kubla Khan*. Its two narratives are not a silencing of its own readers, that is to say, but an invitation to compare notes about silencings and other communicational phenomena within their stories.

38. Cf. Roger D. Sell, *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001), 213–352 (“Part III: Responding to Hopefulness”).

39. William Empson, “Introduction” and editorial materials, in *Coleridge’s verse: A selection*, eds William Empson and David Pirie (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 245.

40. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 205 ll. 66 and 670–672.

In the frame story, anti-conversational silencing is the main subject-matter. The Wedding-Guest, as the verse repeats for emphasis, “cannot choose but hear” what the Mariner wants to say. He “listens like a three years’ child: / The Mariner hath his will”.⁴¹ Or in the words of the marginal gloss, “The wedding-guest is spell-bound ... and constrained to hear his tale”. At two high points of horror the Wedding-Guest does manage briefly to interrupt, exclaiming on both occasions “I fear thee, ancient Mariner!”⁴² He feels the same emotion, then, as the auditors imagined in *Kubla Khan* responding to Coleridge’s own would-be “music loud and long”. But fear is not a basis for a truly conversational interchange between fearer and feared, and by the end of *The Rime* the Wedding-Guest is no longer up to social intercourse of any kind. At the beginning, he had been cheerfully on his way to the wedding of his kinsman, and angrily commanded the Mariner to unhand him. But the Mariner had already begun his tale – “There was a ship” – and his words and “glittering eye” had immediately quelled resistance.⁴³ By the close, although the Mariner himself draws attention to the noise still coming from the wedding festivities, the Wedding-Guest is utterly dumb, his partying and family instincts quite short-circuited. He “[t]urned from the bridegroom’s door. / He went like one that hath been stunned, / And is of sense forlorn”.⁴⁴

Also in the story which is framed, in the Mariner’s own story, that is to say, the silencing of speech is of pivotal importance. For everyone on board, perhaps the greatest suffering was when

... every tongue, through utter drought,
Was withered at the root;
We could not speak, no more than if
We had been choked with soot.⁴⁵

For the Mariner, this loss of speech left him no way to re-establish his relationship with his fellows, and put him on the receiving end of their unmistakable body language: the unforgettable curse in their eyes, their hanging of the Albatross around his neck. When the “spectre-bark” draws close, his desire for speech becomes so intolerable that, in the words of the gloss, “at a dear ransom he freeth his speech from the bonds of thirst”. In the verse’s account:

41. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 168 ll. 18, 38 and 15–16.

42. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 174 l. 224, 178 l. 345.

43. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 167 l. 10, 168 l. 13.

44. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 186 ll. 621–623.

45. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 171 ll. 135–138.

With throats unslaked, with black lips baked,
 We could not laugh nor wail;
 Through utter drought all dumb we stood!
 I bit my arm, I sucked the blood,
 And cried, A sail! A sail!⁴⁶

Was the reason they would have had for laughing that the approaching ship might be able to offer them food and water? Only partly, I suggest. And would their reason for wailing have been, as Ve-Yin Tee suggests, that the stranger ship could be a man-of-war on the look-out for crew replacements, perhaps as a result of leprosy?⁴⁷ I think not. Coleridge has arranged everything in the poem so as to sharpen the focus on matters of community and communication. So the shrewdest comment made by Empson is that there is something Pantisocratic about “the only eminent sea story which never uses the thrilling words *captain* and *mate*”.⁴⁸ Although the Mariner’s story is clearly set in the late middle ages or very early modern period, in crucial respects it is a-realistic and a-historical. The question of where the captain and mate were, and of whether the Mariner himself was the captain or mate was irrelevant to Coleridge’s purposes, because to have acknowledged the ship’s chain of command would have drawn attention away from the common humanity of each and every man, and from the importance of the relationships based on fellow-feeling. Similarly, information about the actual purpose of their voyage – was it for trade or was it for exploration or was it for both? – would have blurred the focus on the element of spiritual and communal journey. All such matters of fact have no more place here than the characters’ sources of income in many Victorian novels, or than the working practices of farmers and lawyers and soldiers in all those eighteenth century ballads about their love-affairs. The only thing the Mariner wants is to be at one with partners in fruitful communication, and the main reasons why he frees his tongue at the cost of his own blood are, I submit, that (a) he is overjoyed in his certainty that the approaching ship will contain other members of his own species; (b) he passionately wants to communicate this joyful news to his own shipmates and thereby improve his relations with them; and (c) he no less passionately wants to hail the strangers and bid them welcome, so practising the Coleridgean ideal of hospitality. Then his high hopes are immediately dashed. Opportunities for speech are snatched away, and so is his psychological preparedness for it. “Alone, alone, all,

46. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 172 ll. 157–161.

47. Ve-Yin Tee, *Coleridge, revision and Romanticism* (London: Continuum, 2009), 42–79.

48. William Empson, “The Ancient Mariner” [1964], in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. Harold Bloom, 19–43 (New York: Chelsea House 1986) 19–43, esp. 36.

all alone, / Alone on a wide wide sea!”⁴⁹ His companions are dead, he has nobody to talk to, and the extraordinary experience of the passage back home leaves him in no fit state to reintegrate into human conversation and society. The second occasion on which an opportunity arises to hail a stranger ship is when the Mariner’s own ship sails back into its harbour. The Mariner “heard the Pilot’s cheer”, and in one part of his mind was overjoyed at it. But the Hermit soon notes, “they answered not our cheer!” The Mariner himself “nor spake nor stirred”.⁵⁰ Towards the end of the poem’s main narrative, in other words, its protagonist is no less numb than the Wedding-Guest at the end of the frame narrative. The Mariner, too, will somehow have to try to rediscover his own voice.

One aspect of his readjustment here is to change from a victim of silencing into a silencer, just as some juvenile rape victims subsequently become rapists. When the ship has sunk and he is hauled up into the Pilot’s rowing boat,

I moved my lips – the Pilot shrieked
And fell down in a fit ⁵¹

and the Pilot’s boy, with a burst of mad laughter, says he is the devil incarnate. When he makes his confession to the Hermit, his need to tell his story and confess his guilt is overwhelming, and ever since that time it has often come back with renewed force, so turning him into the verbal tyrant who now torments the Wedding-Guest:

... this frame of mine was wrenched
With a woful agony,
Which forced me to begin my tale;
And then it left me free.
Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns:
And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns.
I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech,
That moment that his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach.⁵²

49. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 174 ll. 232–233.

50. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 183 l. 501, 184 ll. 528 and 543.

51. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 185 ll. 560–561.

52. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 185 ll. 578–90.

Coleridge, then, with sharp insight into what, in the conversation poems and *Kubla Khan*, no less than in his everyday social intercourse, was his own kind of communicational misdemeanor, has here made it the topic of an imaginary double narrative. This gives readers an unconditional opportunity to compare notes about it, which is Coleridge's way of inviting them into a relationship with himself that is altogether more even-handed than those he is currently portraying.

As a further extension of conversational scope, he gives readers the chance to experience the silencings which structure both of the stories in the context of certain other communicational phenomena. The poem's perspective is one within which human communication takes place between a pole of dystopian dysfunction and a pole of utopian harmony.

At the pole of dystopian dysfunction, there is the grim interchange on the spectre-bark between Death and Life-in-Death.

Is that a Death? And are there two?
Is Death that woman's mate?

Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-mare Life-in-Death was she,
Who thicks man's blood with cold.

The naked hulk alongside came,
And the twain were casting dice;
"The game is done! I've won, I've won!"
Quoth she, and whistles thrice.⁵³

In the earliest versions of the poem, Coleridge also devoted several lines to a blood-curdling description of Death, and some critics have regretted that in 1817 he cut this out – B. R. McElderry, for instance, noting that there are passages at least as gruesome in Shakespeare.⁵⁴ For Swinburne, however, the omission of Death, "his bones fouled with leprous scurf and green corruption of the grave", showed a "keen and tender sense of right" in Coleridge, which made him "reject from his work the horrors while retaining the terrors of death".⁵⁵ A subtle distinction, perhaps, but fair enough, it seems to me. And to this we can add that, as poetry, the lines describing

53. Coleridge, *Complete poems* 173, ll.188–98. I have corrected an error in the text of *Complete poems* at l. 197.

54. B. R. McElderry, "Coleridge's revision of "The Ancient Mariner,"" *Studies in Philology* 29 (1932): 68–94, esp. 82.

55. A. C. Swinburne, "Coleridge." [1875], in *The Ancient Mariner and other Poems: A Casebook*, eds Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman (London: Macmillan. 1973), 85–95, esp. 92.

Life-in-Death are far more extraordinary than the deleted lines about Death, and that the cut also beneficially speeds the narrative up. Above all, however, the shortened version is a huge improvement from a communicational point of view, because it so radically strengthens the impact of Life-in-Death's victory. What we see here is one agent who, thanks to the roll of the dice, totally confounds another agent, and then exults in that triumph. The image conveyed is of a will-power so raw and overwhelming that it renders even its strongest opponent more or less unnoticeable. So far is Life-in-Death from recognizing the autonomy of her formidable "other" that she ignores him. Her glee culminates in the visceral wordlessness of whistling.

Then at the pole of utopian harmony, there is the communion of the angelic spirits. First, in a wordlessness of a very different kind they cluster in union "round the mast", their "[s]weet sounds" rising "slowly through their mouths" and passing "from their bodies".⁵⁶ Later, as the ship approaches its home port, their seraph-band reveal themselves with heavenly brightness, this time completely silent, but emphatically *not* through a silencing that prevents communication:

No voice did they impart –
No voice; but oh! The silence sank
Like music on my heart.⁵⁷

Midway between the two communicational poles, the story offers images of genuine communication: of interchanges involving difference in unity or unity in difference. The two good spirits in the Mariner's dream are in friendly dialogue. Their differences of prior knowledge are not a ground for either of them to claim superiority over the other, but serve as a starting-point from which they can begin to compare notes, a communicational mode which also comes naturally to the Hermit:

How loudly his sweet voice he rears!
He loves to talk with marineres
That come from a far countree.⁵⁸

Hazlitt, if he could have met the Hermit, might have found his loud sweet voice as organ-like as Coleridge's, but without feeling himself disempowered by a verbal charm. The Hermit talks, not to or at, but *with* the mariners. The strange othernesses of which they have to tell can be freely exchanged.

The range of communicational possibilities is confirmed by the case of the Ancient Mariner himself. Although his recounting of his own extremely alien experiences to the Hermit is in one sense his initiation as a guilt-ridden verbal

56. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 178 ll. 351–353.

57. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 185 ll. 497–499.

58. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 183 ll. 516–518.

mesmerist, this is not the end of his communicational history, any more than *Kubla Khan* was Coleridge's only poem. The last thing the Mariner mentions before bidding the Wedding-Guest farewell is the great joy he now takes in attending church services. Christian interpretations of the poem tend to overlook his precise words here, and so do many readings which reject Christian interpretations:

O sweeter than the marriage-feast,
 'Tis sweeter far to me,
 To walk together to the kirk
 With a goodly company! –
 To walk together to the kirk,
 And all together pray,
 While each to his great Father bends,
 Old men, and babes, and loving friends,
 And youths and maidens gay!⁵⁹

He may not rank a wedding feast very highly. But his comforts here are less those of religion than of goodly company even so. His Coleridgean eagerness for togetherness and human solidarity, so strongly recalling his vision of the spirits clustered around the mast in melodious unity, could not be clearer, and his hopes of bringing this about seem to have been fulfilled, at least when he is in his less tyrannical mode – he has not given the Wedding-Guest much of a chance to be goodly company.

So no less than *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan*, and like a great many other literary texts as well, albeit more explicitly than most, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is basically about the difference between silencing and dialogue, the difference so plainly visible in Coleridge's own up-and-down relations with other people. This is what makes the poem's stories tellable: what draws readers in and starts them thinking, even when it does not subsequently figure in the responses they articulate consciously.

That their thoughts can be carried in so many different directions is itself a sign of Coleridge's even-handedness. He has respected their autonomy and left them scope to bring their own ideas to bear, so ensuring that his stance towards them has been conversational in a sense that the Mariner's stance towards the Wedding-Guest is not. Over the years, the status *The Rime* has acquired as a poem which "everybody" knows, and the wealth of debate surrounding it, have confirmed it as one of English literature's dialogical achievements *par excellence*. It is preeminently a poem which people have taken to their hearts, not only because its communicational concerns are so intrinsically fascinating, but because of its own communicational ethics. It is quite exceptionally hospitable to discussion.

59. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 186 ll. 601–609.

3. Readers' responses

Readers such as D. W. Harding, Lionel Stevenson, and Ken McGoogan have not taken full advantage of Coleridge's generosity, but have been content to see *The Rime* as "just a story".⁶⁰ This, too, is a freedom readily allowed by Coleridge, and there can be no suggestion that such readers are humanly inferior to readers who find more to talk about here. With ample justification, they may simply prefer to talk about something else. The point is merely that, although "straightforward" readings can be accurate, and sometimes very detailed, and although they certainly keep the poem alive within the culture, their engagement with it is not very deep. They stop short of seeing the poem as the offering of a particular writer, whose experiences, ideas, and values lend a particular inflection, and sometimes they also fail to spell out their own basic assumptions – the experiences, ideas, and values from which their readings have sprung. As contributions to the literary conversation those readings are therefore far more superficial than those of, say, George Whalley, A. M. Buchan, Geoffrey Yarlott, and Richard E. Matlak, all of whom see the poem as personally expressive and very much the work of Coleridge, and make their own criteria clear as well.⁶¹

But then again, readings which do recognize the poem as the work of one particular human being have sometimes reduced it to biography, almost as if Coleridge's writing here were as intensely subjective and confessional as the Mariner's own telling of his tale. In some commentaries, the distinction between Coleridge and the Mariner is actually blurred. Sally West says that the Mariner's mediaeval religion and superstitiousness trap him in a dualistic conflict of good *versus* evil, a predicament she never really distinguishes from Coleridge's own position.⁶² And while West implausibly aligns Coleridge with the old-fashioned Mariner, Christopher Stokes implausibly aligns the Mariner with the profoundly modern Coleridge.⁶³ The Mariner's modernity, says Stokes, lies in his intense awareness of his own guilt,

60. E.g. D. W. Harding, "The theme of 'The Ancient Mariner,'" *Scrutiny* 9 (1941): 334–42; Lionel Stevenson, "'The Ancient Mariner' as a dramatic monologue," *The Personalist* 30 (1949): 34–44; Ken McGoogan, *Ancient Mariner: The amazing adventures of Samuel Hearne, the sailor who walked to the Arctic Ocean* (London: Bantam, 2004).

61. George Whalley, "The Mariner and the albatross," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 16 (1947): 381–98; A. M. Buchan, "The sad wisdom of the Mariner," in *Twentieth century interpretations of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. James D. Boulger (Engelwood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 92–110; Geoffrey Yarlott, *Coleridge and the Abyssinian maid*. London: Methuen, 1967), 171; Richard E. Matlak, *The poetry of relationship: The Wordsworths and Coleridge 1797–1800* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 88–99.

62. Sally West, *Coleridge and Shelley: Textual entanglements* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

63. Christopher Stokes, *Coleridge, language and the sublime: From transcendence to finitude* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

which amounts to a new kind of sublimity: a sublimity which is not external to the subject, but which consists of the subject standing in awe of itself. Stokes finds a good description of such awe in Coleridge's *Aids to reflection*:

[T]he most frequent impediment to men's turning the mind inward upon themselves, is that they are afraid of what they shall find there. There is an aching hollowness in the bosom, a dark cold speck at the heart, an obscure and boding sense of a somewhat, that must be kept *out of sight* of the conscience; some secret lodger whom they can neither resolve to eject or retain.⁶⁴

But rather than treating this as a modern framework of ideas within which the Mariner's experiences could be contemplated by Coleridge and his readers, Stokes projects it on to the Mariner himself as a permanent tendency to dejection, almost as if it were he who had written the great Ode. One of the things this leaves out of account is the Mariner's initial *surprisedness*: the fact that he is quite dumbfounded by the terrible experiences he has to endure, including his experience of his own sinfulness *vis à vis* the world of nature and his own shipmates. By the end of his voyage, and certainly by the time he comes to tell his story to the Wedding Guest, his intense brooding has made his guilt feelings guilt much too deep for comfort. But at the outset –

The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,
Merrily did we drop
Below the kirk, below the hill,
Below the light-house top.⁶⁵

– his guilt had been that of a novice, and his fundamental naivety precisely *un-modern*.

What biographical interpretations have been slow to register is that, when Coleridge placed *The Rime* in the public domain, his conversational move was to *avoid* burdening readers with the kind of intimacies now accessible in scholarly editions of his notebooks, and to *avoid* as well confessing his own needs, particularly his need of an Ideal Object, in the manner of the verse letter to Sara Hutchinson. In point of fact, for close on two decades after the poem's first publication it was not officially attributed to Coleridge at all, even if its authorship had soon become a fairly open secret. Wordsworth had referred to it in print as merely the "Poem of my friend",⁶⁶ and a certain anonymity was always one aspect of its distinctive aura. Among the distancing factors were both the period setting – the pre-Magellan sea

64. Samuel, Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to reflection* (London: George Bell, 1890), 9–10.

65. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 168 ll. 21–24.

66. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 497.

voyage, the Catholic beliefs and assumptions – and, especially in the first edition, the text’s own self-presentation as an archaic ballad of the kind collected by Bishop Percy, or rather, perhaps, as a Chattertonian pastiche, and one which, as Lowes put it, benefited from its echoes of the “simple, concrete, yet imaginative phraseology” of Renaissance travel-writers such as Purchas and Hakluyt.⁶⁷ As we shall see in some detail, even though later revisions cut back on some of the archaism, in other respects the distancing effect was actually intensified. And then again, even though the poem’s two stories could never have interested any other author in quite the same way, they were nevertheless *dramatized*, as the stories of two characters in a text that was nobody’s autobiography but rather a poetic fiction, and one in which their behaviour, and especially their communicational history, was placed within the larger ethical frame of reference I have already described. As a result, the kind of objectification achieved by the Ode’s narrative dyad of the fallen warriors and the lost child could here be developed on a far larger scale. Above all, there was the poem’s extraordinary imagery, extraordinary partly thanks to all the similes by which things unfamiliar are constantly compared with things even more unfamiliar (“like witch’s oils”, “like God’s own head”, and so on),⁶⁸ and all of it contributing to that hyper-real and visionary intensity which was to challenge so many painters and engravers. In whatever depths of Coleridge’s psyche the poem’s descriptions may have had their origin, they serve to place the poem’s stories “out there”, as we might say, or “in front of us”, as sequences of phenomena and events to be seen, heard, touched, tasted, smelt. In a word, they involve an impersonalizing reification.

Many respondents to Coleridge’s conversational offering have clearly grasped this,⁶⁹ some of them following Lowes in duly emphasizing that the imagery resists paraphrase.⁷⁰ This is not to say that it is merely whimsical, artificial, or forced. On the contrary, most of these respondents have agreed with Lamb that Wordsworth’s complaint about the poem’s “somewhat too laboriously accumulated” imagery was quite out of order.⁷¹ The truth is that, as in *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel*, the writing’s impersonality is symbolist.⁷² Even at their least harrowing, the sense impressions it offers are not merely playful, and even at their most awe-inspiring they

67. Lowes, *Road to Xanadu*, 325–327.

68. Cf. Rosemary Ashton, *The life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A critical biography* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1996), 130.

69. E.g. R. C. Bald, “The Ancient Mariner,” *Times Literary Supplement* (26 July, 1934), 528.

70. Lowes, *Road to Xanadu*, *passim*.

71. In Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 497; Charles and Mary Lamb, *The letters*, ed. Edwin W. Marris, 3 vols. (Ithaca: University of Cornell Press, 1975–78), I 266–267.

72. Cf. George Watson, *Coleridge the poet* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 85.

are extraordinarily beautiful and endlessly suggestive. Perhaps the best point of comparison is internal to the poem itself: the apophatic music of the angelic spirits clustered round the mast.

Readers do try to pin down meanings, needless to say. Nor are they necessarily departing from conversational courtesy here. Symbolist writing *is* suggestive, and its interpretation is merely a matter of combining appropriate knowledge with sufficient good judgement, as in the readings which already seem to be standing the test of time. One safe bet, for instance, has proved to be comparisons between the Mariner and the Wandering Jew, a line of approach already suggested by Coleridge, not only in the poem's own wording –

“I pass like night from land to land;
I have strange power of speech”⁷³

– but also in his table talk.⁷⁴ Warren Stevenson goes much too far in adding that the Mariner is a fantasized version of Wordsworth (on the grounds that Wordsworth's “Song of the Wandering Jew” is, to Stevenson's way of thinking, autobiographical).⁷⁵ More judicious is Lowes, who describes the Mariner's association with the Wandering Jew as a “happy annexation of a tract of the marvellous grown familiar through long credence”.⁷⁶

But then there are the more thorough-going religious interpretations, many of which reduce the symbolism to allegory. Robert Penn Warren argues that the poem has two themes: the theme of a sacramental vision of the “One Life” in all things, a theme clearly centred on the killing of the Albatross; and the theme of imagination, which associates moonlight with the modifying colours of the imagination, and the sun with the mere reflective faculty which partakes of death – so much so, that the more pleasant events take place under the aegis of the moon, the less pleasant events under that of the sun.⁷⁷ Elliot B. Gose, too, speaks of the Mariner's voyage as not “literal” but “emblematic”.⁷⁸ And although such interpretations are no longer

73. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 185 ll. 586–587.

74. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table talk recorded by Henry Nelson Coleridge (and John Taylor Coleridge)*, ed. Carl C. Woodring, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 273–274.

75. Warren Stevenson, *A study of Coleridge's three great poems: Christabel, Kubla Khan and The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (Lewistown: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001).

76. Lowes, *Road to Xanadu*, 250.

77. Robert Penn Warren, “A poem of pure imagination: An experiment in reading.” *Kenyon Review* 7 (1946): 391–427.

78. Elliot B. Gose, “Coleridge and the numinous gloom: An analysis of the ‘Symbolical Language’ in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*” [1960], in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 7–18, esp. 18.

fashionable, in 2007 Thomas Dilworth came up with a kind of retro-reading, going back to Warren's religious certainties and formal tidinesses, but in terms of what he calls the poem's "symbolic spatial form". This he sees as shaped by two sequences of parallel images, which he reads as an allegorical opposition between Killing and Blessing in the action as a whole. In the end, he says, Blessing wins. "Spatially, the structure of this poem implies that the predominant centre, blessing or love, is deeply everywhere and always accessible".⁷⁹

Dilworth is claiming to spot a crucial effect quite overlooked by previous commentators, which can only suggest that it is not so crucial after all. Gose is claiming to offer an alternative reading by Warren's method, which can only suggest that the method is not trustworthy. More generally, allegorical readings seem to assume that one would have to apologize for simply having enjoyed the poem, and that any other kind of reading is crude and unfaithful to the poet's intentions. In other words, allegorical critics are very ready to impose themselves on both Coleridge and their own readers. They respond to the poet's offer of genuine community-making with their own kind of silencing.

Unsurprisingly, the protests have been loud. Humphrey House complains that Warren's allegory makes the poem far too tidy;⁸⁰ John Beer that his elevation of the moon above the sun goes against "all traditional symbolisms, including Coleridge's";⁸¹ and Edward E. Bostetter that Warren

cannot believe that a poem so authoritative in vision, so powerful in symbolism ... is not morally meaningful beyond our fears and desires. As a result, he is led ironically into imposing the moral laws of what Coleridge called the reflective faculty upon a universe of pure imagination.⁸²

Sometimes, however, readers who refuse to see Coleridge's poem as a conventionally Christian allegory seek to impose some other kind of interpretation that is no less distorting. Empson, who intensely dislikes symbolist theory and

79. Thomas Dilworth, "Symbolic spatial form in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and the problem of God," *Review of English Studies* 58 (2007): 500–30, esp. 530.

80. Humphrey House, "The Ancient Mariner," [1953], in *Twentieth century interpretations of The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. James D. Boulger, (Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 48–72.

81. J. B. Beer, *Coleridge the visionary* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959), 168.

82. Edward E. Bostetter, "The nightmare world of 'The Ancient Mariner,'" [1962], in *Coleridge: The Ancient Mariner and other poems: A casebook*, eds Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman (London: Macmillan, 1973), 184–99, esp. 196.

interpretation because he sees it as anti-intellectual,⁸³ not only damns Warren's allegorizing version of symbolism, but accuses Coleridge himself of actually having invented symbolist theory in later life as a way of covering up the original *Rime's* intellectual radicalism: in particular, its strong opposition to "orthodox Christian torture-worship."⁸⁴ This comment tells us a lot more about Empson than Coleridge, whose youthful polemics never took him very far from the Anglican community into which he was born, and which his later writings did so much to consolidate.⁸⁵

Other respondents focus less on theological doctrines and philosophical universals than on various kinds of historical consideration.⁸⁶ But while a story whose protagonist claims that "We were the first that ever burst / Into that silent sea" can obviously be discussed, as by Warren Stevenson, in terms of the transition from the middle ages to the modern period,⁸⁷ Stevenson's description of the Mariner as "the first lonely inhabitant of the global village" is surely *de trop*. More generally, historical allegorizations or contextualizations of the poem always run the risk of becoming seriously unconversational, by ignoring Coleridge's care to leave certain historical details unspecific in order to focus on the communal dimensions.

83. William Empson and John Haffenden, "The Ancient Mariner: An answer to Warren." *Kenyon Review* 15 (1993): 155–77.

84. Empson, "Ancient Mariner", 38.

85. Cf. William Christie, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A literary life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 161–162; Jerome J. McGann, "The Ancient Mariner: The meaning of the meanings," in his *The beauty of inflections: Literary investigations in historical theory and Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) 135–172.

86. Samuel Baker, *Written on water: British Romanticism and the maritime empire of culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010; Tee, *Coleridge*, 43–79; Tim Fulford, "Slavery and superstition in the supernatural poems," in *The Cambridge companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 45–58; Marina Warner, "Introduction," in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, illustr. Mervyn Peake (London: Vintage, 2004), v–xiv; Patrick J. Keane, *Coleridge's submerged politics: The Ancient Mariner and Robinson Crusoe* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994; Andrew Keanie, *Student Guide to Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Greenwich Exchange, 2002).

87. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 170 ll. 105–106; Warren Stevenson, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner as epic symbol," [1976], in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 51–56, esp. 56.

4. Green values

So the Coleridge of *The Rime* allows readers plenty of scope, even if, while many of them are equally courteous in response, others do not take him particularly seriously, or abuse his deference by, in effect, silencing him. On the other hand, Coleridge's courtesy was not a surrender of his own personal and historical identity. If it had been, the writing would have seemed anaemic or dishonest. As things are, his portrayal of relationships and communicational behaviour will always attract many different kinds of reader. Yet without the slightest intention of mesmerizing them, he makes no apologies for his own value system, and especially not for his green values, as we can nowadays call them, which is where the commentatorial silencing has been very gross indeed.

By way of consolidating the links between human communication and the larger ethical dimension, the poem presents the Mariner's partial reconciliation with his own kind as having been anticipated by his improved relations with the natural world. One critic who parries the full significance of this is Lowes,⁸⁸ when he counters Christian allegorical readings by saying that *The Rime* has a strong structure of cause and effect, but one which will work only within the poem's own aesthetic heterocosm. Outside the poem, there would be a lot wrong with it, he says, because he is one of the many commentators who say that in real life, as it were, there would be an unacceptable discrepancy between the Mariner's shooting of the Albatross and the terrible punishment he endures for it. By viewing the narrative action as taking place within a purely aesthetic heterocosm, he is in effect defusing the radical greenness of the poem's challenge.

So, too, is Agneta Lindgren, it seems to me, by suggesting that nature here is not only separate from man, but vengeful and demonic, and that, to make things worse, man is also alienated from himself, "suffering from a quasi-schizophrenic state with serious consequences for his will and emotional responses".⁸⁹ What this fails to pick up is the poem's clear implication that such spiritual disorders, though real and painful enough when they do occur, do not occur necessarily. Even when the Mariner's action disastrously upsets the balance of creation, Coleridge never gives up on the ideal of harmonious relations all round.

Another way of silencing the poem's green values has been to say that Coleridge's account of the Mariner's action and sufferings involves a misinterpretation of Christianity. The poet and engraver David Jones, while generally sympathetic to the Catholic ethos of the Mariner's own thought-world, says that the "penance of life"

88. John Livingston Lowes, "Introduction," in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, illustr. Edward A. Wilson (New York: The Limited Editions Club, 1945), 7–17.

89. Agneta Lindgren, *The fallen world in Coleridge's poetry* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1999), 235.

imposed upon him is a “flat travesty” of the sacrament of penance – “[i]t is no part of the job of those who administer the sacrament to impose compulsion-neuroses under the guise of penances.”⁹⁰ This tends to make the Mariner’s own indelible shame at what he has done sound simply rather misplaced. Coleridge, Jones means, ought to have known better.

Yet another silencing attributes the penance of life to a thought-world even more outdated than mediaeval Catholicism. Thomas Dilworth, in a commentary on Jones’s illustrated edition of *The Rime*, says that the penance of life mentioned in the poem’s gloss is actually *not* the penance given by the Mariner’s confessor, but the one exacted by the Polar Spirit. From this Dilworth draws the conclusion that the Mariner’s “fate is a compromise between the spiritual economics of unforgiving paganism and forgiving Christianity”.⁹¹ Seen this way, the Mariner’s shame could hardly be more benighted. Coleridge, Dilworth is arguing, was more fully Christian than the Mariner, and did not think the shooting of the Albatross so unforgivable.

But the most egregious silencing of all is Empson’s, who says that the Mariner obviously killed the Albatross for food, that he does not deserve to be so dreadfully punished for it, and that when the young Coleridge first wrote the poem he was expecting readers to think that shooting birds was “a very OK occupation”, so that they would naturally “side with the Mariner, imagining themselves to oppose the author, who was plainly a muff”.⁹² Apart from the fact that the Mariner and his shipmates are so far from wanting to eat the Albatross that the latter hang it around the former’s neck, what Empson willfully overlooks is that, for all concerned, this action betokens his shame in having killed it. What matters is not what Empson or some hunting lobby think or have thought about killing birds, but what the people in the poem think about killing this one. It is *their* experiences and rationalizations we are reading about, and as far as they are concerned the great bird has been in a close relationship with them.

The first of the poem’s three carefully spaced occasions in which a hail is appropriate arises when the Albatross first flies to them through the fog:

As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God’s name.⁹³

90. David Jones. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Illustrated and introduced by David Jones* [1929], edited with preface and Afterword by Thomas Dilworth (London: Enitharnon Press, 2005), 33.

91. In Jones, *The Rime*, 34n.

92. Empson, “Introduction”, 39.

93. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 169 ll. 65–66.

They are so glad to see it that they treat it as a fellow-being and feed it with food it had never before eaten, unhesitatingly applying the Coleridgean ideal of hospitality, as underlined by both the prefatory Argument of the 1800 version and the glosses introduced in the 1817 version. And to the men in the poem, though not to Empson, the bird's response to their welcome is unmistakable:

It ate the food it ne'er had eat,
And round and round it flew.
The ice did split with a thunder-fit;
The helmsman steered us through!⁹⁴

Or as the gloss underlines the Mariner's clear implicature: "And lo! the Albatross proveth a bird of good omen". One of the good spirits in the Mariner's later dream speaks of the Albatross as "the bird that loved the man / Who shot him with his bow", so confirming the Mariner's own perception of his action's monstrosity.⁹⁵ Granted, in the earlier phases of his suffering he in effect repeats his grave error. In his agony of loneliness, his grief at the death of his crewmates is so obsessive that he quite overlooks the possibility of some sort of rapport between himself and other forms of creation:

The many men, so beautiful!
And they all dead did lie:
And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I.⁹⁶

But his sufferings are greatly alleviated as soon as his mind dispenses with the distinction between mankind and nature, the non-Coleridgean distinction on which Empson's argument depends. Just as when he and his shipmates had first hailed the Albatross as if it had been a Christian soul, so he now watches some water-snakes in a mood of delighted respect. As they coil and swim by moonlight, he "blesseth them in his heart", as the gloss puts it.

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware.⁹⁷

94. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 169 ll. 67–70.

95. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 180 ll. 404–405.

96. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 175 ll. 236–239.

97. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 176 ll. 282–284.

One of the critics who do respect Coleridge's plotting and values here is Tim Milnes: "It is only when, in a final act of acknowledgement, he blesses God's creatures, that the Mariner's penance begins" – even if the "final" is misleading; there are hundreds of extraordinary lines still to come after the watersnakes.⁹⁸ Other respondents acknowledge where Coleridge is coming from still more fully. H. W. Piper relates the poem to what at the time was a new physics. Rejecting older mechanistic accounts, scientists such as Diderot, de Maupertuis, d'Holbach, Robinet, Volney, Cabanis, Hutton, Erasmus Darwin, and Priestley no longer saw the world as a dead mass that was observable only from the outside. For them, it was made up of living monads. As Diderot put it, "[f]rom the elephants to the flea, from the flea to the living sensitive molecule, there is not a point in all nature that does not suffer and rejoice."⁹⁹ Human beings are themselves part of this, and to see the world as full of life and purpose alters their own way of living. To similar effect, and evoking an even wider sphere of reference, D. J. Moores points out that both the great monotheistic religions and the Enlightenment, which ostensibly disagreed with them, were repressive of nature and the body, whereas in the religious thought and experience of, say, Japan there was all along a sense of man's being an integral part of nature.¹⁰⁰ Against the backgrounds they adduce, Piper and Moores' suggestion that the Mariner learns from the water-serpents how he can right himself with nature is truly conversational. Here are two commentators who have carefully read what Coleridge has written, and who are bringing to it something distinctive and appropriate of their own.

The Mariner's unconscious blessing of the water-snakes is indeed a crucial turning-point, which William Christie perceptively links to moments, or hopes, of loving reconciliation in the human relationships dealt with in the conversation poems,¹⁰¹ even if there, I would point out, the motif can be marred by the unfortunately personal vibration. Again in the words of *The Rime's* gloss, "[t]he spell begins to break", the spell which has resulted in silencing, and which was brought on by the Mariner's guilt for the death of the Albatross:

98. Tim Milnes, *The truth about Romanticism: Pragmatism and idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 60.

99. H. W. Piper, "Nature and the supernatural in 'The Ancient Mariner'" (Armidale: University of New England, 1955), 4.

100. D. J. Moores, *The dark enlightenment: Jung, Romanticism and the repressed other* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 2010).

101. Christie, *Coleridge*, 101.

The selfsame moment I could pray;
 And from my neck so free
 The Albatross fell off, and sank
 Like lead into the sea,¹⁰²

an experience on which he clearly draws in his very last words to the Wedding-Guest:

He prayeth best, who loveth well
 Both man and bird and beast.
 He prayeth best who loveth best
 All things both great and small;
 For the dear God who loveth us,
 He made and loveth all.¹⁰³

Empson and those who, like Patrick J. Keane and Marina Warner,¹⁰⁴ follow in his footsteps here not only fail to take account of the coherently structured detail as to the beliefs and experiences of the story's main protagonist. They also ignore the ample historical evidence that Coleridge, Wordsworth, and many of their contemporaries and successors venerated the world of nature to much the same effect as the Mariner. In a letter of 1797, when his ideas for the poem were already under gestation, Coleridge himself applied his notion of hospitality to the animal kingdom, albeit more playfully. He simply could not bring himself, he explained, to set a mousetrap:

'Tis telling a lie. 'Tis as if you said, "Here is a bit of toasted cheese; come little mice! I invite you!" – when, oh, foul breach of the rights of hospitality! I mean to assassinate my too credulous guests.¹⁰⁵

For more public and serious analogues, there are the idea about the One Life in all things that is prominent in both "The Eolian Harp" and "Tintern Abbey", and Wordsworth's plan for a *magnum opus* proclaiming

How exquisitely the individual Mind
 (And the progressive powers perhaps no less
 Of the whole species) to the external World
 Is fitted: – and how exquisitely, too –
 Theme this but little heard of among men –

102. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 176 ll. 288–291.

103. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 186 ll. 612–617.

104. Keane, *Coleridge's submerged politics*; Warner, "Introduction".

105. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The collected letters*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), I 322.

The external World is fitted to the Mind;
 And the creation (by no lower name
 Can it be called) which they with blended might
 Accomplish.¹⁰⁶

Writers and readers operating within this climate of opinion would have taken no less serious a view of the Mariner's rude severance of his relation with nature than he did himself, and would have rejoiced at the new equilibrium he has achieved by the end.

Even though Empson interprets the poem in terms of the European adventurers' conquest of the planet, he sees their crimes as directed only against humanity. The guilt they felt or ought to have felt stemmed, he says, from their treatment of indigenous races. Although in passing he compares the Mariner's tale to the legend of Faustus, whose empirical researches certainly could be seen as a prototypically modern violation of nature, he is far more keen to take the spectre-bark as an anticipation of the slave trade, a topic on which Coleridge did write a prize poem at Cambridge, and with which he did deal in his Bristol lectures, but which has little relevance here, it seems to me, even though some new historicist and postcolonial critics have followed Empson's lead, resorting, I would say, to anachronistic special pleading, and quite ignoring Coleridge's carefully a-realistic focus on the spiritual and communicational dimensions of the Mariner's experiences.

Empson was writing on *The Rime* from the mid-1930s to the early 1980s. By the end of that period, other critics were already moving in the direction of ecological criticism. More than ever before, the Mariner's unbearable sense of guilt nowadays stands forth as entirely understandable – it is definitely not, as Empson had to say, a groundless guilt neurosis.¹⁰⁷ Coleridge was as prophetic here of the third millennium's environmental politics as, in *Kubla Khan*, he was seminal for the elitism of Victorian and Modernist aesthetics. The Mariner's sense that, if a human being is to achieve any harmony and peace in life, then this must pertain equally to relations with fellow-humans and the natural world could hardly be more topical, and earlier critics' incomprehension at the severity of his punishment now seems very unenlightened. The Mariner himself thought he fully deserved it. So, probably, did the Wedding-Guest when he woke up on the next day, “[a] sadder and a wiser man”.¹⁰⁸ So did Coleridge and many of his contemporaries. And so

106. William Wordsworth, *The poetic works of William Wordsworth*, 5 vols, eds Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952–9), V 5 ll. 64–71.

107. Empson, “Introduction”, 39.

108. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 186 l. 624,

should we, lest our attitude allows us to treat the planet in ways our descendants would find unforgivable.

In charting the consequences of satisfactory and unsatisfactory relationships and communication, some of Coleridge's most telling imagery is itself drawn from the world of nature, so that the human and the natural actually become each other's types. There really does seem to be One Life in all, and the human and the natural are apparently equally agentive, and perhaps co-agentive – in blended might, to use Wordsworth's fine expression. This would also have been one way to speak of the pathetic fallacy developed around the wind in "Dejection: An Ode", for instance. Then there is a passage in "Constancy to an Ideal Object":

The peacefull'st cot, the moon shall shine upon,
Lulled by the Thrush and wakened by the Lark
Without thee [i.e. the Ideal Object] were but a becalmèd Bark,
Whose Helmsman on an Ocean waste and wide
Sits mute and pale his mouldering helm beside.¹⁰⁹

I am not bringing in "Constancy to an Ideal Object" because *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is sympathetic to the point it is making. It obviously is not. Pursuing the logic of "Constancy to an Ideal Object", the conversation poems, especially the verse letter to Sara Hutchinson, try to incorporate that Object in other people, and therein are insensitive, I have argued, to other people's human autonomy. As creator of *The Rime*, and not least creator of its Hermit, whose loud sweet voice did not betoken an inability to talk *with* the mariners coming from afar, Coleridge is acting on his full awareness of such risks. The fascination of the lines just quoted lies rather in their juxtaposing the imagery of the conversation poems, which aspire to domestic bliss in the bosom of the English countryside, to the imagery of *The Rime*, with its Mariner amid water, water everywhere, becalmed in a rotting ship. In the conversation poems, this second kind of imagery never intervenes, because the hope or charade of the happy rural home is never surrendered. The converse, however, is not true. In *The Rime*, in addition to its own extraordinary natural imagery, the imagery of the conversation poems significantly recurs. Both these kinds of natural imagery are in the closest sympathy with what is happening in the Mariner's human world as he perceives it. The world of nature is, as it were, telling, or is itself part of, the same story. The greenness is at the writing's very heart.

In the case of imagery we think of as more typically belonging to *The Rime*, the writing can have the hyper-reality of dream or opium trance, while the pathetic fallacies and metaphorical buttressing remain fairly straightforward. The equivalence

109. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 333 ll. 220–225.

between the drought, the dryness of the Mariner's lips, and his spiritual thirst is obvious enough. And everywhere, the human-natural symbiosis is working in another way as well. When "ice, mast high / Came floating by / As green as emerald", or when the sea-snakes' every track "[w]as a flash of golden fire",¹¹⁰ what the Mariner is seeing is extremely exotic to him, but he can see and report it only by virtue of having travelled to a place where he is extremely exotic himself. He is in reciprocal confrontation with the ice, the waves, the wind, the Sun, the Moon, the Albatross, the watersnakes, the Polar Spirit, and so on, all of which he experiences as reacting to him. He and the world of nature are, as it were, mutually surprised. Alienation rules supreme.

By contrast, the imagery of rural England most typically channels, as in the conversation poems, the dream of harmonious communication and happy domesticity. When the angelic spirits cluster round the mast to join in their unearthly musical communion, that astonishing phenomenon, and the totally alien setting in which it takes place, suddenly become as delightfully quotidian as Coleridge's lime-tree bower in Nether Stowey:

Sometimes a-dropping from the sky
I heard the sky-lark sing;
Sometimes all little birds that are,
How they seemed to fill the sea and air
With their sweet jargoning.¹¹¹

When the sound ended, similarly,

... still the sails made on
A pleasant noise till noon,
A noise like of a hidden brook
In the leafy month of June,
That to the sleeping woods all night
Singeth a quiet tune.¹¹²

Less typically but no less appropriately, on the far more discouraging occasion of the ship's return to port, by which time it looks as unseaworthily gaunt, we may reflect, as the spectre-bark of Death and Life-in-Death, the English rural imagery constates a very different mood. The ship, says the Hermit, is like nothing he has ever seen, except, perhaps,

110. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 69 ll. 53–4, 176 l. 281.

111. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 178 ll. 358–362.

112. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 179 ll. 367–72.

Brown skeletons of leaves that lag
 My forest-brook along;
 When the ivy-tod is heavy with snow,
 And the owlet whoops to the wolf below,
 That eats the she-wolf's young.¹¹³

Happiness, comfort, security, the imagery is suggesting, are important in both the human and the natural worlds. The two worlds are actually one, and entail a single all-embracing value: an absolute respect for created otherness in any shape or form. This is nothing less than the ethics of good conversation in its widest possible application. It is also what an experience of the poem can offer any reader as itself a topic of continuing conversation.

5. The conversational readjustment of 1817

With the changes Coleridge made in the version of *The Rime* published in his collection *Sibylline Leaves* in 1817, its dialogicality was greatly strengthened. During the past eighty years, one of these changes has come in for a huge amount of commentary: his addition of the marginal glosses. In much of the discussion, however, the communicational implications have not been fully grasped.

In a copy of the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* now in the Library of Victoria, Melbourne, Coleridge's own hand has started further to expand the Argument and has added a marginal note beside the Wedding-Guest's "I fear thee, ancient Mariner!" at line 345. From this R. C. Bald drew the conclusion that the process of glossmaking must have started early on.¹¹⁴ But we cannot know when Coleridge actually inserted these additions, and their precise dating is in any case irrelevant to a reader of the 1817 *Rime*. What is notable is rather that the expansion of the Argument and the addition of the marginal gloss in the Melbourne volume both sought to clarify the poem's assumptions about the guardian Saint and angelic spirits by whose assistance the Mariner's life and homecoming were ensured. In very many of the 1817 glosses, a similar effort of explanation is under way: uncertainties relating to angelic properties, to time and place, to cause and effect, and to ethical judgements are all cleared up.

This is one of the main points stressed by the scholars who began to scrutinize the glosses' function in the 1930s. B. R. McElderry saw them as part of Coleridge's

113. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 184 ll. 533–537.

114. R. C. Bald, "The Ancient Mariner," *Times Literary Supplement* (26 July, 1934). 528.

continuing response to accusations of obscurity, and he accordingly took for granted that the verse and the glosses were basically in harmony with each other.¹¹⁵

In the second phase of the discussion, commentators such as Huntington Brown and Lawrence Lipking began to spell out differences of historical period and socioeconomic status between, on the one hand, the Minstrel one can imagine reciting the verse, or the Ancient Mariner who is the main protagonist in its story, and on the other hand the more educated though still rather old-fashioned Glosser.¹¹⁶ But I repeat: differences, and nothing more. There was still not the slightest suggestion that the differences resulted in any kind of direct conflict. So for Lipking, the poem's workings brought to mind the following passage from Chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria*:

The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of a mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power; or like the path of sound through the air; at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward.¹¹⁷

Such was the dynamism which in Lipking's view developed as the reader's eye moved backwards and forwards between verse and gloss. There was a sense, not of opposition, but merely of movement interestingly interspersed with pauses.

In the third phase of the discussion, the verse and the gloss were indeed seen as in direct conflict with each other, and Coleridge as having thereby forfeited artistic and intellectual integrity. Empson trumpeted his claim that the young Coleridge, author of the poem as first published in the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, had shared Empson's own disapproval of "a God who could be satisfied by the crucifixion of an innocent person, God or man";¹¹⁸ that he had given up his work on Cain because the Ancient Mariner's sense of guilt was more obviously unreasonable;¹¹⁹ and that

115. B. R. McElderry, "Coleridge's revision of 'The Ancient Mariner.'" *Studies in Philology* 29 (1932): 68–94.

116. Huntington Brown, "The gloss to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 6 (1945): 319–24; Lawrence Lipking, "The marginal gloss," [1977], in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 75–82.

117. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 173.

118. Empson, "Introduction", 32.

119. Empson, "Ancient Mariner".

he was in any case a necessarian who did not believe in guilt in the first place.¹²⁰ When he added the glosses in 1817, in Empson's view he ratted on his bracingly Empsonian world-view, so becoming the first misinterpreter of what he had written in his youth. The glosses are nothing less than "lies ... about the meaning of an early work",¹²¹ lies which Empson and David Pirie set out to eradicate by providing a new text of the poem. But their plan here was hopelessly confused. While simply removing all the glosses, they nevertheless retained some of Coleridge's other revisions, claiming that these were improvements. On top of which, they in any case acknowledged the cultural salience of the glosses, by re-admitting them within their scholarly notes and commentary.

In the fourth phase of the discussion, a very large group of commentators continued to see a direct conflict between the verse and the glosses, but in various ways now tried to redeem Coleridge's reputation for artistic and intellectual control.¹²² In particular, many commentators, having stressed a dichotomy between verse and gloss, then loaded onto it all the sophistication of their own time's "Theory". Their chief claim was that in adding the glosses Coleridge had harnessed subtle, and ultimately rather pessimistic ideas about the nature of language. For Sarah Dyck, the verse-prose contrast showed that language could never net experience in.¹²³ Or as K. M. Wheeler put it, the Glosser tried to force the experience narrated by the verse onto an intellectualist Procrustean bed.¹²⁴ For Stephen Bygrave, the verse "piles on the agony" while "the gloss piles on the explanation", but the only thing this established was that "all there is after language is more language".¹²⁵ As described by Jerome Christensen and Wendy Wall,¹²⁶ tensions between verse and

120. Empson, "Introduction", 31.

121. David Pirie, "Textual commentary," in *Coleridge's verse: A selection*, eds William Empson and David Pirie (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 207–216, esp. 215.

122. E.g. Watson, *Coleridge*, 93; Frances Ferguson, "Coleridge and the deluded reader," [1977], in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 57–73, esp. 72; David Simpson, *Irony and authority in Romantic poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 101; McGann, *The Ancient Mariner*.

123. Sarah Dyck, "Perspective in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,'" *Studies in English Literature* 13 (1973): 591–604.

124. K. M. Wheeler, *The creative mind in Coleridge's poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1981).

125. Stephen Bygrave, *Coleridge and the self: Romantic egotism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), 137.

126. Jerome Christensen, *Coleridge's blessed machine of language*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982; Wendy Wall, "Interpreting poetic shadows: The gloss of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,'" *Criticism* 29 (1987): 179–195.

gloss reflected Derrida's logic of supplement and the host-parasite relationship as expounded by, say, J. Hillis Miller.¹²⁷

The original text [i.e. the verse] may presume inalienable priority, but the marginal comment always threatens the reduction of the original text to a pretext for commentary. The marginalium is, thus, both enrichment and deprivation of its host, just as it is, equivocally, neither inside nor outside the text.¹²⁸

(Christensen 1982: 105–6)

And in the view of Susan Eilenberg, the juxtaposition of verse and gloss carried a sense that we are all implicated in a kind of guilty intertextuality – that human beings are merely zombie-like ventriloquists, spouting distressful words that are never ultimately their own.¹²⁹

The theoretical underpinnings in this fourth stage of discussion were not only deconstructionist. To some extent the strong emphasis now laid on potentially antagonistic differences of position between the various agents involved – the Mariner, the Wedding-Guest, the Minstrel, Thomas Burnet (author of the poem's epigraph from 1817 onwards), the Glosser, Coleridge, Coleridge's readers of various periods – could also reflect those postmodern kinds of historical, social, cultural and ideological critique which fed in to the so-called culture wars of the mid-1990s. At the time, a frequently heard claim was that differences between one sociocultural, religious, ethnic or gender grouping and another went all the way down, as if communication between people belonging to different groupings was not really possible. This appalling determinism was merely an excessive manifestation of the period's wholly admirable politics of recognition. In other words, it sprang from a fear that the rights and autonomy of differently placed individuals could all too easily be disregarded, a fear that communicational teleologies could be too hegemonic, a fear, to use my present terms, of anti-conversational silencing. This helps to explain why, in much postmodern literary theory and criticism, what came to be valorized was everything that made one human grouping different from another, thereby underestimating the likelihood of something which, in post-postmodern times, we are beginning to think of as a real possibility: a type of community that is very large *without* being hegemonic, because it is *not* a consensus but a grouping of people who despite real differences are somehow brought into communication, into communion.¹³⁰

127. J. Hillis Miller, "The critic as host," *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1976): 439–47.

128. Christensen, *Blessed machine*, 105–106.

129. Susan Eilenberg, *Strange powers of speech: Wordsworth, Coleridge and literary possession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

130. Sell, *Communicational criticism*, 1–50.

Some of the critics who espoused deconstructionist and postmodern paradigms showed symptoms of a professionalist Alexandrianism that was keen to raise itself above the two sides of the communication on which it was commenting: above Coleridge, who had offered his conversational invitation, and above ordinary readers in their response to it.¹³¹ As a result, such critics forgot that what a human being thinks or knows or means is not more important than what a human being does, especially *vis à vis* other human beings and the world of nature. How do the people in the poem behave? How does Coleridge behave towards them? How does Coleridge behave towards us? How should we behave towards Coleridge? These, I am suggesting, are important questions. Obviously, the poem's philosophical ramifications do challenge discussion as well. But no less obviously, to argue that a verbal achievement of the order of *The Rime* demonstrated the inadequacy of language was utterly absurd. Similarly, to suggest that the Mariner and the Glosser were in total opposition was clearly wrong. One detail which such a view overlooked was that, in the only case where the two of them really are at variance, what results is not philosophical insights, but an arresting moment of suspense and dramatic irony within the ongoing story:-

See! See! (I cried) she tacks no more!	And horror follows. For can it
Hither to work us weal;	be a ship that comes
Without a breeze, without a tide,	onward without
She steadies with upright keel!	wind or tide? ¹³²

The Mariner and the Glosser have so much in common here! Both of them would like the oncoming ship to be, unproblematically, just that: a ship with other human beings on board who could work some weal. The only difference is that the Glosser, because he is merely reading about the Mariner's experiences rather than actually keeping him company on the ship, has the saddening objectivity to see that the Mariner's hopes could be deceiving him.

I am not alone in my reservations about this fourth phase of the discussion. Critics and scholars contributing to the fifth and latest phase are in effect returning to phase two, as I have already done myself in reading the verse and the gloss as different but complementary. Commentators still see a distinction between the verse and the prose and between the poem's various characters, but nevertheless tend to think in terms of larger human commonalities. From this point of view, what separates Jack Stillinger, Joseph C. Sitterson, Marina Warner, Adam Sisman

131. Cf. Sell, *Mediating criticism*, 1–29.

132. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 172 ll. 167–70.

and Seamus Perry from Brown and Lipking is nothing more than their dates of publication.¹³³ Stillinger says that the early *Rime* was a “relatively simple story of crime, punishment, and partial redemption”, whereas the 1817 version gives us: “the story; the author teasing and challenging the reader; and the reader confronting epigraph, author and story simultaneously”. Warner and Sisman have much the same model: there are two voices, the enthralled teller of the tale and the contemplative commentator, in dramatized dialogue with each other. To which Perry adds that this dialogue brings to mind John Bayley’s suggestion that division and artistic unity are not mutually exclusive;¹³⁴ sometimes Coleridge is joyously “diversitarian”: a writer for whom things which do not fit together are thereby beautiful. Most suggestive of all for my present argument, Sitterson feels that neither the Mariner nor the Glosser fully accounts for the story, but that they are united in trying to do so, and in inviting us as readers to circle around it ourselves. An account more sensitive to the poem’s conversational qualities as strengthened by the glosses is hard to imagine.

Some of the other changes made in 1817 contributed to this same conversational consolidation. For one thing, the poem now appeared for the first time under Coleridge’s own name. The revisions he made for *Lyrical Ballads* 1800 had already removed many archaisms of the kind made fashionable by Chatterton, Shenstone, and Thomson, and had further reduced the element of distance and artificiality by expanding the prefatory Argument with an element of straightforward moralizing. On the other hand, a source of confusion had been introduced as well, because Coleridge deferred to Wordsworth’s complaint about the imagery by subtitled the 1800 version “A Poet’s Reverie”. To use terms developed in his own later theoretical work, the problem for a reader here was that, whereas “Poet” is a big word, suggesting Imagination, creativity, will,¹³⁵ “Reverie” is a much smaller word, suggesting merely Fancy. The added subtitle, then, had introduced a doubt as to the poet’s ultimate seriousness. But as hinted by Lamb’s protest,¹³⁶ the implication that *The Rime* was not entirely the work of Imagination was in fact misleading. True, even in its earliest form the poem was what we might nowadays describe as a flow of fast-shifting intertextualities: a veritable cascade of images and allusions, many of

133. Jack Stillinger, *Coleridge and textual instability: The multiple versions of the major poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 71; Joseph C. Sitterson, *Romantic poems, poets, and narrators* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2000); Warner “Introduction”; Adam Sisman, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The friendship* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007); Perry, *Coleridge and division*; Brown, “The Gloss”; Lipking, “The Marginal Gloss”.

134. John Bayley, *The uses of division: Unity and disharmony in literature* (New York: Viking, 1976).

135. Cf. James Engell, “*Biographia Literaria*,” in *The Cambridge companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 59–74, esp. 66.

136. Lamb, *Letters*, I 266–267.

them taking over motifs from the hymns Coleridge had recently been planning on the Elements, the Sun, and the Moon. Yet from no less early on, the writing also gave every sign of conscious shaping, energetic thought, and driving will.¹³⁷ So when, in versions later than 1805, the subtitle was omitted, Coleridge's creativity came more fully into its own, and his invitation to readers became somewhat less qualified. In 1817, when the title-page finally acknowledged the poem as his own work, the invitation became even more directly an appeal from one particular individual.

The author was now identified as the person who, among other things, in the same year published *Biographia Literaria*. But readers who therefore searched that work for possible explanations of the poem's aim would have been faced with a contradiction. On the one hand, *Biographia Literaria* speaks, in that unforgettable phrasing, of *The Rime*'s kind of poetry as offering "a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for ... shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic truth". On the other hand, such poetry is also described as a kind of psychological experiment, in which both author and reader can presumably share, as it were, but only by re-assuming their critical, disbelieving faculties. The "incidents and agents" are, "in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at" consists in

the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, for whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency.¹³⁸

This is the clue to the overall conversational readjustment of the 1817 version of *The Rime*. What had already been on offer in the anonymously published earlier versions was an intensely thrilling story which made the incredible seem real, and about whose subject matter no sensitive reader could fail to compare notes with its author, distant though he partly remained. In this sense, the early *Rime* was not all that far from *Christabel*, except that all the loose ends which Coleridge refrained from tidying up in the fragmentary *Christabel* provided a more immediate stimulus to creative speculation on the part of readers. But then from 1817 onwards, the stimulus to creative speculation provided by the *Rime* acquired an immediacy of an altogether different order.

The Wedding-Guest's terrified description of the Mariner as "long, and lank, and brown, / As is the ribbed sea-sand"¹³⁹ was now annotated as follows: for these lines

137. One of the main arguments throughout Lowes, *Road to Xanadu*.

138. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 168–169.

139. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 174 ll. 226–7.

I am indebted to Mr. WORDSWORTH. It was on a delightful walk from Nether Stowey to Dulverton, with him and his sister, in the Autumn of 1797, that this Poem was planned, and in part composed.

And on “The furrow followed free”¹⁴⁰ a note now commented that

I had not been long on board a ship, before I perceived that this was the image as seen by a spectator from the shore, or from another vessel. From the ship itself, the *Wake* appears like a brook flowing off from the stern.

Whereas the verse here invites us, as always, to an extraordinarily enjoyable suspension of disbelief, the two notes, the one by placing the delightfulness of the lines’ circumstances of composition in contrast with their awesomeness of content, the other by being positively critical of the verse, immediately draw readers out of the illusory world of the poem into considerations bearing on the actual writing of it. Such exposures of the writer at work were what Henry James disliked in the novels of Trollope, because to his mind they interrupted, not only the illusion, but also the pursuit of human truth for which the illusion was being conducted in the first place.¹⁴¹ But for a later generation of novelists – John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Borges, William H. Gass, and many of the others discussed in Patricia Waugh’s *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*¹⁴² – Coleridge’s example here would presumably have been admirable. To speak for myself, I find *The Rime* of 1817 not only engrossing as narrative, but intellectually exciting as well, precisely through its fluctuation between fictional intensity and the coolness of commentary. Our minds, it seems to me, are perfectly capable of parallel processing. By conversing at such moments in the form of self-conscious fiction, Coleridge was bringing more aspects of a reader’s psyche into synergetic play than James was bargaining for.

In most printings of the poem after 1817, the two notes just discussed were not included, unless as footnotes in scholarly editions and student textbooks. Even so, they are enough to suggest how Coleridge was now thinking of his relationship with his readers, and the other main changes of 1817, which did become permanent, point in the same direction. He still wanted his readers to be fascinated. But he did not want them to be so possessed by the poem’s narratives that they could no longer think about anything else, or think on their own behalf. The ethical distance from his own late table talk, from the conversation poems – especially the verse letter

140. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 170 l. 104.

141. Henry James, “The art of fiction,” [1884], in *Henry James: Selected literary criticism*, ed. Morris Shapira (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 78–97, esp. 80.

142. London: Methuen, 1984.

to Sara Hutchinson – and from *Kubla Khan* could not be greater. By introducing a fair range of moods and frames of reference, he actually discouraged readers from a stupefying concentration on the story element.

That, I think, is why, in this same 1817 version, the prefatory Argument in English was replaced with the longish Latin epigraph from Thomas Burnet's *Archeologiae Philosophicae* of 1692. The Latin alone here was enough to set a scholarly, dispassionate tone, and Burnet's very argument has to do with whether or not strange and wonderful spiritual beings can really exist. The need for caution and critical thinking comes through loud and clear. On the other hand, and typically of Coleridge's conversational complexity from 1817 onwards, by leaving out certain words in Burnet's text he has made it seem slightly less sceptical than it really was, and there were also a number of things which he could rely on many readers to remember: that even Burnet himself had written a wonderfully imaginative account of the beginnings of the world, famously praised for its sublimity by Steele in *The Spectator*; that Burnet had actually believed that profound truths have to be accommodated to the understanding of those who are expected to believe them; and that in this connection Burnet had thought that nothing was more effective than a strange and wonderful story. Moses, he had argued, simplified the language and concepts to be found in *Genesis* in order to suit the comprehension of an ignorant people, a claim which was strongly grounded in the early church fathers' discussion of different levels of biblical interpretation, but which nevertheless exposed Burnet to a long-lasting deluge of condemnation. His own parodic retelling of the encounter between Eve and the Serpent provided choice materials for verse libels such as the one by W. King in a volume published as late as 1776, sixty-one years after Burnet's death. As King phrased it, Burnet believed

That all the books of Moses
Were nothing but supposes;
That he deserv'd rebuke, Sir,
Who wrote the Pentateuch, Sir,
'T was nothing but a sham

...

That as for father Adam,
With Mrs. Eve his madam,
And what the serpent spoke, Sir,
'T was nothing but a joke, Sir,
And well-invented flam.¹⁴³

143. W. King, *The original works*, Vol. I (London: N. Conant, 1776), 221–222.

Coleridge himself, in his efforts to stimulate dispassionate reflection on the story of the Mariner and the story of the Wedding-Guest, would have sympathized with Burnet in his more cautiously critical mode. But he also embraced a remarkably similar account of biblical fictionality. If, in the biblical writers,

all imperfections of knowledge, all participation in the mistakes and limits of their several ages had been excluded, how could these Writings be or become the history and example, the echo and more lustrous image of the work and warfare of the sanctifying Principle in us?¹⁴⁴

All in all, to readers aware of these backgrounds the poem's epigraph will tend to suggest that they can profitably alternate between suspension and reinstatement of disbelief, and that although the Mariner's story may seem enjoyably weird and wonderful, it could nevertheless channel an essential truthfulness. Here too, then, Coleridge's revision of 1817 did nothing to undermine the narrative's attraction, but was an attempt to prevent it from becoming utterly mesmerizing. He was encouraging readers to use their own brains, precisely in the way Sitterson describes in terms of the reader's mental circling, a metaphor which, in sensitive response to Coleridge's intentions, he has borrowed straight from Burnet.

The coherence of the intensified conversational strategy of 1817 becomes even clearer as soon as we begin to imagine the hand of Burnet at work in the glosses as well (even if Rosemary Ashton and many others have thought that the most likely model was Jeremy Taylor).¹⁴⁵ When McElderry described the glosses as helpfully explanatory, factual, and down to earth, he was in effect highlighting a quality very close to Burnet's coolness of commentary and critical scepticism. Yet the glosses, no less than the verse, also have their own element of delighted speculation on the wonders of universe, most notably on the moon and stars:

In his loneliness and fixedness he [the Mariner] yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and everywhere the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival.¹⁴⁶

This surely recalls Burnet's other side: his free-ranging imaginativeness. Nor are these the only considerations here. Burnet's dates are appropriate: more modern than the Minstrel we can think of as narrating the ballad of the Mariner and the

144. Coleridge, *Aids to reflection*, 336–337.

145. Ashton, *Coleridge*, 130.

146. Coleridge, *Complete poems*, 155 at 263–266.

Wedding-Guest's late mediaeval stories; but not contemporary with Coleridge himself. As a leading disciple of Ralph Cudworth, Burnet would have been perfectly capable of the glosses' more Neo-Platonic motifs. His suitably tragic potential had already been very publicly identified by Steele:

When this admirable Author has reviewed all that has passed, or is to come, which relates to the habitable World, and run through the whole Fate of it, how could a Guardian Angel, that had attended it through all its Courses or Changes, speak more emphatically at the End of his Charge than does our Author, when he makes, as it were, a Funeral Oration over this Globe, looking to the Point where it once stood?¹⁴⁷

And Coleridge himself was singing his praises (albeit alongside those of Taylor!) in the same year's *Biographia Literaria*: "The writings of Plato, and Bishop Taylor, and the [*Telluris*] *Theoria Sacra* of Burnet, furnish undeniable proofs that poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre, and even without the contradistinguishing objects of a poem." Such high poetry, he explained, involves "a studious selection and artificial arrangement" which excite "a more continuous and equal attention than the language of prose aims at, whether colloquial or written." Poetry, he concluded in those well-known words, "brings the whole soul of man into activity" and involves "the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities".¹⁴⁸

From 1817 onwards, that is exactly the kind of spiritual activation and *discordia concors* which the combination of *The Rime's* verses with Burnet's epigraph, the marginal glosses, and Coleridge's own authorial signature has tended to promote in his conversation with readers.

6. The continuing conversation

As the years go by, readers' responses to Coleridge's greatest poem will continue to vary. For one thing, I may well have to accept that many will continue to underestimate what I see as *The Rime's* fundamental greenness, and will therefore continue to feel that the Mariner's punishment does not fit his crime. Even so, all responses belong to the same conversation, and in fact presuppose some striking common denominators: a recognition of the extraordinary power of the dream-like imagery; an understanding of both the Mariner's and the Wedding-Guest's human need of communion with their fellows; an empathy with the Mariner's experience

147. Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), V 75–77.

148. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 173.

of loneliness, his relational failure, his feelings of guilt; and fellow-feeling with the Wedding-Guest in his stunned horror at the Mariner's tale.

In post-postmodern times, it is once again possible to say that all such aspects of readers' responses partake of a human universality, in which Coleridge shared, and to which he strongly appealed. But to say this is possible precisely because postmodernity has gone before, and because its empowerments are still in place. Post-postmodernity's ideal of a non-hegemonic universality involves an agreement between human beings to agree on things that seem to win wide acceptance, but, under other circumstances, an agreement to disagree.

Coleridge, both in his social relations and in his philosophizing, had a prodigious compulsion to unity. Keats's complaint that he would "let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining Content with Half Knowledge" was not without ground.¹⁴⁹ Imagination as he conceived of it was always on the brink of becoming (as it did indeed become in the interpretative syntheses of some New Critical descendants)¹⁵⁰ no less of a steamroller in its reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities than some of his own talk, which Hazlitt so loved but so resented.

But Perry is right. Coleridge is a diversitarian as well, or is so at least in his greatest work, where I have been keen to show that a dazzling creativity and firmly green values can go hand in hand with a self-restraint that is magnanimously impersonalizing. The temptation to seek for a submissive Ideal Object, and to try to cast some of those around him in that role, was unremitting, and was certainly problematic for some of his writing in verse form. But the quantum leap he took in re-writing the verse letter to Sara Hutchinson as "Dejection: An Ode" was that of a genius whose most distinctive vein has been well caught by John Beer:

One pattern above all emerges from the play of his mind as it tried to make sense of the universe: it was the gravest of mistakes to imagine that truth would eventually be discovered in some version of stability, or stabilities. Ultimate truth must rather be found, if at all, behind the dialectical play of stability and movement. In this respect the Mariner's dawn vision – a central sun in perpetual interplay with energies which it both emitted and received back – remained utterly central, while the attempt to anchor himself in his vision of Sara Hutchinson's "eternal Self" was doomed to failure.¹⁵¹

149. Keats, *Letters*, 52.

150. Sell, *Communicational criticism*, 37–43.

151. John Beer, *Coleridge's play of mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 205.

It seems to me that, as an alternative to the symbolism of solar energies emitted and received back, the dialectical play of stability and movement can be equally well described as a conversational give-and-take. Or as Beer had stated this earlier:

Coleridge's ultimate gift to human thinking lay in his capacity for double perception, for thinking at more than one level At its best his mind positively recoiled from watertight formulations [He was] most at home not in professional philosophy as commonly understood, but in the more difficult kind of terrain where different *kinds* of discourse met one another, often in mutual incomprehension.¹⁵²

This was a doubleness, a meeting of differences, to which Coleridge offered hospitality, to use his own word. Especially in his greatest poem of all, he positively counteracted the possibility of mutual incomprehensibility. Ever since 1817, the mind-set of *The Rime*'s verse and the mind-set of its glosses have been side by side on the page. By any single mind which, in the imaginative but meticulous spirit of Burnet, seeks to interpret them in each other's light, they can be processed in parallel, as part of an enjoyably genuine conversation within a large but heterogeneous community.

152. John Beer, "Coleridge's afterlife," in *The Cambridge companion to Coleridge*, ed. Lucy Newlyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 231–244, esp. 240.

Cultural memory and the communicational criticism of literature¹

1. Communicational criticism

In one of its aspects, postmodernity was an ideological maelstrom which threw up changes so radical as to propel us into a new era. The so-called culture wars of the late twentieth century, to which literary theoreticians of post-Marxist, postcolonial, feminist, queer, ethnic and religious orientations all made their own distinctive kinds of input, so effectively empowered previously underprivileged groupings that many large societies became a lot more democratic. This brought important long term benefits to the lives of countless individuals, and some exciting innovations in the field of cultural production as well.

Despite this formidable success, the postmodern politics of recognition could box individuals into identity scripts which were far too narrow,² and which in post-postmodern times would ideally become a thing of the past. Yet even today, we are morally obliged to distinguish between groupings which “have” and groupings which “have not”. The world is still riven by systematic injustices, and by violence on a truly shameful scale. Even though political, economic, environmental, and communication-technological developments now constantly remind us that we are all denizens of just a single planet, and even though we have already started to dream of a new, non-hegemonic kind of globalization, dream and reality are still far apart.

So while many literary scholars are arguing that, in the early third millennium, Goethe’s notion of *Weltliteratur* is acquiring fresh relevance, most of them qualify their optimism with a note of caution. David Damrosch has shown that the old canonical classics can continue to attract a disproportionate amount of attention, becoming a “hypercanon” against which the new authors belonging to previously small literatures are mustered into a “countercanon” that is merely the hypercanon’s shadow.³ In order to remain factually accurate and politically just, literary

1. [First published in *ESSACHESS: Journal for Communication Studies* 5 (2012): 201–25.]

2. Roger D. Sell, *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000), 10–11.

3. David Damrosch, “World literature in a postcanonical, hypercanonical age.” in *Comparative literature in an age of globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 43–53.

scholarship does need to retain, as Sarika Chandra and Silvia Lopéz argue, some insistence on national and regional distinctions.⁴ And as emphasized by J. Hillis Miller and Ernst Grabovsky, distinctivenesses also need to be maintained in the face of present-day communications technology.⁵ As channels for literary texts world-wide, the new digital media clearly have a huge potential. But their formats, and the culture of reading they encourage, could perhaps be too homogenizing.

As a result of such continuing concerns, some scholars are beginning to see a need for a criticism which takes as its special focus the ethics of literary address, for instance by extending the insights of Habermas and Levinas.⁶ Whereas earlier generations of critics have discussed literary texts as creating a special kind of artistic entity, as conveying some particular message or other, as exhibiting some particular manner of representation, as emanating from some particular ideological position, or as shaping some particular kind of identity, this new type of criticism is communicational, in that it sees writers treating their audiences as virtually partners in conversation.⁷ More precisely, it asks whether the addressivity of a given writer

4. Sarika Chandra, "Reproducing a nationalist literature in the age of globalization: Reading (im)migration in Julia Alvarez's *How the García girls lost their accents*," *American Quarterly* 60 (2008): 829–885; Silvia Lopéz, "National culture, globalization and the case of post-war El Salvador," *Comparative Literature Studies* 41 (2004): 80–100.

5. J. Hillis Miller, "A defense of literature and literary study in a time of globalization and the new tele-technologies," *Neohelicon* 34 (2007): 13–22; Ernst Grabovsky, "The impact of globalization and the new media on the notion of world literature," in *Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies*, ed. Steve Tötösy Zepetnek (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2004), 45–57.

6. Roger D. Sell, *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011), 18, 48–49; Donald R Wehrs and David P. Haney (eds), *Levinas and nineteenth-century literature: Ethics and otherness from Romanticism through Realism* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009).

7. Roger D. Sell, *Literature as Communication; Mediating Criticism: Literary Education Humanized*. (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001); (ed.) *Children's literature as communication: The ChilPA project* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002); "Reader-learners: Children's novels and participatory pedagogy," in his *Children's Literature*, 263–90; (ed.) *Special issue: Literature as communication*, *NJES: Nordic Journal of English Studies* 7 (2007): 1–172; "The importance of genuine communication: Literature within a participatory pedagogy," in *Towards a dialogic Anglistics*, eds Werner Delanoy, Jörg Helbig, and Allan James (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2007), 247–61; *Communicational Criticism*; "Dialogicality and ethics: Four cases of literary address" *Language and Dialogue* 1 (2011): 79–104 [= item 5 in the present selection]; (ed.) *Literary community-making: The dialogicality of English texts from the seventeenth century to the present* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2012). Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (eds), *Religion and writing in England, 1558–1689: Studies in community-making and cultural memory* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009). Roger D. Sell, Anthony W. Johnson, and Helen Wilcox (eds), *Community-making in early Stuart theatres: Stage and audience* (forthcoming [London: Routledge, 2017]).

in a given text is such as to recognise its readers' human autonomy. One working hypothesis is that writers who, without trying to de-historicize or silence their own voice, are sufficiently open-minded to allow a certain leeway to their addressees can perhaps bring about communities of readers that are indefinitely large but also indefinitely heterogeneous, and therefore non-hegemonic in structure.

When the writing and reading of so-called literary texts is viewed as one among other kinds of communicational interchange, features which in Kantian, Romantic and literary-formalist accounts of literature were seen as contributing to a special otherworld of "Art" can be re-conceptualized. Literature's beauties and pleasures; the fictionality of many literary texts; literature's lack of an obvious feedback channel from readers to writers: all such characteristics come to be perceived as having their own kinds of communicational dimension.

Beauties and pleasures can arise from non-literary uses of language as well – conversation analysts have long been studying the "poetics of talk".⁸ And although a work of art can have an attractiveness that is psychologically very real for us, so real, in fact, that we experience it as something positively "there" in the work, and although this impression will certainly not occur unless there are details in the work which give rise to it, a great deal also depends on our own prior conditioning – on what we ourselves *bring* to our appreciation. As explained by pragmatist aestheticians such as Richard Shusterman, there are social contracts as to what shall count as agreeable.⁹ To a considerable extent, our enjoyment as readers of literature arises from our communicating membership of a reading circle within which matters of taste and value are under constant, albeit often tacit negotiation.

Fictionality, too, is an element in many everyday, non-literary uses of language whose communicational function nobody would question. Communication is not confined to the statement of hard-and-fast facts, opinions and feelings. Especially by making up stories, a communicant can explore general or moral truths that go beyond the detail of particular empirical cases, and can probe opinions and feelings that have yet to be socially stabilized into constant attitudes. This applies to the stories in literary texts at least as much as to any others.¹⁰

As for literature's lack of an obvious feedback channel from reader to writer, genres with no such channel can still allow for a powerful dialogicality of spirit.

8. Deborah Tannen, "Repetition in conversation: Towards a poetics of talk," *Journal of the Linguistics Society of America* 63 (1987): 574–605, and "Ordinary conversation and literary discourse: Coherence and the poetics of repetition," in *The uses of linguistics*, ed. Edward H. Bendix (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1990), 15–22.

9. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist aesthetics: Living beauty, rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

10. Sell, *Communicational criticism*, 195–221.

Late-twentieth-century linguists in the fields of conversation-, discourse- and dialogue analysis demonstrated that all writing, no less than all speech, has addressivity,¹¹ and this same insight was also developed by literary critics working under the inspiration of Bakhtin.¹² Still more to the point, the addressivity chosen by literary authors is not solipsistic. Even when they have written under the auspices of a formalist aestheticism, even when they have written drama, a mode in which all the communication may seem to be happening, less between the dramatist and the audience, than between the characters on stage, they have written with other people in mind: the people to whom they have been offering their work for contemplation. And just as the stipulations of a last will and testament, whose words so obviously prompt survivors to a conscientious reading, may need to be interpreted by expert lawyers, so the readers of a literary text will sometimes hone their responses to it with the help of, say, a literary historian, who thereby begins to serve as a mediating go-between. At best, readers' sense of responsibility towards the fellow-humanity of a literary writer is very strong. Consciously or unconsciously, they will tend to feel that they themselves have been decently treated by the writer. The good will, in other words, is reciprocal.

In order to highlight this aspect of literary activity, literary-communicational theory has had to draw a distinction to which some earlier accounts of communication have seemed oblivious.

On the one hand, in semiotics, linguistics, and communicational theory, as well as in the narratological, literary and more widely cultural and social criticisms which have drawn on them, the main model of communication has involved an *A* sending a message to a *B* within a single, unitary context, which is also set by *A*, and by reference to which the message can be interpreted. This model exactly corresponds to a very great deal of the communication which actually takes place in the real world. Much communication is decidedly transitive – it communicates *something* – and decidedly unidirectional, making one participant, and that participant's life-world, more influential in what is going on than the other participant and that other participant's life-world. Not that communication of this kind is necessarily sinister or ethically reprehensible. Especially when we find ourselves in positions of responsibility, there may be very little point in trying to avoid it. But certainly there are also countless cases, and not only in the form of giving orders or of making a strongly coercive argument, where the human autonomy of the person in the *B*-position is merely latent, passivized, or completely overlooked.

11. Sell, *Literature as communication*, 80–88; Edda Weigand, *Language as dialogue: From rules to principles of probability* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2009).

12. M. M. Bakhtin, *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

On the other hand, communication can also be more fully human than this, by conforming with the main principle of Kantian ethics, the principle which, despite the datedness of Kantian *aesthetics*, is still fundamental to our sense of justice: the idea of the universal human right to respect and fair treatment.¹³ Whereas communication in the form of an *A* sending a message to a *B* within a unitary context typically seeks to establish a consensus, more fully human, or genuine communication, as I have called it, is altogether more intransitive.¹⁴ It is more a matter of an *A* and a *B* comparing notes about something, each of them from within their own life-world, so that what takes place still leaves room for differences of perception and evaluation. Even if what happens here is communicational in the term's etymological sense of making or consolidating a community, and even if that resultant community is perfectly hospitable to strong agreements, it will also always entail an agreement to *disagree* if necessary. This kind of community-making, then, is neither a power struggle nor a sympathetic bonding, but fundamentally a matter of empathy, mutual understanding, and respect.

One can indeed argue that part of the reason why some texts attract very large audiences over very long periods of time whereas others do not is precisely that they are communicationally genuine.¹⁵ This claim does not represent a new kind of literary essentialism. Genuineness can never be a *sufficient* precondition for high literary status, and it frequently occurs in many other kinds of communication as well, the vast majority of them not only non-literary but actually quite unrecorded. Also, readers have always applied additional, more exclusively "literary" criteria which have been specific to their own particular phase of culture. Genuineness, rather, is merely a *necessary* precondition. Even in the innumerable cases where it is not a feature explicitly praised by reviewers or literary critics, it is one *sine qua non* among others if a text is to meet with widespread and lasting admiration.

So a post-postmodern communicational criticism draws particular attention to literary modes of address which acknowledge the human autonomy of each and every reader.¹⁶ For critics drawn to this task, the goal will partly recall an

13. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*, [1785], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

14. Sell, "Genuine communication", and *Communicational criticism*, 151–194. See also Roger D. Sell, "Wordsworth and the spread of genuine Communication," in *Literature and values: Literature as a medium for representing, disseminating and constructing norms and values*, eds Sibylle Baumbach, Herbert Grabes and Ansgar Nünning (Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2009), 125–43.

15. A main theme in Sell, *Communicational criticism*.

16. Sell, *Communicational criticism*, 1–50.

assumption already at work in the rhetorical treatises of the ancient world: the idea that some texts are more suitable than others as models to be emulated in language use more widely. But whereas the rhetoricians of earlier ages were often mainly looking for models of style and persuasiveness, the phenomenon examined by post-postmodern communicational critics is communicational ethics: a writer's way of entering into human relationships, both with individual readers and with readers in larger groupings. Because this type of criticism seeks to foster a new self-consciousness about the connections between language use and human relationships, it is one of the discourses which could perhaps improve the chances for peaceful coexistence and fruitful cooperation in the world at large. And among other things, a communicational critic may be particularly interested in how any given literary writer draws on, and contributes to, the resources of cultural memory.

2. Cultural memory

What is remembered within a culture or subculture relates to every single thing for which its members have a conscious or unconscious concept. As a result, cultural memory has several different modes: knowledge, history, belief, myth, value, institution, practice, skill, image, artefact, and probably several more as well. In all its different modes, it is passed on from human being to human being, since it is fundamentally a communicational phenomenon, which explains how it outlives the death of particular individuals. In the case of a literary work, the writer's range of cultural memory can enter into seminal communication with those of addressees in at least three ways: through mimesis, because the work can reflect items of cultural memory within its own world of imitated reality; through subjectivity, because perceptions, evaluations, and sensibilities which are culturally specific may colour the writer's own assessment of the narratives and/or topics offered for the communicational comparing of notes; and through genre, because culturally pre-existent models of style and form will underpin the work's own artistry.

Now for more than three decades, memory has been seen, not only as an attribute of the single individual, but also as a dimension of the individual's entire sociohistorical *habitus*.¹⁷ It has therefore been taken to involve a greater or lesser degree of ideological regimentation. Although Maurice Halbwachs claimed that cultural memory, as compared with written history's unifying single-mindedness, is more spontaneously multiple, even he emphasized its connection to the milieu

17. Pierre Bordieu, *Distinctions: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 6.

and tradition of a particular grouping at a particular time and place,¹⁸ a connection which, in Pierre Nora's view, the grouping did well to embrace whole-heartedly. Nora thought there was a real danger that cultural memory's natural and ancient vitality would deteriorate into the cultivation of just a certain limited range of *lieux de mémoire*: certain privileged recollections which, if not vigilantly commemorated, could themselves all too easily disappear without a trace.¹⁹ In practice people do use these special *lieux*, Nora continued, in order to buttress their sense of identity against all manner of hegemonic threats to it. And in similar vein Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith have claimed that cultural memory operates as an "act of transfer" through which individuals and groups constitute their identities by recalling a shared past on the basis of common, and therefore often contested norms, conventions, and practices.²⁰ Hirsch and Smith themselves are particularly interested in cultural memory as a support to forms of female identity, whereas scholars such as Étienne Balibar have traced its connection with identities of race or nation,²¹ and Avtar Brah and others have seen it as a sustaining thread in the experience of peoples undergoing diaspora.²² But in all such analyses, cultural memory is seen to function more or less polemically, as a kind of rallying call for particular groupings.

This, as my own discussion will show, is a fair enough assessment. But what I shall also stress is that cultural memory, thanks to its close relationship with communication, is far from static. For some reason or other, a chain of communication may actually break down, so that something which was once widely accessible and widely applied as an item of current cultural memory simply falls into obscurity. Conversely, something which has been forgotten within our culture can subsequently re-surface there, and something which has either been forgotten or is still remembered within some alien culture can be taken over, and from then onwards be remembered (or later forgotten) as part of our own culture.

Both our own culture's forgotten items of cultural memory, and forgotten or remembered items of alien cultural memory, can be thought of as *potential* cultural

18. Maurice Halbwachs, *The collective memory* [1950] (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980).

19. Pierre Nora, "Between memory and history: *Les lieux de mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–12.

20. Hirsch, Marianne and Valerie Smith "Feminism and cultural memory: An introduction," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (2002): 3–8. Cf. Paul Connerton, *How societies remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 39.

21. Étienne Balibar, "The nation form: History and ideology" in *Race critical theories*, eds. Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg (London: Blackwell, 2002), 220–30.

22. Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities* (London: Routledge, 1996).

memory. A melody can be unsung, unplayed, unknown for centuries, until rediscovered in some old manuscript. Ancient ceramic or architectural forms can lie buried until, unearthed by archaeologists, they come to be emulated by the potters or builders of some quite different age and in very different places. Alternatively, the potential memory can be much closer to the surface, and in one sense even remembered already, though with less than full attention. The Gothic revival in England, for instance, was *not* a consequence of archaeological excavations. In spite of despoliation by puritan iconoclasts, many mediaeval churches had remained physically standing all along. But whereas in the eighteenth century they had been held at a certain mental distance because of their alleged barbarity, under the influence of Ruskin and Pugin it was as if they now became visible again, mentally foregrounded for their alleged spirituality. In the same way many books, in all their extant copies, have sat on shelves for decade after decade, perhaps century after century, without actually being read, or at least not read with care, delight, and profit. Then quite suddenly, literary taste or intellectual orientation can change, as with the Anglo-American Modernists' rehabilitation of seventeenth century Metaphysical poets.

This alone is enough to suggest that the distinction I have just drawn between "our own" culture and "alien" culture is an oversimplification, and that cultural memory is not a historically deterministic straitjacket. As its very name suggests, it is a matter of memories which are not genetically inborn, but which any human mind can communicatively acquire and cultivate. Although a particular range of cultural memory may tend to be associated with a sociocultural position at some particular time and place, that same range can be empathetically absorbed by people whose position is different, for instance within programmes for foreign language education.²³ Thanks to one and the same kind of empathetic communication, literary or otherwise, human beings develop operative knowledge of the cultural memory associated not only with "their own" indigenous tradition but with "alien" traditions as well.

Sometimes cultural memory even expands to embrace elements for which there has been very little precedent, either indigenous or alien, and certainly no *direct* precedent. Whether in literary or other kinds of case, this is where it can still seem appropriate to speak of originality and creative genius. Yet bearing in mind that even these exceptionally interesting developments are dependent for their survival and consolidation on communicative processes, their success must also be examinable in communicational terms.

23. Sell, "Reader-learners", and "Genuine communication".

The most relevant consideration here is the principle of communicative dynamism as proposed by Prague linguists such as Jan Firbas.²⁴ What Firbas emphasized was that, in all communication, there has to be a movement from the known or the old to the unknown or the new. The reasons for this are, we can say, both practical and ethical. Communicators cannot hope to introduce something unexpected unless they start with, and pay deference to, the expected. A human being is, paradoxically, a social individual, and a communicational act is an individual *parole* which instantiates, but may also change, the received *langue*.²⁵ Communicators have no choice but to use the knowledge, the beliefs, the values, the codes, the genres, the memories which are culturally available, because otherwise their addressees may think they are mad, or will quite possibly feel insulted. Yet communicators' use of the received norms may well be innovatory. Yeats could never have written his poem "Easter 1916" if Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" had not already been deeply entrenched in cultural memory, as what most Anglophone readers took to be the definitive form for a poem about a group of idealists who meet their death in fighting for their values.²⁶ By setting up fascinating intertextualities with Tennyson's poem, Yeats was helping his first readers find their feet. Yet he also introduced some marked differences, which instantaneously made "The Charge of the Light Brigade" seem rather antiquated. Between the social and individual aspects of Yeats's own being, there was, as we can put it, a kind of co-adaptational compromise.²⁷ On the one hand, an absolute cultural discontinuity is impossible. On the other hand, a writer is not a socially programmed robot. Yeats was influenced by a cultural inheritance, which he then influenced in turn.

With all its apparent lapses, resurfacings, borrowings, and co-adaptational expansions over time, cultural memory does not automatically synthesize itself into some uniform ideology, or into some single all-embracing narrative or set of narratives. Especially within a literary community, it is shot through with frequent and radical discontinuities, alternatives, and contradictions, and is open to recall and use in many different ways, depending on particular circumstances and particular individuals' own perceptions, values, and intentions. To mention just one example, as the Christian Humanist poet Milton gradually became part of British cultural memory, his significance proliferated. He and his work were a topic for communicational negotiation by widely various parties. Whereas he himself had claimed

24. Jan Firbas, "On defining the theme in functional sentence analysis," *Travaux linguistiques de Prague* 1 (1964): 267–80.

25. Sell, *Literature as communication*, 145–158.

26. Sell, *Literature as communication*, 187–189.

27. Sell, *Literature as communication*, 145–158.

to see his undertaking in *Paradise Lost* as an attempt to justify the ways of God to man, the Romantics Blake and Shelley saw it very differently. Milton, they said, was on the Devil's side without knowing it. Then in the twentieth century, C. S. Lewis professed to see the poem more as Milton saw it, A. J. A. Waldock more as Blake and Shelley saw it,²⁸ and the discussion still rolls on today.

As is clear from recent work in sociology, any culture or subculture is actually heterogeneous.²⁹ Even if we used to believe that we were dividing the human world and its history up into cultural or subcultural groupings and epochs that truly corresponded to something in the real world, we now increasingly admit that we were merely trying to make sense of chaos. A culture or subculture is simply not real in the same sense that Mount Everest is real, but is an intellectual category imposed on a very wide range of human phenomena. The only way a culture or subculture can be seen as a homogeneous consensus is by being observed from a very high level of descriptive abstraction. The lower our level of abstraction, the greater the amount of diversity and even contradiction we shall notice.

To take another literary example, consider the ways in which Fielding's novel *Tom Jones* has been remembered within British culture.³⁰ From its first publication onwards, this novel was on the one hand fiercely blamed for irresponsible superficiality, and on the other hand warmly praised for humanity, realism, and humour. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu said that Fielding's happy endings "encourage young people to hope for impossible events to draw them out of the misery they chuse to plunge themselves into",³¹ and Johnson agreed with Richardson that "the virtues of Fielding's heroes were the vices of a truly good man".³² Boswell, on the other hand, said that Fielding did not encourage a "strained and rarely possible virtue", but certainly did favour honour, honesty, benevolence, and generosity. "He who is as good as Fielding will make him, is an amiable member of society".³³ For Coleridge, too, Fielding was charming. "To take him after Richardson is like emerging from a sick room heated by stoves into an open lawn on a breezy day

28. C. S. Lewis, *A preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942); A. J. A. Waldock, *Paradise Lost and its critics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947).

29. Arif Dirlik, "In search of contact zones: Nations, civilizations, and the spaces of culture," in *Cultures in contact*, eds Balz Engler and Lucia Michalcak (Tübingen: Gunter Narr 2007), 15–33.

30. Roger D. Sell, *Mediating criticism*, 309–315.

31. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The complete letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Vol. III*, ed. Robert Halsband (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 65.

32. James Boswell, *The life of Samuel Johnson* [1791], ed. Ernest Rhys (London: Dent, 1906), 343–344.

33. Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, 344.

in May”³⁴ Up until fairly recently, if we had asked Fielding’s British readers for a written statement of their views, most of them would probably have opted fairly coherently for either the one account or the other. But in more genuine communication, such distorting coherence always breaks down, as it did in the honest remarks of Thackeray. Fielding’s Tom, said Thackeray, is “an ordinary young fellow, ruddy-cheeked, broad-shouldered, and fond of wine and pleasure. He would not rob a church, but that is all”³⁵ In which, he continued, there is nothing surprising, and nothing that might not be dealt with in a novel. But how could Fielding so blatantly *admire* such a fellow? There was the rub! Fielding’s novel obviously left Thackeray unable to make up his mind, a predicament with which as cultural beings we are all perfectly familiar.

3. Negative capability: Postmodern novelists

A communicational critic is particularly concerned to see whether a given writer’s handling of cultural memory is restrictively coercive or more generously liberal. Here the kinds of ambiguity, polyvalence, and uncertainty to which I have been pointing become especially relevant, since they suggest that cultural memory can indeed allow for some diversity of values and opinion.

Literary writers draw on and develop cultural memory in their own way. But they give rise to traditions which always involve a dialogue between their own take on cultural memory and that of their addressees. Although we are often likely to feel that a literary writer’s words are far more powerful than anybody else’s, as an element and exponent of cultural memory within an infinitely enlargeable community they are in fact less highly privileged than may at first appear.³⁶ Across the ages, and in many different countries, a very great number of human beings remember and respond to literary authors in their own distinctive ways, and some authors actually leave room for such different interpretations in their very manner of address. By positively encouraging an eclectic resort to widely varying ranges of cultural memory, such writers stimulate in those responding to them a process of individuation that is rewardingly complex. Their writing is, to use Keats’s expression, “negatively

34. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table talk recorded by Henry Nelson Coleridge and John Taylor Coleridge*, [1834], Vol. I, ed. Carl Woodring (London and Princeton: Routledge and Princeton University Press, 1960), 496.

35. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Henry Esmond; The English humourists; The four Georges*, ed. George Saintsbury (London: Oxford University Press, n.d.), 60.

36. Sell, *Communicational criticism*, 51–81.

capable"; they are prepared to remain in "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".³⁷ As a result, their communication comes across as genuine in the sense explained above. Its gesture is to invite readers to a comparing of notes which does not emphatically pin everything down, but which offers them a certain leeway.

Since post-postmodern communicational criticism itself began as a response to the postmodern politics of recognition, I begin with some examples from the time of the culture wars. And to confine myself to novelists, one major but unsurprising observation must be that many of them hammered cultural memory into just a single strong form in order to support some particular identity formation. This kind of restriction, the very hallmark of postmodern politics, involved precisely the kinds of *lieux de mémoire* and acts of transfer discussed by Nora and by Hirsch and Smith. When previously underprivileged and marginalized groupings were for the first time trying to draw attention to their own voice, success was a matter of winning acceptance as a community or sub-community with certain clearly distinguishable characteristics.³⁸ Alex Haley's *Roots*, for example, was both written and marketed as "[t]he monumental saga of one man's twelve-year search for his family's origins. The man is Alex Haley, a black American".³⁹ To the extent that Haley saw himself as offering other black Americans a defined subject position with its own distinctive history and interests, and as thereby providing them with an identity which other groupings could very easily perceive, he was an *A* sending a message to a *B* or a grouping of *Bs* within a unitary context of his own setting. To that same extent, his use of cultural memory, and especially of the memory of slavery, was uncomplicatedly polemical. His addressivity left little room for disagreement, and negative capability was at a minimum.

Postmodern novels with Haley's kind of addressivity could be stirringly effective in their own terms, and many of them will doubtless retain their interest and power as important landmarks in the history of politics. But there were also other postmodern novels whose handling of identity and cultural memory was more nuanced. Even when they, too, emanated from historical positions which in the Western tradition had been marginalized and under-represented, and even when their subject-matter was actually very close to that of *Roots*, their appeal may in the long run turn out to be both wider and more permanent. Ideologically speaking,

37. John Keats, *Selected letters of John Keats*, ed. Frederick Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 53.

38. Roger D. Sell, "What's literary communication and what's a literary community?" in *Emergent literatures and globalisation: Theory, society, politics*, eds Sonia Faessel and Michel Pérez (Paris: In Press Editions, 2004), 39–45 [= item 2 in the present selection].

39. Alex Haley, *Roots*. [1976] (London: Picador, 1977), blurb.

and especially in their resort to cultural memory, they were simply less narrow. So much so, that they satisfy the evaluative criteria of a communicational critic today.

Fred D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* is set on a Virginian plantation in 1810, and is underwritten by D'Aguiar's confident grasp of social and ethnic differences.⁴⁰ Curiously enough, however, this novel's representational convention is totally unrealistic. Each and every character is created through a stream of consciousness that is unflinchingly beautiful but socioculturally unspecific, and there is also an absolute minimum of direct speech. As a result, the facts of heteroglossia never actually surface, even though they are always an urgent presupposition. The novel has only 137 pages, and the convention could probably not have been sustained for very much longer. The risk was that it would become just as euphemistic as, say, the middle-class decorum of the longueurs in Dickens.⁴¹ But as it stood, D'Aguiar's writing idealized or demonized neither the slave owner, Mr Whitechapel, who is not a mere whited sepulchre, nor the old slave, Whitechapel, named after his master, and as dignified as his master, but not more so. Difference here was far from "all the way down,"⁴² and was definitely not a matter of better or worse. D'Aguiar was deliberately questioning the roles and modes of expression towards which so much public discourse tends to force us, and his sense of the tension between the individual and the social dimensions of human identity was very sharp. On this showing, the longest cultural memory of all, as we might put it, was a-polemically ambiguous.

To take another example, Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* is set some time between the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery in 1834.⁴³ One of the two main discourses it brings into play is that of Cambridge himself, an early black Briton, who having achieved both his freedom and a fine mastery of the English language is then subjected to slavery in the West Indies, where he ends up being taken to court for the killing of a white plantation manager. The other main discourse is that of Emily, daughter of the absentee owner of the plantation, who crosses the Atlantic to see it for herself. Cambridge's narrative is close to those written by blacks who really did achieve their freedom, and who came to think of themselves as virtual Englishmen, even if they dared not emulate a native Englishman's freedom of speech. Emily's narrative is in ideological contradiction with that of Cambridge, in that it continues to valorize the European at the expense of the exotically non-European. But Phillips is actually performing a mediating function here, between the early-nineteenth-century colonial past and the postcolonial present,

40. Fred D'Aguiar, *The longest memory* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994).

41. Sell, *Mediating criticism*, 165–193.

42. Cf. J. Hillis Miller, "The university of dissensus," *Oxford Literary Review* 17 (1995): 121–43.

43. Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991).

so encouraging his readers to some thoughtful introspection.⁴⁴ In the nineteenth century the two discourses he highlights could only cross paths, as it were, and never meet to become one. Today, things are potentially very different, and this novel is not re-surfacing the culture's discursive memories just for the sake of it, or merely to explore the roots of different ethnic groupings. The recourse to memories is Phillips's way of promoting a wider community in our own present.

Two novels tending towards the same effect but tapping rather different subject-matter are Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and M. G. Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*.⁴⁵ *The Satanic Verses* is even more directly a book about present-day hybridity, by an author who is himself a hybrid of India and Britain, and who invites readers to compare notes about living in, or between, more than one culture and its memories at a time, an experience which can bring firm loyalties, beliefs, and attitudes into question. M. G. Vassanji, similarly, has been resident in Canada since 1978 but was raised in Tanzania, having been born in Kenya of Indian or (from a post-Partition perspective) Pakistani stock, and the checkered past of his book's main character is much the same. Vikram Lall is sensitive both to white farmers' colonialist assumption of natural superiority, and to aspersions cast by the Mau Mau on his Asian inauthenticity as a true African. But he passionately loves what Africans call God's bowl, the great Rift Valley, and becomes increasingly implicated in the web of corruption surrounding Jomo Kenyatta. During his Canadian exile, his thoughts shift between different aspects of his own liminality, with all its different ranges of cultural memory. As he looks back on his Kenyan past, his feelings alternate between nostalgia, guilt, and detachment.

Hybridity and liminality can be painfully difficult, and postmodern writers of the calibre of D'Aguiar, Phillips, Rushdie, and Vassanji did nothing to disguise this. Yet their work could also carry more than a hint of excitement. The kind of predicament they were describing was both a challenge and an opportunity. Sometimes they showed cultural differences, including differences in cultural memory, becoming so endlessly communicable that traditional barriers gave way to vistas of intoxicating freedom, even if the price for this enlargement was a loss of customary security.

One of the most striking examples was Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy*, in which questions of cultural definition at first seemed to be set back in the British past.⁴⁶ Barker was re-activating cultural memories associated with British poets of

44. Mirja Kuurola, "Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge*: Discourses in the past and readers in the present," in Roger D. Sell (ed.), *Special issue: Literature as communication*, *NJES: Nordic Journal of English Studies* 6 (2007): 129–44.

45. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, [1988] (Dover, Delaware: The Consortium, 1992); M. G. Vassanji, *The in-between World of Vikram Lall* (Doubleday Canada, 2003).

46. Pat Barker, *The regeneration trilogy* (London: Viking, 1996).

the First World War, purporting to show how Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, and Siegfried Sassoon were treated for shell-shock by W. H. R. Rivers at Craiglockhart in Scotland. In their different ways, all four men – and other patients and doctors as well – were trying to come to terms with a fundamental shift in their own culture's values and restraints. But Rivers, who was not only a psychologist but also an anthropologist, could draw comparisons and contrasts with Melanesian cultures and, despite being a healer in his own society, had long since come to understand how sick he himself must have seemed to the women of that very different part of the world – even to those who had been missionized. Having once asked a group of them his anthropologist's question, "Suppose you were lucky enough to find a guinea, with whom would you share it?", he was then teased into telling them his own answer to the same question: that "he would not necessarily feel obliged to share his guinea with anybody". His life as a bachelor don in a Cambridge college merely provoked their sniggering disbelief, and he suddenly realized that their view of *his* society was neither more nor less valid than his of theirs.

No bearded elderly white man looked down on them, endorsing one set of values and condemning the other. And with that realization, the whole frame of social and moral rules that keeps individuals imprisoned – and sane – collapsed, and for a moment he was in ... [a] condition of absolute free-fall.⁴⁷

Although the real-life Rivers was to die in 1922, Barker's fictionalized versions of him and his poetic patients were learning, in the teeth of great personal distress, to seize openings which can arise from a radical questioning of authority, values, and associated reserves of cultural memory in any society at all.

This was a learning curve which still had a strong potential within the society to which Barker's *Trilogy* was contributing when it was published in 1996, and which since then has not become less relevant. Between the individual's present experience and the available resources of cultural memory there is always a never-ending process of co-adaptation, whose most formidable challenges a negatively capable writer may manage to illuminate and even resolve. In the *Trilogy*, another main character is Billy Prior, who may be an entirely fictional creation, a man of working-class origins who becomes an officer, and whose sexuality is also ambiguous, between gay and straight. In some ways the troubled liminalities of this obscure individual serve to clarify the difficulties of the public figures Owen, Graves, Sassoon, and Rivers, and can even be seen as catalytic, not only within the world of the *Trilogy*, but also within the more recent and very different worlds in which the *Trilogy* has been read. Billy Prior has been culturally hybrid all along and, however painfully for him, so much the richer as a potential exemplar. In reading Barker's story, one

47. Barker, *Regeneration Trilogy*, 499–500.

can have the impression that, whereas Billy Prior grows out into our own present, Owen, Sassoon, Graves, and Rivers, despite their painful efforts of self-renewal, are always just about to fade back into the past.

4. Varieties of community-making: An early modern poet

Value-laden memories typically associated with one sociocultural grouping, then, can end up being borrowed into, or hybridized with, the life-world of some other grouping. And these are communicational processes which a literary text can not only portray, but actually be a part of as they continue within society as a whole. Granted, there are countless cases in which communicants, including many professional writers, do not encourage these kinds of fusion. Instead, they positively exclude the human other, which means that the community they seek to create or consolidate has strictly defined boundaries, with cultural memory mostly figuring in a rigidly defensive or polemical role. But in other cases, the boundaries between one community and another are far more porous, so that communication becomes very inclusive, and cultural memory correspondingly fluid.

So far, so good. My worry is, though, that the argument's scope may be coming across as narrower and more superficial than it really is. In the previous section, I dealt with only one period of literary history, and merely surveyed a few novelists at great speed. In order to suggest the topic's fuller implications, I shall now switch to a completely different period, and mainly deal with a single writer in some depth.

The fact is that complexities such as those of *The Regeneration Trilogy* abound in the literature of earlier periods as well. Barker's questioning of hard and fast patterns of identity perpetuated what had always been one of literature's most characteristic ways of working. There had been Rudyard Kipling, for instance, who, though so often described as the voice of empire speaking to empire's own ear, created that great riddle, *Kim*, the white boy "burned black as any native", who uses the local vernacular "by preference", who is ambiguous in his loyalties, and who always blends in with his surroundings.⁴⁸ Or there was Shakespeare, creator of Shylock, the Jew who on the one hand feels physically ill when ordered to submit to baptism, and proudly tells of Jacob's cunning scheme for getting sheep to produce parti-coloured lambs, a chunk of cultural memory which the Christian Antonio finds irreducibly grotesque, but who on the other hand makes the famous speech about Jews' full share of the existential basics: "Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?"⁴⁹ Like all great writers, Shakespeare was

48. Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* [1908] (London: Macmillan, 1920), 1.

49. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Russell Brown (London: Methuen, 1959), 73.

constantly testing his own values, and those of his first audience, and novels such as those by D'Aguiar, Phillips, Rushdie, Vassanji and Barker tended to suggest that his plays, when performed in a theatre four hundred years after of their original composition, could push audiences into a cultural free-fall more precipitous than ever, stirring memories ever more difficult to label as those of just some single, homogeneous culture.⁵⁰

One range of English literature in which communicational critics are studying both memorial exclusiveness and memorial inclusiveness is early modern religious writing.⁵¹ I have already said enough to suggest that exclusivity here was likely to be a religious grouping's defensive move in the face of opposition or even persecution, so tending to strengthen the particular kind of religious identity under threat. Such was indeed the case. As for more inclusive strategies, these were of three main kinds. First, the inclusivity could lodge claims to common memorial ground that were basically coercive. Secondly, inclusivity could involve the disingenuous acquiescence of a subordinate or outlawed subjectivity in a discourse that was socially dominant. Thirdly, inclusivity could be altogether more dialogical in spirit, neither aggressive nor self-demeaning, but rather an invitation to compare notes in the hope of viable co-existence. And paradoxically enough, not only defensive exclusivity, but all three types of inclusivity could be manifested in the *oeuvre* of one and the same writer. Such was the case of Sir John Beaumont, the most important Catholic poet at the court of James I in the early 1620s, and a protégé of James's favourite, the Duke of Buckingham.⁵²

In order to understand Beaumont's handling of cultural memory, we need to bear in mind the larger historical background. The English civil war of the late middle ages, the so-called War of the Roses between the white rose of the House of York and the red rose of the House of Lancaster, had come to an end with the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, when the Yorkist King Richard III was conquered by the Lancastrian Henry Tudor, who consequently became Henry VII of England. But it was not until the reign of Henry's son, Henry VIII, that the English Reformation got under way. In 1535 an act of parliament declared that Henry VIII himself, and not the Pope, was supreme head of the church in England, and the dissolution of the monasteries began in the following year. During the reign of Henry VIII's daughter

50. [For an example of the kind of postmodern, turn-of-the-century Shakespeare criticism which confirmed and explored such likelihoods, see Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (eds), *Shakespeare and race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).]

51. Sell and Johnson, *Writing and religion*.

52. [The upcoming commentary on Beaumont re-uses several longish passages from the discussion of his community-making in item 4 of the present selection, tweaked, however, so as to emphasize the contribution of cultural memory.]

Mary, Roman Catholicism was re-introduced, and many notable Protestants were executed. But with the accession of her sister Elizabeth I in 1558, Protestantism was instated once and for all, bolstered with recusancy laws designed to punish anyone refusing to recognize the English monarch's supremacy over the church in England. Many Catholics hoped that Elizabeth would be ousted by their fellow-religionist Mary Queen of Scots. But in 1587 Mary was executed, and in 1588 a Spanish armada which had set sail in the hope of forcibly bringing the British Isles back into the Catholic fold was defeated by Sir Francis Drake. James Stuart, Mary Queen of Scots' son, was *not* a Catholic, moreover, even though his wife, Anne of Denmark, became a Catholic convert, and it was James who, already James VI of Scotland, eventually succeeded Elizabeth in 1603 as James I of England. After the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, which was a Catholic conspiracy to blow up the Houses of Parliament, the recusancy laws were applied with renewed vigour. Yet Queen Anne was by no means the only practising Catholic in high places, and James's own foreign policy was an attempt to bring about peace between Catholic and Protestant powers in Europe at large. For some years he therefore cherished the hope of a marital union between his son Charles, the Crown Prince, and the Spanish Infanta, a plan fully supported by Buckingham, who in 1623 accompanied Charles on a journey to Madrid which was supposed to bring it to fruition, but which finally ended in failure. About a year later, a treaty was signed with France, providing for the suspension of the recusancy laws, and for a marriage between Charles and another Catholic princess, Henrietta Maria. The marriage took place in May 1625, just a few months after James's death.

Now Beaumont's *magnum opus* was *The Crowne of Thornes*, a poem of 11,000 lines which he completed not long before his own death in 1627. In one of its key passages, he says that although he is conscious of no great handicap when trying to pay poetic tribute to Jesus Christ, what he finds far more difficult to write about is Christ's bride, the one true Church. This is because

mine eye
could never yett that glorious staite espie,
Which shee [the one true Church] enioyes, in nations where shee raignes;
nor ever felt her sweetness but her paines.

...

... [O]ft our fainting soules crye out, how long
shall wee, in Babel, sing a mournfull song?⁵³

53. British Library, MS Additional 33,392 B: 113. The first six books and the beginning of the seventh book of *The Crowne of Thornes* are paginated from 1 to 168. The remainder of the poem is in a different hand, and is paginated from 11 (*sic*) to 131. By "B" here, I indicate the second pagination.

Here the writing moves from the experience of his own “I” towards that of his fellow-religionists’ communal “we”, and consolidates their cultural memories of despoiled church buildings, forbidden worship, and martyrdom by alluding typologically to the captivity of the Jews as similarly recalled in Psalm 137.⁵⁴ Elsewhere, having adored the Blessed Virgin Mary on her heavenly throne, an adoration strictly out of bounds to Protestants, needless to say, and having paid tribute to many Virgins, Saints, Martyrs, and Doctors of the Church as well, Beaumont then mentions two other Marias who were very dear to English Catholics, the one already a tragic cultural memory, the other still a present hope. These two Marias are typologically joined together within the poem’s overarching narrative of the one true Church’s survival, not in “material” buildings, but in “nue temples in religious harts”, where “Devotion liues” that “shall, at last, prevaile”:

Shall we forget our glorie of the north,
Triumphant Marye, who dispercing forth
her beames from snowie Calidonian hills,
this happie Ile with princly offspring fills;
while two large realmes, vnited in her sonne,
laments the wrongs which they to her haue done;
when Scotland clos’d in walls her freeborne breath,
and England stood astonish’t att her death.
The bloud which shee from kingly vaines receiu’d,
confirm’d that faith, to which her parents cleau’d.
The miners [i.e. the destroyers] of Gods house distroyd this wall;
and ioynd her murder to our churches fall;
but hee [God] who firmnesse to his rocke imparts,
erects nue temples in religious harts;
as hee hath chang’d her short, and earthly raigne,
for heavenly crownes, which noe foule hand can staine;
soe though with vs material churches faile,
Devotion liues and shall, at last, prevaile.
Expecting now a farr securer life,
for thee our second Marie, vertuous wife
of mightie Charles⁵⁵

No contemporary reader could have missed the reference to Mary Queen of Scots, and few Catholic readers would have failed to sympathize with the hopes entertained of the union of Charles and Henrietta Maria. Beaumont’s mode of address

54. Cf. Hannibal Hamlin, *Psalm culture and early modern English literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

55. MS Additional 33,392 B: 127.

to his fellow-religionists here was not coercively transitive, and had no need to be, but was intransitively phatic, drawing on aspects of Catholic cultural memory as the strongest form of bonding. His massive poem offered a sheer time-filling continuum of Catholic devotion, thought, feeling, and above all fellowship. Not providing new information, not exactly telling a story, not exactly making an argument, he was inviting his readers to share a whole universe of Catholic learning, ideas, sensibility, history, experience, all of it held together in memories organized so as to strengthen just the one particular grouping, and to leave other groupings, for whom these signifiers did not signify in the same way, quite outside the poem's circle of address.

Given such defensive exclusivity, there is a passage in Book 11 of *The Crowne of Thornes* which can come as a surprise. All of a sudden, Beaumont's address becomes more inclusive, and very coercively so, when he turns a distinctly missionary gaze upon one particular *non*-Catholic reader: none other than James himself, whom he urges to

Pull vppe these roots of schisme, let none divide
the maried realmes, from Christs vnspoted bride.
behold the name of Christ in peeces torne,
with errours, which daire chalenge to be borne
from ventrous sailing into scepters flood
and are not quencht, but fedd with christian bloud.
To thee their peaceful eyes all good men raise,
and pray thee to restore those goulden dayes
when faith, and practice of religious grownds
was generall, and not fastned to the bounds
of severall staites; then charitie shall heale
our mutual raige, and wee, possesst with zeale,
shall whet our swords against the faithlesse Turkes,
and fill all Asia with our glorious workes.⁵⁶

Here Beaumont addresses his king in a boldly man-to-man fashion, and the proselytizing urge behind his use of cultural memory is unmistakable. He is challenging James to bring about a Catholic community on a truly European scale, a community which, no longer torn apart by schism, would finally vanquish the Turks, the common enemy. In the background here is a generalized memory of the mediaeval crusades, and the more particular memory of an event which could be taken as extending that older Christian culture into modern times: the battle of Lepanto of 1571, a memory which, in 1584, James himself had helped to nourish by writing a narrative poem about it. Here the royal author had already developed the theme

56. MS Additional 33,392 B: 110.

of different strands of Christianity uniting in order to conquer the Turks and, despite his own Protestant allegiances, had given credit where credit was due: to Don John, whose victory at Lepanto brought an end to years of conflict, even though he himself was but a “forraine Papist bastard”.⁵⁷

For a *Protestant* writer in the England of Beaumont’s day, a coercively inclusive use of cultural memory was well within the bounds of political correctness. In Edmund Spenser’s well received *The Faerie Queene*, for instance, English history and Arthurian legend had been given a polemically anti-Catholic, anti-Spanish twist.⁵⁸ But a poem adoring the Blessed Virgin Mary, lamenting the death of Mary Queen of Scots, seeing the union of Charles and Henrietta Maria as a step towards the restoration of the Old Religion, and seeking to coerce James himself through a polemically inclusive use of Catholic cultural memory could not expect an imprimatur. *The Crowne of Thornes* was bound to circulate only in manuscript, most probably among Catholics. There is no doubt that the Earl of Southampton read the early parts of it, since up until his death in 1624 he was its patron. The Catholic wife of Buckingham and Buckingham’s Catholic mother (a Beaumont by birth) almost certainly read it as well, as would doubtless have Queen Anne if she had not already died in 1617. Among all such court Catholics the poem would have been well known. But even if James, Charles, and Buckingham, too, had read it, they could not publicly acknowledge having done so, and the same would have applied to any other member of the court who professed Protestantism. Protestant readers, though perfectly capable of activating the same memories which meant so much to Beaumont’s Catholic audience, actually had to steel themselves against their Catholic connotations, interpreting them from within what was officially supposed to be a different communal camp, even if many of their own close family members and loved ones were actually still Catholics.

This, though, is by no means the whole story, for Beaumont also wrote poetry that was more politically correct. In many cases, present-day readers with a weak sense of the pressures entailed by his historical circumstances may accuse him of being *too* correct. Here I am thinking of poems addressed to James, Charles, and Buckingham on the occasion of birthdays and other family and court events, in which Beaumont wholly erased his own religious affiliation and drew on a body of cultural memory that was little more than superficially humanistic: ranging from

57. James VI & I, *Lepanto, or heroical song being part of his poetickall exercises at vacant houres*, [1584] (London: Simon Stafford and Henry Hooke, 1603), sig. A2 recto.

58. See Lars-Håkan Svensson, “Imitation and cultural memory in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*”, and Åke Bergvall, “Religion as contention and community-making in *The Faerie Queene*”, in “*Writing and religion in England, 1558–1689: Studies in community-making and cultural memory*”, eds. Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 73–90 and 91–107.

the *contemptus mundi* of standard Christian Stoicism, sometimes in embarrassingly compromised forms, to the personnel, episodes, and landscapes of Greek and Roman mythology at their most decorative. He himself was perfectly well aware of his self-betraying self-disguise here, and in some cases explicitly tried to dispel his own fear that he was grovelling too low. In one of his ostensibly moralizing poems to Buckingham he wrote that, because Buckingham was such a successful courtier, he had at first hesitated to describe him as an embodiment of true goodness, but that

... when your temper, innocencie, truth
 (Now famous all) I balance with your youth
 I cann not thinke it sinne or flatterie then
 To write you in the roule of honest men.⁵⁹

In his epithalamium for Buckingham's marriage, similarly, his pretty mythologizing even acquiesced in the aura of eroticism, including homoeroticism surrounding the king's favourite –

The Bridgroomes starres aries,
 Maydes, turne your sight, your faces hide:
 Lest ye be shipwrack'd in those sparkling eyes,
 Fit to be seene by none, but by his lovely bride:
 If him Narcissus should behold, he would forget his pride.⁶⁰

– but the same poem opened with nothing less than an apology for this kind of thing. Addressed to his “Severe and serious Muse”, it asked her to be not “too nice”.

But then again, in much other work Beaumont's political correctness was not shameful in the least, because he could also identify with the cultural memory of his addressees in a much deeper sense, even when it was not explicitly Catholic. At the higher levels of society, many items of memory were widely shared by Catholics and Protestants alike, not least the memories of aristocratic ancestors, which could fuel a shared pride of station *vis à vis* the lower orders. Beaumont could converse on equal terms with high-born and well educated readers whose immersion in the civilization of ancient Greece and Rome was genuinely humanistic. And since, like the vast majority of English Catholics, he was totally loyal to the English monarch in a way the English authorities sometimes failed to understand, he also had not the slightest qualm about appealing to the commonalities of Stuart political ideology, and of national and genealogical history. Another of his wavelengths was an interest in more modern, scientific learning, and he also showed some sympathy with the

59. Sir John Beaumont, *The shorter poems of Sir John Beaumont*, ed. Roger D. Sell [Acta Academiae Aboensis ser. A vol. 49] (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University, 1974), 180.

60. Beaumont, *Shorter poems*, 138.

period's more serious aesthetic taste, though again with just that dash of erotic, sometimes homoerotic sensuality which was such a persistent interface between the high culture of early Stuart England and the imageries of the Counter-Reformation. Indeed, another clear commonality was of biblical knowledge, and of religious belief, experience, and practice of an ecumenically Christian character which was warmly endorsed by James's eirenic foreign policy. In short, there were times when Beaumont's own religious affiliation did not prevent him from convincingly drawing on a wide range of ideologically loaded cultural memory that was the common property of the entire establishment.

This resulted in a communicational inclusiveness that was not coercive, and not self-disguisingly self-betraying either, but altogether more congenially dialogical. One of his most widely admired poems was "Bosworth Field", a mini-epic describing that crucial battle of 1485. Nowhere does the poem comment on the fact that the action described took place fifty years before the English reformation, even though for most readers, Protestant or Catholic, its very silence on this point was probably enough to code the author's sympathies as Catholic. What the poem does dwell on is Henry Tudor's victory as a memory which twines together the red and white roses in a type of James's joining of Scotland and England.

The Winters storme of Civill warre I sing,
Whose end is crown'd with our eternall Spring,
Where Roses joynd, their colours mixe in one,
And armies fight no more for Englands Throne.⁶¹

The poem depicts the high-born combatants on both sides of the battle as epitomes of noble valour, and in doing so addresses itself to their descendants in the Jacobean court, an aristocratic audience which is taken to be already in sympathy with Beaumont's own lofty standards of judgement, and which, regardless of any internal religious disagreements, here quite unmentioned, is assumed to be as totally homogeneous in its devotion to the ancient virtues of courage and generosity as were their great ancestors on that battlefield of 1485, quite regardless of whether their rose was the white one or the red one. The battle becomes a cautionary image of the sheer folly of discord, with a whole series of episodes – none of them to be found in Beaumont's printed sources, whose memories he clearly felt free to embroider for his own high ends – in which a noble warrior on the one side pities a noble warrior at a disadvantage on the other, "though in armes his foe / In heart his friend".⁶² And whereas the spiritual aura surrounding blue blood is

61. Beaumont, *Shorter poems*, 66.

62. Beaumont, *Shorter poems*, 81.

gently sentimentalized – the young Lord Strange, for instance, reprieved from death, is like a sacrificial steer sent back from the burning altars and allowed to breathe the air in peace –, the common soldiers are described in large masses, and accorded individual mention only for some act of special despicability towards one of their betters. When “rude hands” are laid on “that noble flower”, the Earl of Surrey, whose bravery Beaumont further idealizes by making it – in another departure from a more accurately historical memory – the bravery of a warrior young and unfledged, the relish is considerable as Surrey sends “the Peasants arme to kisse the ground”.⁶³ But the poem’s strongest condemnation is reserved for Richard III, figured as the reason for the noble warriors’ continued discord, quite human enough in his fears and aspirations to arouse interest and understanding, yet unmistakably the hell-bound villain that his role in Tudor-Stuart historiography required, thereby further strengthening the genuine bond between Beaumont and his court readership – a bond which was hardly to be loosened by a glancing memory, in the mention of the grim punishment awaiting the fiendish Richard, of a Catholic *dies irae*.

5. Cultural memory and communication

By way of conclusion, I must first underline something which I hope is already clear, even if it has not been my main point. When post-postmodern communicational critics identify a literary use of cultural memory which is *not* negatively capable, a use, for instance, such as Haley’s in *Roots* or Beaumont’s in much of *The Crowne of Thornes*, a use which sharply separates one community or sub-community from another, they may well feel obliged to respect the defensive narrowness and exclusiveness of this. As I said at the outset, the post-postmodern dream of a non-hegemonic globalization is tempered by a strong sense that systematic and violent injustice not only preceded, but still lives on after, postmodernity’s democratizing maelstrom. Indeed, there probably always has been, and probably always will be, a need for a very robust politics of recognition. In the past, that strategy’s way of defining marginalized identities has risked oversimplifications which, insofar as they suggested that the difference between one grouping and another is all the way down, did not immediately improve the chances of genuine communication across the board. Yet both now and in the future, if the same grave drawback were to recur, it should arguably be tolerated, in the hope that emergent identities and their cultures, having once become perceptible to other groupings, will gradually enter into fuller

63. Beaumont, *Shorter poems*, 78.

dialogue with them, within a larger, egalitarian community that is indefinitely large and indefinitely heterogeneous.⁶⁴

I repeat: indefinitely heterogeneous. The post-postmodern ideal of community does not entail a levelling out of differences. The ideal community's members would *not* conform, except in a profoundly eirenic relish of each other's othernesses. This would involve, as one might put it, the politics of recognition in a new, post-culture-wars phase of reciprocated empathy. Stridency, barricades, and inhumanly narrow identity scripts would be firmly relegated to the past.

One of the things a communicational critic singles out for positive emulation is any use of cultural memory which promotes the growth of just such a community: uses which are inclusive without claiming a solidarity that is insincere, and without coercion; uses which work, rather, in a spirit of negative capability that is at once frank and deferential. In their different ways, D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory*, Phillips's *Cambridge*, Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, Vassanji's *The in-between world of Vikram Lall*, Barker's *The Regeneration Trilogy*, Kipling's *Kim*, Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and Beaumont's *Bosworth Field* all have these qualities. In cases like these, cultural memory is a resource that is polyvalent, and not so much the fundamentalist shibboleth of some very circumscribed identity, as the exponent of those kinds of personal hybridity and rainbow coalition by which differences are most fruitfully negotiated. Although, in both literary and other spheres of life, differences are nothing less than the communal life-blood, the less a memory is experienced as eternally available to just some single grouping, the more it contributes to genuine communication. In an ideal world as we are beginning to conceive of it today, cultural memory would be open to discussion from every quarter.

64. Sell, "What's literary communication?"

Herbert's considerateness

A communicational assessment¹

In October 2011 scholars from all over the world converged on Newtown, Powys in order to discuss “George Herbert: Family, Place, Traditions”. In proposing such a strongly historical slant on Herbert, the conference organizers had been responding, not only to recent trends in research, but to a kind of curiosity which is universally human, and which Dr Johnson's Imlac tried to stimulate in the mind of Rasselas:

When the eye or the imagination is struck with any uncommon work, the next transition of an active mind is to the means by which it was performed. Here begins the true use of such contemplation; we enlarge our comprehension by new ideas, and perhaps recover some art lost to mankind, or learn what is less perfectly known in our own country. At least we compare our own with former times, and either rejoice at our improvements, or, what is the first motion towards good, discover our defects.²

Imlac was carefully choosing his words so as to prepare Rasselas for a conducted tour of the Egyptian pyramids. But, *mutatis mutandis*, they apply equally well to Herbert's monument of words, *The Temple*. By knowing more and more about Herbert as a historical individual, we do also come to a better understanding of his writings. Obscurities are made plain. We get some grip on his contribution to major religious and sociocultural developments. And our readings and our judgements become less anachronistic. We are healthily reminded that we ourselves are not the measure of all humanmankind.

But then again, neither was Herbert, which is why historical knowledge about him is, in another sense, frankly rather baffling. The more detailed our grasp of him as a writer who lived in a certain place at a certain time, and who had certain family, class, religious and other affiliations, the more remarkable it seems that he has been able to communicate with readers whose position has been so different from his own. As demonstrated by Helen Wilcox, his astonishing breadth of appeal

1. [First published in *The ethics of literary communication: Genuineness, directness, indirectness*, eds Roger D. Sell, Adam Borch, and Inna Lindgren (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2013), 21–28.

2. Samuel Johnson, *The Prince of Abissinia: A tale. In two volumes. Vol. II. Second edition* (London: Dodsley, 1758), 36–37.

was evident from very early on.³ The community of seventeenth century readers brought into being by his poems was divisible into many sub-communities along lines of family, geographical location, epistolary network, and religious denomination. Over the course of subsequent centuries, the dynamic heterogeneity of the Herbert reading community has become even more obvious. Today, to single out any particular grouping of Herbert readers would be to give it a misleading prominence over many other groupings world-wide. In fact the only thing I do need to stress here, perhaps, is that William Empson has been by no means the only admirer of Herbert who did not admire the God of Christianity.

As a matter of everyday fact, human beings are capable of communicating with each other even when they are very dissimilar. True, during the so-called culture wars of the mid-1990s many postmodern linguistic and literary theoreticians argued that the differences between one sociocultural, religious, ethnic, or gender grouping and another simply went all the way down, thereby strongly reducing the chances of mutual understanding. But in our twenty-first century era of post-postmodernity, we can look back on such deterministic claims as mainly motivated by that time's politics of recognition. Or to put it more negatively: as motivated by a fear that the rights and autonomy of differently placed individuals could all too easily be ignored; a fear, in short, that communicational teleologies could be too hegemonic. As post-postmoderns, we are beginning to believe, it seems to me, that a community can be extremely large *without* necessarily being hegemonic, because a community is not at all the same thing as a consensus, but is precisely a grouping of people who, often despite real differences, are in some way or other brought into communication – into communion. In my own attempts to develop what I call a post-postmodern communicational criticism, I study literary writers who, like Herbert, have brought about communities that have been unusually varied because of their wide extent and long duration, and my aim in this is frankly amelioristic.⁴ Such writers, I claim, are nothing short of exemplary for communicants more generally. They can help us foster a kind of human interaction by which our own time's rampant globalization will be more fully reconciled with the rights and dignity of every single individual.

Unless I am mistaken, the success of literary writers does have something to do with the way they treat their readers as human beings. One of my suggestions has been that their role within society and culture at large can in effect be to instigate a communion with their audience which can replace, and be a better model

3. Helen Wilcox, "In the *Temple* precincts: George Herbert and seventeenth-century community-making," in *Writing and religion in England, 1558–1689: Studies in community-making and cultural memory*, eds Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 253–271.

4. Roger D. Sell, *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011).

than, communication of the kind so often represented within the worlds of their texts. Literary texts are very often *about* communicational dysfunction, sometimes to tragic or comic effect, but are themselves communicationally salutary within culture and society as a whole, thanks to the relationship which develops between writers and their readers. The writing and reading of literature provides some of the most striking, though by no means the only instances of what I have called genuine communication: the kind of communication in which people fully recognize each other's human rights and personal autonomy.

Now there is no reason why genuine communication should not take the form of a forthright directness: a frankness which respects the autonomy of the other person by not practising deception and by encouraging serious discussion. But often, genuine communication involves a tactful considerateness. In this form, it is not really the kind of interaction about which you could tell a good story. It is not "tellable", because it is so peaceful and uneventful, whereas dysfunctional communication often involves conflict, which is the very soul of drama. Frequently, good stories are about genuine communication's breakdown or total absence. Conversely, most stories in which genuine communication is restored or initiated thereafter quickly come to an end. And all the time, a good story's teller will have been in genuine communication with its hearers or readers.⁵

As far as religious and devotional texts are concerned, it is easy to think of examples, including long passages in Herbert's own "The Church Porch", which work the other way round. That is to say, a relationship dealt with in the poem comes across as far superior to the relationship between the poet and the poem's readers. In such cases, by *endophorically* addressing God within the world of the text, the poet develops a relationship with him that is allegedly far more satisfying than any relationship between one human being and another. Furthermore, in directing an explicitly *exophoric* address towards real human readers, the poet develops a relationship with them which is in effect strained, didactic, badgering, coercive – "You must make God mean to you what he means to me," as it were.

Here a question arises as to whether any text which, to borrow Keats's wording,⁶ has such a palpable design upon us is likely to be assigned high and lasting status as a work of literature. The coercive attitude towards readers can actually cast doubt on the bliss which is supposed to obtain in the relationship between the writer and God, since a poet who had truly appreciated God's pure love would surely be unlikely to treat fellow human beings so domineeringly. Any such suspicion is particularly fatal for a religious text whose writer has not solved the problem of

5. See Roger D. Sell, *Great Expectations and the Dickens community*, Sell, *Communicational Criticism*, 195–237.

6. John Keats, *Selected letters of John Keats*, ed. Frederick Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 72.

genuine communication's frequent untellability, its unsuitability as matter for a story. Sometimes the genuine communication allegedly taking place between the poet and God can come across as not only too perfect to be true but simply boring. The heaven to which the poet aspires can sound like a place which would be more interesting if only more things happened there.

In much of what we think of as the very finest religious and devotional writing, the exophoric address to real human readers is actually so entirely implicit, and so totally uncoercive, that the text can be described, along lines suggested by John Stuart Mill, as poetry in contradistinction from eloquence. Poetry and eloquence, said Mill,

are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling: but ... eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience. The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavoring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action.⁷

At the same time, religious writers who do *not* conspicuously court readers' sympathy, do *not* endeavour to influence their belief, and do *not* move them to passion or action are so much the more frank, and so much the more relaxed. On the one hand they can admit to themselves that their religious life has not been all plain sailing, as when Herbert in "The Collar" "struck the board, and cry'd, No more. / I will abroad. / What? shall I ever sigh and pine?"⁸ On the other hand, their lack of polemical drive, their obvious contentment with their own private thoughts, perceptions, and speculations, equips them to speak in a much more natural and convincing way about genuine communication: about communion with God in prayer, and about the joys they are hoping for in heaven.

In Herbert's best writing, the problem of genuine communication's frequent untellability is solved by his free-ranging devotional wit, which is constantly minting figures of speech through which the imperfections of this world are seen as a clue to understanding the perfections of the next, but are always trumped by them! Here his private musings carry to new heights the kind of troping by which baroque poets, painters, sculptors, and musicians bodied forth the fleshly and the spiritual as each other's types, the heavenly anticipated by the worldly in secular art, the worldly

7. John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on poetry and its varieties" [1833], in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, eds M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), I: 341–65, esp. 348–349.

8. George Herbert, *The works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 51.

shadowing forth the heavenly in sacred art. The metaphors running through his poem "Prayer", for instance, begin by seeing prayer as "the Churches banquet" and close with it as "The milkie way, the bird of Paradise, / Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the souls bloud, / The land of spices".⁹ In "Heaven", while Herbert's own voice talking to himself finds it difficult to raise his sights above the level of earthly things, the trumping takes the form of another voice, a mysterious friend and mentor's voice, which enters into dialogue with Herbert's words by echoing them with a difference. Finding the celestial prospect so difficult to take in, Herbert asks, "But are there cares and businesse with the pleasure?" The Echo answers, "Leisure". "Light, joy, and leisure: but shall they perseve?" asks Herbert. "Ever", replies the Echo.¹⁰

For all we know, Herbert may originally have written such poems purely as exercises in his own devotional life, with no thought of any relationship except the one between God and himself. If so, then in one sense their address to God happened endophorically – within the world of the poem – while in another sense it was exophoric, directed towards God as a real being outside the poem, even if, at the same time, there was also implicit exophoric address to Herbert himself: the poems were also his own self-communion. Yet on publishing them, and on doing so with prefatory materials explaining his hope that they would help others in their devotions, he activated a far broader potentiality – a human representativeness – in his own self-portrayal, to which readers of extremely varied positionality have in fact whole-heartedly responded. As I have hinted, a present-day atheist is just as likely as anybody else to admire Herbert, whose writing has turned out to be communicational in the fullest etymological sense of the term, bringing about a community that was, and still is at once very large and extremely heterogeneous.

In what I think of as his very greatest poems, such community-making comes about on the page, so to speak, drawing in other human beings apart from himself with a most beautiful gentleness.

The Glance

When first thy sweet and gracious eye
 Vouchsaf'd ev'n in the midst of youth and night
 To look upon me, who before did lie
 Weltering in sinne;
 I felt a sugred strange delight,
 Passing all cordials made by any art,
 Bedew, embalme, and overrunne my heart,
 And take it in.

9. Herbert, *The Works*, 51.

10. Herbert, *The Works*, 188.

Since that time many a bitter storm
 My soul hath felt, ev'n able to destroy,
 Had the malicious and ill-meaning harm
 His swing and sway:
 But still thy sweet original joy,
 Sprung from thine eye, did work within my soul,
 And surging griefs, when they grew bold, controll,
 And got the day.
 If thy first glance so powerfull be,
 A mirth but open'd and seal'd up again;
 What wonders shall we feel, when we shall see
 Thy full-ey'd love!
 When thou shalt look us out of pain,
 And one aspect of thine spend in delight
 More then a thousand sunnes disburse in light,
 In heav'n above.¹¹

The Herbertian texture is unmistakable. Again we find the frankness about the downs of his spiritual life, but also the witty trumping of the earthly by the other-wordly – the “delight / Passing all cordials made by any art”, for instance. Then there is the poetically structuring anthropomorphism of God’s having an eye, whose merest glance brings a sustaining joy, and which will one day “look us out of pain” altogether. At once teasingly evoked and decorously held at bay here are, it seems to me, erotic associations – of an erotic poem, perhaps, in which a mistress is said to throw a coquettish glance at her lover-poet. And just as subtle in its boldness is the play on “look”, quietly infringing the word’s fundamental grammar, so capturing, in *God’s* looking, an exceptional force of agentive transitivity.

Still more to the point, by the third stanza, Herbert is no longer thinking merely about his own experience of God. “I” and “me” give way to “we” and “us”. In devotional poems and hymns, such climactic shifting from first person singular to first person plural is not unusual,¹² and the best of them have in any case never buttonholed their users with a vocative apostrophe in the *second* person. But Herbert is surely the supreme master here. In one sense his poem’s exophoric addressee has up until now been God; the poem has been Herbert’s private prayer addressed to God in the hope that he will listen. On another reading, a reading which takes account of the poem’s publication, together with that pastorally oriented preface, what Herbert has offered so far has been a dramatizing representation of his relationship

11. Herbert, *The Works*, 171–172.

12. Roger D. Sell, “Henry Vaughan’s unexpectedness”, in Roger D. Sell, *Mediating Criticism: Literary education humanized* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001), 139–164.

with God within the poem, a reading which tends to emphasize a more endophoric element in the address to God. But either way, the "us" explicitly introduces new parties: the group of *all* those others who, in addition to Herbert himself, can benefit from God's love. This is a group to which the reference is mainly endophoric if the poem is taken as Herbert's private prayer, mainly exophoric if it is taken as a text published for the good of others. But given the facts that the poem *has* of course been published, and that this is how we ourselves have come to be aware of it, we are very likely to take it all ways at once.

As readers, our powers of parallel processing are far more sophisticated than any literary-scholastical hunt for "the definitive interpretation" would suggest. To read Herbert both as writing *about* God, *about* himself, and *about* us, and as simultaneously addressing himself *to* God, *to* himself, and *to* us is the easiest thing in the world. And even if, to use Mill's terms again, the "us" does mark a move from poetry to eloquence, then it is to an eloquence which is winning through its sheer friendliness, a friendliness to no small part inherent in these very ambiguities: in this slight uncertainty in which readers can remain as to whether Herbert is implying that they must make God mean for them what he means for him, or whether he would be equally content to keep them as a topic of conversation just between God and himself.

Herbert leaves it ultimately up to readers – including, of course, a reader such as William Empson – to decide for themselves whether or not they would like to belong in the circle of God's loved ones. Herbert's generous tact does not mean that he is colourlessly self-abnegating. Nothing could be more distinctive or insistent than his wit. But as God's servant he is also modelling his communication on God's: the God who was considerate enough merely to glance in his direction at first. Both God's glance and Herbert's glance-like poem are "A mirth but open'd and seal'd up again": an overture that is completely unforceful. What we have here is genuine communication all round, both within the text and in the text's own interaction with each and every one of its possible readers. Nothing could be more exemplary.

In dialogue with the ageing Wordsworth¹

Elsewhere I have praised Wordsworth for “communicational genuineness”.² This is a term I use to cover any instance of communication, be it literary or otherwise, in which a communicant’s mode of address respects the human autonomy of other communicants. So the idea is firmly grounded in the Kantian take on ethics which for nearly two and a half centuries has been seminal for notions of justice.³ It also recalls Levinas’s account of how we *recognize* the human other,⁴ and Habermas’s exploration of the ethical protocols which obtain for any kind of communicative interaction at all.⁵

Genuine communication, then, is not merely something admired by me personally, but something which in practice is greatly valued by societies as a whole, even when it is not explicitly singled out for commendation. In fact one of my main suggestions in *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue*, the collection in which my previous Wordsworth piece came out, was that no text will achieve the status of literature and be appreciated by a large audience over a long period of time unless, in some sense or other, its writer has exercised precisely this quality. This is not to say that the attitude of canonical authors towards their readers is necessarily one of selfless deference. On the contrary, their respect for readers’ human otherness often takes the form of a frank directness – sometimes a satirical directness – which treats their addressees as equals by inviting them to debate. Alternatively, an author can show respect by a suggestive *indirectness*, which can empower readers to negotiate narratives or significances for

1. [First published in *Literature as dialogue: Invitations offered and negotiated*, ed. Roger D. Sell (Amsterdam: Benjamins 2014), 161–176.]

2. Roger D. Sell, “Wordsworth’s genuineness,” in Roger D. Sell, *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011), 151–194.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*, [1785] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

4. Donald R. Wehrs and David P. Haney (eds), *Levinas and nineteenth-century literature: Ethics and otherness from Romanticism through Realism* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009).

5. Jürgen Habermas, *The theory of communicative action*, 2 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 & 1987), *Justification and application: Remarks on discourse ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), and *On the pragmatics of communication* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).

themselves.⁶ Nor have I proposed that genuineness is a *sufficient* condition for a text to be admitted to the canon. For one thing, genuineness is also to be found in countless interchanges which have nothing to do with literature at all. For another thing, every period of cultural history has its own additional criteria which literary works must satisfy – fashion and taste do change as time moves on. But even so, if a text is to be accorded lasting and widespread recognition as a literary achievement, genuineness is certainly, I have argued, a *necessary* condition, a *sine qua non*, quite regardless of whether or not it is explicitly noticed by critics and reviewers.

When genuineness does escape comment, this is not due to some mysterious indescribability. My earlier discussion of Wordsworth was not, I hope, vague or impressionistic. One of the aims of *Communicational criticism* as a whole was to show that a critic can exactly pinpoint genuine communication in the way writers actually direct their words towards their readers: in the addressivity by which they seek to engage their envisaged partners in literary dialogue, as I expressed this.

In a world still riven by conflict and injustice on a truly shameful scale, for a literary critic to pinpoint genuineness of communication is a potentially ameliorative move. Communicational criticism, as I think of it, holds up instances of genuineness for emulation, in the hope of thereby improving – however slightly – the chances for a post-postmodern community which would be, not only indeterminately large but indeterminately heterogeneous: a non-consensual community which could in principle be both global and non-hegemonic. This is the spirit in which, having surveyed a range of Wordsworth's poetry, I concluded that,

[f]irst and last, he is community-making, which is seldom an entirely easy and painless process. When we are genuinely community-making, we cannot pretend that we have sorted out all of life's great questions and made ourselves intellectually ship-shape. Our willingness to offer words that [as Habermas would put it] are comprehensible, true, truthful, sincere, and socially appropriate can extend even as far as admitting what we cannot after all deny: our puzzlement and doubts, our sorrows and fears. We freely confess that many of the disagreements we find within the community at large are also internal to our own mind, and we fully accept that any extension of the community we ourselves may bring about is likely to involve still further heterogeneity. What holds a community together is nothing more, but also nothing less, than a generous agreement to disagree when unavoidable, plus a common determination not to insist on impossible certainties. Of community in this sense, potentially so significant for our post-postmodern times, Wordsworth is surely the supreme poet.⁷

6. Roger D. Sell, Adam Borch, and Inna Lindgren (eds), *The ethics of literary communication: Genuineness, directness, indirectness*. (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2013).

7. Sell, "Wordsworth's genuineness", 194.

Now in order to arrive at this weighty claim by a straightforward route, my earlier study adopted two limitations of scope which I shall here rescind. This, in turn, will be the quickest way to get at another, complementary aspect of the dialogue between Wordsworth and his readers.

The first limitation was that I tended to speak of poems as if they could exist in only a single state. I did comment on the descent of “Old Man Travelling” from a somewhat longer version with a longer title, and I did mention the complicated genesis of the much longer poems, and of *The Excursion* and *The Prelude* in particular. But that was more or less that, and in my quotations from *The Prelude* my choice between the many different versions of the poem was silently dictated by the nature of the particular argument I had in hand at any given point, and/or by my own personal judgement as to what, in any given passage, is the best reading in terms of poetry. My prime concern was not to trace the development of Wordsworth’s texts over time, but to establish that his finest writing is indeed communicationally genuine.

The other limitation was that the ethical qualities with which I concerned myself were only those of Wordsworth’s own address to his readers. Throughout *Communicational criticism*, my stress was on major writers’ admirable ways of treating their readers as fellow-human-beings. The ethics of response, the question, that is to say, of whether or not readers have respected the human autonomy of writers, I have usually assigned to the task of mediating criticism, as I call it, whose practitioners seek to improve writer-reader relations by acting as a kind of interpreter-cum-go-between.⁸ In fact prior to my recent discussion of Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*,⁹ I had never tried to fulfill the aims of mediating criticism and communicational criticism – never tried to focus on the ethics of both reader response and authorial address – within one and the same critique.

I still believe that my disregard of textual genetics and reader response made for clear presentation as regards Wordsworth’s fundamental genuineness of address. What it obscured from view, however, was the ethical challenge arising to readers from Wordsworth’s long-drawn-out, complicated, and very public process of ageing.

This has not just been a matter of the texts which he himself published during his own lifetime. He was born in 1770, first published a poem in 1786, published his first long poem – *An Evening Walk* – in 1793, had his real breakthrough with

8. Roger D. Sell, *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000), and *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001).

9. Roger D. Sell, “Dialogue versus silencing: Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in *Literary community-making: The dialogicality of English texts from the seventeenth century to the present*, ed. Roger D. Sell (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2012), 91–129 [= item 7 in the present selection].

Lyrical Ballads (to which Coleridge also contributed) in 1798, went on publishing for half a century, and died at the age of 80 in 1850. Yet no version of the autobiographical *Prelude* was printed until slightly later on in that same year,¹⁰ and other significant work also came out posthumously. Not least, *Home at Grasmere*, another major autobiographical poem, did not appear in a complete and free-standing form until 1888,¹¹ and earlier versions of *The Prelude* did not become widely accessible until the twentieth century, in particular the 1805 version in 1926 and the two-part version of 1799 in 1974 – yes, 175 years after it was written, and 188 years after its author's poetic debut.¹² Since 1974, previously unknown or little known materials, both epistolary and poetic, have continued to appear in scholarly editions, including a further two early versions of *The Prelude* in 1995 and 1997.¹³ For over two centuries, then, Wordsworth has remained present to his admirers as a writer who could spring surprises, and not least surprises connected with his own life-story.

During his lifetime, in addition to writing new poems for decade after decade he was also constantly revising his work, often tinkering – his own word for it – with one and the same poem time and time again.¹⁴ So for readers who became aware of this, part of the surprise would often have been that of confronting texts which were already familiar, but now somewhat defamiliarized. Even though he never himself published his most extensive and most intimately detailed autobiographical writings, he in effect allowed himself to figure as a poet who was publicly growing older, as his earlier ideas and manner of expression gradually changed with the passing years.

Not only in the posthumous *Prelude* and *Home in Grasmere*, but also in some of the best known poems which he himself saw through the press, his own ageing actually became a main theme. Both as a private individual and as the denizen of a particular cultural milieu at a particular time, he had a most pressing sense

10. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude or Growth of a poet's mind; An autobiographical poem* (London: Edward Moxon, 1850).

11. William Wordsworth, *The complete poetical works of William Wordsworth*, ed. John Moreley (London: Macmillan, 1888).

12. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926); M. H. Abrams *et al.* (eds), *The Norton anthology of English literature, 3rd Edition*. New York: Norton, 1974).

13. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The four texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (London: Penguin, 1995), and *The five-book Prelude*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

14. William Wordsworth, *Descriptive Sketches*, ed. Eric Birdsall (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 19.

that ageing was a topic that called for discussion. In fact a crucial aspect of his communicational genuineness *vis à vis* readers was to recognize the scope for disagreement here, both within society at large and within his own mind. Ageing was an issue on which Wordsworth, despite Keats's complaint about his "egotistical sublime", showed a considerable degree of "negative capability", as Keats called it – the capability "of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".¹⁵ Over his writing career as a whole, and often within just a single poem, both sides of the controversy about growing old received full recognition.

On the one hand, he was haunted by a fear that older might not mean better – that the surprises of which he was capable might become steadily less worth the candle. This was the side of him which chimed with Rousseau's valorization of childhood, a motif whose development has usually been seen as also one of his own most distinctive contributions to Romantic thought. In many poems – "We are seven" is typical enough – there were child characters who struck him, the adult poet, as wiser, more truthful, or more fully alive than he himself. In "My heart leaps up" he famously wrote that the child is nothing less than "father of the man": that for the man to respect the child's insight would be the sign of a truly "natural piety".¹⁶ In *The Prelude* (1805) he says that an "infant babe" is "[e]mpirically" alive, "[a]n inmate of this *active universe*";

... [its] mind
 Even as an agent of the one great mind,
 Creates, creator and receiver both,
 Working but in alliance with the works
 Which it beholds;

the young child "is the first / Poetic spirit of our human life", a spirit which "[b]y uniform controul of after years / Is in most abated and suppressed". And even if here in Book II he still spoke of some adults in whom "[t]hrough every change of growth or of decay" this youthfully poetic spirit remains "[p]reminent till death", by Book XI he sounded less sure: "I see by glimpses now, when age comes on / May scarcely see at all".¹⁷ Looking back to his own childhood in the "Immortality

15. John Keats, *Selected letters of John Keats*, ed. Frederick Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 53.

16. William Wordsworth, *The poetical works of William Wordsworth*, 5 vols, rev. edn., eds Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952–9), I 226 ll. 7 and 9).

17. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth and Stephen Gill, (New York: Norton, 1979), 567–85, esp. 78 ll. 237 and 265–280, 432 ll. 337–338, Wordsworth's italics.

Ode”, he unambiguously lamented the passing of youth’s “visionary gleam”,¹⁸ and having returned to Tintern Abbey, he wrote the poem which portrays him as now quite lacking the spontaneous imaginativeness which had so buoyed him up during his first visit, a type of *élan* which is now to be seen only in Dorothy, his present companion and younger (that is the point!) sibling. *Home at Grasmere* was about the two of them coming back, after an absence of many years, to settle in the Lake District, the region in which he had grown up, and from which, as a writer, he now fervently hoped to recover an inspiration otherwise quite lost.

On the other hand, he also had deep roots in those European traditions – Jewish, Christian, Humanist – within which age was seen as the precondition for wisdom, a view which during his own lifetime came to be freshly endorsed through the reverence paid to a number of no longer youthful luminaries, of whom he himself was not the least, and to whom we sometimes refer as the Victorian sages – the others included Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, and Tennyson. Some of his own most striking poetry is about old men, who fascinate him by their sheer weight of experience, which in some cases even becomes a kind of metaphorical explanation for a bent spine. In “The Old Cumberland Beggar”, “Old Man Travelling” and “Resolution and Independence”, the aura surrounding the old man characters can be at least as uncanny as that surrounding the child characters in those other poems, and in no small part it stems from a sense of the extreme duration of sufferings and hardships which have been shouldered uncomplainingly. In both the “Immortality Ode” and “Tintern Abbey”, he consoles himself for his own loss of imaginative spontaneity, not only with powerful memories of a childhood shaped by the beauties and terrors of nature, but with a conviction that the passing years are bringing him, too, the strength to survive, a resilience seen as arising quite naturally from a lengthening experience of life on earth, and from a fuller understanding of human relationships and human priorities. In the figure of the Pedlar, who attained his final form in *The Excursion* (1814), additional kinds of wisdom flow from the old man’s wide range of observation during his commercial travels, but also from the continuing influence of his upbringing under the wing of the kirk, and from his thoughtful responses to an admittedly limited range of reading, and to the Good Book in particular. Also closely interlinked with Wordsworth’s thoughts about the Pedlar, *The Prelude* first got under way as a kind of riposte to his own valorization of both experience and books. Under the influence of Coleridge, he had come to think that he wanted to write a major philosophical poem, but he felt too young and too unlearned for such a task. Hence *The Prelude*’s initial attempt to recuperate what he claimed was the primary wisdom of childhood, and especially of a childhood nourished at the

18. Wordsworth, *Poetical works*, IV 280 l. 56.

bosom of nature. As the poem grew over time, however, it became somewhat more of a reader's journal; in both the 1805 and 1850 versions, Book V is accurately entitled "Books". And all along, the poem's composition continued to be infused by the life-changing psychological disturbance which had come about when his youthful hopes of the French Revolution – "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!"¹⁹ – had been confounded by the onset of the Reign of Terror, a chronic personal dilemma for him, which he treated even more directly in the biography of *The Excursion's* anguished Solitary. Not to put too fine a point on it, some of his most interesting writing is haunted by a suspicion which made him the spokesman for many of his own contemporaries here: the suspicion that his youthful political enthusiasm had been, in the very generosity of its communitarianism, dangerously naive.

In 1888, the year in which *Home at Grasmere*, with its personal narrative of inspiration re-sought from the home ground of childhood, was first published as a complete whole, and 38 years after Wordsworth's death, Arnold not only followed Coleridge in declaring Wordsworth the third greatest English poet after Shakespeare and Milton but, perhaps partly influenced by Wordsworth's own idealization of youth, opined that after a golden decade from 1798 to 1808 he had spent his remaining 42 years producing "a mass of inferior work".²⁰ Arnold's two-fold verdict has been enormously influential right down to the present day. One of the few real differences in the way twentieth century readers experienced Wordsworth as compared with nineteenth century predecessors was simply that, while Victorian readers could have had – especially after Arnold's pronouncement – a slightly confused sense of having watched Wordsworth's poetry worsen over time, Modernist and later readers could feel that they were witnessing that same process oddly in reverse. As I say, in 1926 came the *The Prelude* of 1805, and in 1974 the two-part version of 1799, followed by other early versions in 1995 and 1997. Readers' transportation back to the allegedly golden decade could not have been more effective.

But then in 2011 a book appeared which, though hardly mentioning Arnold at all, was in fact a major challenge to the Arnoldian orthodoxy: *Wordsworth's revisitations* by Stephen Gill, one of this poet's most distinguished editors and biographers. Gill is especially interested in Wordsworth's re-workings of his own earlier writing, and constantly asks himself exactly *why* the poet might have wanted to "revisit" a particular passage at a particular moment in time. He focuses not so much on Wordsworth's "continual return ... to his past but to his past in his past writing",

19. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1799, 1805, 1850, 396 ll. 692–693.

20. Matthew Arnold, "Wordsworth," in his *Essays in criticism: Second series*, (London: Macmillan, 1888), 122–162, esp.136.

clearly demonstrating that the poet's ongoing engagement with his own earlier texts was a subtly nuanced reactivation of the past "into conjunction with the present".²¹ Gill's willingness to entertain the possibility that the older Wordsworth might have something valuable to say about the work of the younger Wordsworth, and that the older man's judgement might indeed be up to that task, reflects a fairness of critical stance which it is my main purpose in this present study to commend. Not making a song and dance about his own probity, however, Gill concentrates on that of the ageing Wordsworth in relating to his younger writerly selves. In revisiting *The Prelude* in 1804, for instance, he "was determined to honour both selves – the self he had become and the self he had once been",²² so preserving what he described in some unpublished lines as "affinities ... / Between all stages of the life of man".²³ As the 1805 *Prelude* itself puts it, he was entering into a fully conscious internal dialogue:

so wide appears
The vacancy between me and those days,
Which yet have such self-presence in my mind
That, sometimes, when I think of them I seem
Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
And of some other being.²⁴

Time and time again, Gill's comprehensive knowledge of Wordsworth's life, publications, and manuscripts enables him to show that the poet was steadily continuing to grow precisely by entering into new relationships with his own past as written into his verse. This helps to explain why he found it so fundamentally difficult to think of anything he had ever written as actually finished.

A communicational critic's gloss on this must be that, within a community, the last word is never spoken, and least of all in a process of active community-making. Wordsworth's tinkering year after year was partly, we can assume, a matter of artistic perfectionism, and of actual changes in the criteria he applied in making aesthetic judgements. Much more importantly, though, it was an indefatigable frankness *vis à vis* his readers, both those who were his own contemporaries and those who, after his death, might be able to read the entire range of his work, including the major autobiographical writing. He simply could not bring himself to address readers in a way with which he no longer identified. With each re-writing, he was offering them

21. Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth's revisitings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10, 37.

22. Gill, *Wordsworth's revisitings*, 96.

23. William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and other poems, 1797–1800*, eds James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 328.

24. Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, 66 ll. 28–33.

a text which was the honest medium of a fellow human-being still very much alive. He clearly had a sense that earlier versions, though perhaps true to his younger selves, ran the risk of becoming, from a communicational point of view, fossils – the remnants of a phase of writer-reader communion now actually beyond recall.

Granted, many revisions seem to involve a loss of poetic force. Most notoriously, perhaps, whereas the 1805 *Prelude* describes his developing consciousness of man's relation to the natural world as the rise of

Man, inwardly contemplated, and present
In my own being, to a loftier height –
As of all visible natures crown ...,²⁵

by the 1850 version this has become:

In the midst stood Man,
Outwardly, inwardly contemplated,
As, of all visible natures, crown, though born
Of dust, and kindred to the worm ...²⁶

Nothing can take away our reader's right to complain that "though born / Of dust, and kindred to the worm" makes these lines self-contradictory and anticlimactic, and nothing can defend Wordsworth against the criterion on which such a judgement is based. The addition does not come across as the outcome of a truly dialogical re-thinking, but is all too obviously tacked on as a much later, half-baked afterthought. In reading the entire passage in which it occurs, our impression is likely to be embarrassedly twofold: of a younger Wordsworth who cannot envisage the older Wordsworth as even a possibility; and of an older Wordsworth who has become decidedly deaf to the younger. For many readers the net result is likely to be that the older writer's nagging insistence on man's dusty origin and vermicular kin actually puts the kibosh on the younger writer's exultation in man's superiority among visible natures. Alternatively, things may work the other way round: for many other readers, the youthful exultation will quite dispel the older man's gloom. Either way, as readers we cannot grant the two attitudes the equal validity which the sentence's syntax nominally asserts, since interaction between the two Wordsworths has not yet been sufficiently intense to remove what is a total unviability in the new version's overall semantics. The new version is sloppy, slack, lazy, because, despite the ostensible change from contemplating man "inwardly" to contemplating man "[o]utwardly, inwardly", the real change is that the youthful and

25. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1799, 1805, 1850, 300 ll. 632–634.

26. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1799, 1805, 1850, 301 ll. 485–488.

elderly attitudes are actually both said to be triggered by a consideration of man in an exclusively outward or physical dimension: to repeat, a consideration of man as superior to *visible* natures on the one hand and, on the other hand, of man as born of dust and kindred to the worm. The problem, then, is one of straightforward logic: the attributes of a magnificent physicality and of an extremely unimpressive physicality simply collide; neither man nor any other creature can be both physically magnificent and physically very unimpressive at one and the same time. As my italics here may have hinted, perhaps one of the words which still needed to be changed was “visible”, and in such a way as to credit man-as-seen-by-the-young-writer with at least *some* kind of real magnificence, while at the same time not invalidating the more sober reflections occasioned by man-as-seen-by-the-older-writer. This was a paradoxical challenge to which, as we shall see, the tinkering Wordsworth elsewhere rose in style.

But as I say, there is a communicational ethics for readers as well as for writers and, in the case of Wordsworth, Gill has already blazed the trail. I see Gill’s province as that of a mediating critic who accepts, first, that within a genuine process of communication one criterion can operate alongside others and, second, that any communicational contribution whatever deserves respect as some fellow-human-being’s current best shot, even if it is still vastly improvable or actually quite unendorsable. A contribution which to many people seems magnificent as poetry, to many of the same people, and to other people, too, may seem decidedly mediocre as wisdom. Conversely, a contribution which to many people seems profound as wisdom, again to many of the same people, and to other people, too, may seem quite unpoetical. But within a true community, people of every description will not only have their own voice, but will seek to listen their way into the life-experience of others. And those who have high public profiles and are thought of poets and philosophers will be making their contributions to the same free-for-all as everyone else, even when something they write seems both wretched as poetry and, as philosophy, nothing better than “illusion”, to recall another of Arnold’s verdicts on the older Wordsworth.²⁷ No less than other people, such prominent individuals will have an unchallenged right to position themselves in whatever way they find most suitable at the exact point in time when positioning, or re-positioning, seems to be in order.

It is within some such true community that Wordsworth, early and late, takes himself to be writing, not only in welcoming readers’ manifold differences from himself – the topic of my earlier study – but in trusting readers to be equally fair in return, and to try to understand his present point of view. The plain fact is that, whereas in his youth he had revelled in the strength and power of his own mental

27. Arnold, “Wordsworth”, 148–149.

life, by his later years his self-consciousness had radically changed character. As Helen Darbishire said *à propos* the addition I have criticized above,

[t]he pressure of the years and crushing personal sorrows had taught him the inherent weakness of human nature, a weakness from which neither mind nor spirit was exempt. And so the Christian doctrine of humility went home to his heart. The words “though born / Of dust, and kindred to the worm”, out of key as they are with his earlier mood [of 1805], were strictly relevant to his later position. They stand for something not only sincerely thought, but passionately felt.²⁸

Ralph Pite, similarly, has tried to link the older Wordsworth’s insistence on man’s kinship with the worm to his view of the natural world in general, an effort of understanding no less exemplary than Gill’s, because no less genuinely an attempt to treat Wordsworth in the manner to which he justly assumed himself entitled: as our fellow human-being.²⁹ Wordsworth simply took for granted that he had the right to compose the added phrase here, and to receive, if and when it was published, a thoughtful response to it. He could not reasonably want readers to find it great poetry if they really did not, or to hail its wisdom if their own thoughtful response found it wanting. Nor, in either of these cases, could he expect them to read a lot more of the same, or to refrain from using labels such as Leavis’s “lamentable claptrap” or James Kenneth Stephen’s “articulate monotony”.³⁰ Readers have always been no less surely moving towards death than Wordsworth himself was, and in their remaining time on earth the poetry of Wordsworth has never been the only claim upon their attention. But what he definitely would have the right to hope for is an audience with enough common decency to complement any criticisms they may have with an acknowledgement of communicational reciprocities – of their own obligation to match his manner of address with a humanly worthy response. Not to mince words, what kind of answer are we making to Wordsworth’s inveterate courtesy, if we wish that he had written us something he did not mean, or had cut out something he did mean? Certainly if we ourselves are to deserve to live in a post-postmodern community – large but heterogeneous, non-consensual and non-hegemonic – and to enjoy that community’s full rewards, we shall need to be catholic.

28. Helen Darbishire, “Wordsworth’s *Prelude*” [1926], in *Wordsworth, The Prelude: A casebook*, eds W. H. Harvey and Richard Gravil (London: Macmillan, 1972), 81–98, esp. 97–98.

29. Ralph Pite, “Wordsworth and the natural world,” in *The Cambridge companion to Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 180–195.

30. F. R. Leavis, “Wordsworth,” in his *Revaluation: Tradition and development in English poetry* [1936] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 62–86, esp. 152; James Kenneth Stephen, “Sonnet,” in his *Lapsus Calami* (Cambridge: Macmillan and Bowes 1896). 83.

As I have begun to hint in connection with Arnold's assessment, one reason why some of Wordsworth's revisions may be perceived as old man's chill-blooded sermonizing is the sheer cultural thrust of his own valorization of youth. After the first publication of the 1805 *Prelude* in the 1926 edition by De Selincourt, of which Darbishire's essay was a review, this bias was reinforced by the Modernist predilection for brevity and impersonality, a taste which was channelled through critical buzzwords such as "symbol", "image", "epiphany", "haiku" and "dramatic presentation" (as opposed to "intrusively omniscient presentation"). For many mid-Victorians, though not for Arnold, Wordsworth's greatest work had been *The Excursion*, a poem of adult meditation on a centrally adult question: Does human life have any point or value? The publication of the 1850 *Prelude* had been fairly unexpected, yet to many readers had brought little more than a reminder of poems they knew already, in a style which could seem, very roughly speaking, like a continuation of *The Excursion's* blank verse. What Darbishire now discovered in *The Prelude* of 1805, by contrast, was

the poetry of a spiritual experience so intense, so pure, and so profound that it holds the essence of all religion. ... [It] gives us the elemental experience freed from the floss of later interpretation [in the form of some of the more intrusive 1850 revisions]. And it shows us, further, how its roots lay, where Wordsworth did not shrink from finding them, in the sensuous or animal life which is our common heritage.³¹

For a Modernist reader, there were passages in the 1805 version which could seem so much less spoilt by authorial intrusion than anything in the 1850 version that they almost resembled, as we might put it, the prose of Henry James as described by T. S. Eliot: "a baffling escape from ... Ideas", and the work of mind "so fine that no idea could violate it".³² Eliot himself, it has to be said, was unenthusiastic about Wordsworth, possibly suffering from some anxiety of influence here. According to his essay "Tradition and the individual talent",³³ Wordsworth's talk of poetry as the overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity came too close to seeing poetry as personal self-expression, and Eliot perhaps wanted to intimate that Wordsworth's own verse illustrated the shortcomings of poetry when so conceived. But to the extent that Eliot's opinions had at that time been shaped by *The Prelude*, he would have relied on the version of 1850, the only one then available in print. And even so, he did not seek to anticipate what Leavis was to describe as

31. Darbishire, Wordsworth's *Prelude*, 98.

32. T. S. Eliot, "In memory of Henry James": [1918], in *T. S. Eliot: Selected prose*, ed. Frank Kermode, (London: Faber, 1975), 151–152, esp. 151.

33. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the individual talent" [1919], in his *Selected essays* (London: Faber, 1951), 13–22.

the Modernist “dislodgement” of Milton with a campaign against Wordsworth.³⁴ True, in 1933 he did prefer “Coleridge the voracious reader” to a Wordsworth he portrayed as “indifferent to books”.³⁵ True, too, this assessment could well have been a response to Darbishire’s claim – doubtless a reflection on *The Waste Land* – that the Wordsworth of 1805 had grappled with his materials far more impressively than poets of her own time, being more daring, more “aloof from knowledge that he did not need”, and “innocent where they are sophisticated”.³⁶ But if so, nothing further came of it, and by 1970 Jonathan Wordsworth was recommending the two-part *Prelude* of 1799 as, in effect, even more goldenly youthful and tersely ur-Modernist than the 1805 version: “a poem of much smaller scope but also much more concentrated power than the thirteen-Book version of 1805”.³⁷ It only remained for Jonathan Wordsworth and (in one of his editorial assignments) Stephen Gill to publish the 1799 version, four years later, in the influential *Norton Anthology of English Literature*.

But what Gill has now made amply clear in *Wordsworth’s revisitings* is that, if we allow this Romantic-Modernist line of evaluation automatically to damn the older Wordsworth, the revising Wordsworth, the Wordsworth who writes about topics other than childhood and youth, and who writes from a point of view that is itself distant from the juvenile, then we shall not only be doing him a gross discourtesy, but shall ourselves miss out on something well worth having. Read with an open mind, his later poems and his revisions sometimes amply reward consideration. Even Modernist critics had some sense of this, for they occasionally qualified their overall judgements, even to the extent of contradicting themselves. Taking over where Arnold had left off, Leavis lamented a poetic decline in Wordsworth that resulted from “the sentiments and attitudes of the patriotic and Anglican Wordsworth”, whose late revisions to *The Prelude* were a pursuit of “formal orthodoxy” in which “he freely falsified and blunted the record of experience”. Yet Leavis also observed that, of the 1805 and 1850 versions of the “Blest the infant Babe” passage in Book II, “[n]o one is likely to dispute that the later version is decidedly the more satisfactory”.³⁸ In the wake of *Wordsworth’s revisitings*, the later Wordsworth should be able to command a scrutiny more sustained.

34. F. R. Leavis, “Milton’s verse,” in his *Revaluation: Tradition and development in English poetry* [1936] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 42–61 esp. 42.

35. T. S. Eliot, *The use of poetry and the use of criticism* [1933] (London: Faber, 1964), 70.

36. Darbishire, Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, 98.

37. Jonathan Wordsworth, “The two-part *Prelude* of 1799,” [1970], in *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds Jonathan Wordsworth and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979), 567–585.

38. Leavis, “Wordsworth,” 153, 133.

To take one representative detail, in the 1805 *Prelude* Wordsworth had written:

The mind of man is framed even like the breath
And harmony of music.³⁹

A beautiful affirmation, to be sure! But in the 1850 text this has become:

Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows
Like harmony in music; ...⁴⁰ (Wordsworth 1979: 47 ll. 340–41)

In content, this may at first seem close to that other revised passage in the 1850 version, about man as “of all visible natures crown, though born / Of dust, and kindred to the worm”. But the overall impact is really quite different, because in this case the dichotomy of “[o]utwardly, inwardly contemplated”, which was introduced but not followed through in the other passage, is fully activated. Here the youthful ebullience and the elderly sobriety are not both associated with a consideration of man in just one and the same dimension. Instead, while the elderly sobriety again stems from an outward contemplation of man in terms of corporal mortality, the youthful ebullience attaches to an inward contemplation of man’s beauty of spirit. In its logic, therefore, the revised passage as a whole is fully consistent with the traditional semantics of most religions, with their binary opposition between the dying body and the immortal soul. Even Darbishire said that Wordsworth’s alteration here vindicates itself, though she did not explain how. The crux of the matter is surely that, thanks to this clear and sustained distinction between his “more elderly” thoughts and his “more youthful” thoughts, there is a lot more going on than in the exclusively “youthful” sentiment of “The mind of man is framed even like the breath / And harmony of music”. There is a wider range of ideas and associations, more of what Coleridge called secondary imagination, more opposite or discordant qualities being brought, under considerable compression, into interrelationship. Not that the imaginative interrelationship is *fully* Coleridgean. Coleridge’s compulsion to holistic synthesis, which in the subsequent tradition of critical thought so strongly favoured the idea of poetry as a kind of autotelic symbolism in its own aesthetic other-world,⁴¹ was something which Wordsworth did not share, and which sheds little light upon his writing. As I tried to show in my previous study, Wordsworth’s texts more naturally respond to pre-Romantic critical concerns with rhetoric and politeness, which can now be rehabilitated within an account of literature as community-making. If anything, then, his imagination, far

39. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1799, 1805, 1850, 46 ll. 351–352.

40. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1799, 1805, 1850, 47 ll. 340–341.

41. Sell, *Communicational criticism*, 40–43, and “Dialogue versus silencing”, 92–93.

from fusing opposites and modulating discords, makes contrasts positively sharper, until they become major talking-points, within an implied forum where the prospect of some final verdict or compromise is never rudely hastened. The body's dust seems even more dusty, the harmonious immortal spirit even more wonderfully musical, thanks to the patience by which they are allowed to remain each other's foil, a concise opposition that is more inclusively communal than the 1805 version of the passage because, in covering that wider range of thought and understanding, it is also pitched, like the rest of Wordsworth's greatest writing, to an audience in which difference is welcomed. Gloomier, though not necessarily older readers are invited to consider a more sanguine view than they would normally countenance. More sanguine, though not necessarily younger readers are not allowed to avoid the challenge of incontrovertible fact. All in all, the revision's strength stems from the way in which the sadder, older Wordsworth and the younger, more exhilaratedly care-free Wordsworth do seem to be writing, not in unawareness of each other, but against each other's grain. It is as if they have each recognized, like any pair of good communicants, the other's existence, plus the other's *right* to existence, and as if they can fruitfully agree to disagree. The net result is one of those negatively capable paradoxes which, by so readily distinguishing and accepting differing perceptions, by so firmly resisting holistic synthesis, are, to a post-postmodern way of thinking, the hallmark of a good community.

All of which raises a practical question. What should readers who now want to give the ageing Wordsworth his full due actually read of him? Should it be the 1850 version of *The Prelude* plus everything in the painstakingly prepared *Collected works* of 1849–50? I think not. In leaving to one side the complete *Home at Grasmere* and the wonderful earlier versions of so much poetry, this policy would be far too self-denying. And for most readers it would also be unrealistic, in prescribing materials of such considerable bulk. Despite astonishing advances in medical science, human beings will probably continue to die within a hundred years or so of their birth, which means that neither Wordsworth nor any other writer is likely to occupy a great deal more of their reading time than at present.

On the one hand, Gill is already able to point to an “ongoing reassessment of the later Wordsworth,”⁴² and there is, I would say, most certainly a place for such a Wordsworth, a poet who at best is versatile not only between the perceptions of youth and the perceptions of age but, *pari passu*, between the countryside and the world of letters, between boon companionship and solitary prophecy, between poetry and wisdom. Among humanly curious and fair-minded readers, Wordsworth's public ageing could now set in motion a process of community-making that would

42. Gill, *Wordsworth's revisitations*, 12.

be maturely adult. In my earlier study I have already hinted the scope for a reevaluation of *The Excursion*, for instance – that serious poem about some ageing men comparing notes.⁴³ On the other hand, I was not proposing that *The Excursion* should, or ever could, eclipse *The Prelude*. The point is rather that a community within which not only *The Prelude* but also *The Excursion* are allowed their full deserts would be far more humane and far more humanly rewarding than any community within which Wordsworth has been admired so far. But then again, this prospect will never be realized unless there are scholars, critics and editors who, having surveyed with Gillian scrupulosity the entire history of the poet's writing, are prepared to offer signposts to readers whose time for Wordsworth is less extensive than their own, as Arnold very responsibly did in 1888

My guess is that, with appearance of *Wordsworth's revisitings*, Arnold's discriminations will now be widely recognized as in need of adjustment, and that Gill's recent selection of Wordsworth's poetry and prose for the *21st Century Oxford Authors* series will also play a role here.⁴⁴ Gill's major concession to the Arnoldian and Modernist bias is that his Oxford selection, while including the texts of the two-part *Prelude* of 1799 and the 1805 *Prelude* in their entirety, has nothing at all from *The Prelude* of 1850. But such an omission was probably inevitable in a single-volume quintessentialization of a poet so extensively great, and Gill's sampling is otherwise richly serviceable. It will go a long way towards meeting the aspirations of new, post-postmodern readers whose proactive catholicity will respect, like Wordsworth's own, both youth and age.

43. Sell, "Wordsworth's genuineness", 171–182.

44. William Wordsworth, *Wordsworth: 21st Century Oxford Authors*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

A communicational criticism for post-postmodern times¹

The changes thrown up by the so-called culture wars of the late twentieth century were so radical as to propel us into a whole new era. Postmodernity's ideological maelstrom, to which literary theoreticians of post-Marxist, postcolonial, feminist, queer, ethnic and religious orientations all gave their input, helped to empower previously underprivileged groupings, so helping to make many large societies a lot more democratic. This has brought important long term benefits to the lives of countless individuals, and some exciting developments in the field of cultural production as well.

Yet even in *post*-postmodern times, the world is still riven by systematic injustices, and by violence on a truly shameful scale. Political, economic, environmental, and communication-technological developments now constantly remind us that we are all denizens of just a single planet. But although we can dream of a new, non-hegemonic kind of globalization, it still seems wise to distinguish between dream and reality.

Certainly most of the literary scholars who are arguing that, in the early twenty-first century, Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur* has acquired fresh relevance are at once optimistic and cautious. David Damrosch has shown that the old canonical classics may continue to attract a disproportionate amount of attention, becoming a "hypercanon" against which the new authors belonging to previously small literatures are mustered into a "countercanon" that is merely the hypercanon's shadow.² In order to remain factually accurate and politically just, literary scholarship does need to retain, as Sarika Chandra and Silvia Lopéz both argue, some insistence on national and regional distinctions.³ And as J. Hillis Miller and Ernst

1. [First published in *Linguistics and literary studies: Interfaces, encounters, transfers*, eds Monika Fludernik and Daniel Jacob (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 127–46.]

2. David Damrosch, "World literature in a postcanonical, hypercanonical age," in *Comparative literature in an age of globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 43–53.

3. Sarika Chandra, "Reproducing a nationalist literature in the age of globalization: Reading (im)migration in Julia Alvarez's *How the García girls lost their accents*," *American Quarterly* 60 (2008): 829–885; Silvia Lopéz, "National culture, globalization and the case of post-war El Salvador," *Comparative Literature Studies* 41 (2004): 80–100.

Grabovsky⁴ emphasize, distinctivenesses also need to be maintained in the face of present-day communications technology. As channels for literary texts world-wide, the new digital media clearly have a huge potential. But their formats, and the culture of reading they encourage, could perhaps be too homogenizing.

In view of such continuing concerns, there is now, I think, a need for a criticism which takes as its special focus the ethics of literary address. Whereas earlier generations of critics have discussed literary texts as creating a special kind of artistic entity, or as conveying some particular message, or as exhibiting some particular manner of representation, or as emanating from some particular ideological position, or as shaping some particular kind of identity, and so on and so on, the kind of criticism I now envisage is communicational, in that it deals with writers' ways of treating their audiences as communication partners. More precisely, it asks whether the addressivity of a given writer in a given text is such as to recognise the human autonomy of readers who do not necessarily share the writer's own historical position. The basic assumption is that those writers who, without trying to de-historicize or silence themselves, allow their addressees a certain leeway are the ones most likely to bring about a community of readers that is indefinitely large but also indefinitely heterogeneous, and therefore non-hegemonic in structure.

This means that the communicational critic is keen to gauge the extent to which writers are un-self-centred, and the extent to which they encourage un-self-centredness in their readers as well. In effect, then, such a critic valorizes a quality which in our human ways of being and interacting is often conspicuous by its absence. For the truth is that we can be very self-centred indeed. We actually spend a lot less time talking to other people, after all, than to ourselves. Seldom literally talking, perhaps, though sometimes even that can happen; sometimes we do talk to ourselves out loud, at least if nobody else is present to make us shy. But certainly *communing* with ourselves: this we do non-stop, usually in silence, and philosophers, linguists, and psychologists have spent a lot of ink debating the degree to which this silent self-communion avails itself of words. With or without words, a very large part of our lives is lived within our own personal thought-world. Thoughts, ideas, impressions, feelings, memories, impulses, intuitions, intentions all circulate within our own consciousness, an entity which doubtless shades off into a subconscious that is even livelier, and even more solipsistic.

At the same time, though, we are all perfectly aware of the existence of other people. Other people are unavoidable, and we might not even want to avoid them. In all sorts of ways, our lives are inextricably interwoven with theirs, and this is

4. J. Hillis Miller, "A defense of literature and literary study in a time of globalization and the new tele-technologies," *Neohelicon* (2007) 34: 13–22; Ernst Grabovsky, "The impact of globalization and the new media on the notion of world literature," in *Comparative literature and comparative cultural studies*, ed. Steve Tötösy Zepetnek (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2004), 45–57.

something to which we are accustomed, and which most of us are probably glad enough to accept, even if it sometimes leads to serious frictions. A totally un-social life is surely difficult to imagine. Nor is interaction with other people by any means beyond our powers. To a fair extent, we do seem able to snap out of our solipsism, and there have even been entire phases of cultural history during which self-enclosure has been more or less discouraged in the interests of a greater communality. Think only of the eighteenth century's dedication to common sense.

But what does greater communality mean in practice? Can it mean that solipsism never rears its head at all? Does privacy altogether disappear? We do of course try to empathize with other people. But can we, with any certainty, really know what is going on in another person's mind? And can they know what is going on in ours?

This question, too, has been much discussed, not least within post-Wittgenstein linguistics, and within Relevance Theory in particular. In Relevance Theory, the assumption that we *can* know another person's mental workings is called "the mutual knowledge hypothesis".⁵ Relevance theoreticians and others reject this hypothesis in its most comprehensive form, but argue that, through careful observation of what other people do and say, and through relating this to everything else we have experienced and know about already, we do arrive at some idea as to what they currently think or mean or want. We then rely on this, the argument continues, as a kind of working assumption by which to regulate our interaction with them, until such time as they surprise us by doing or saying something which seems to contradict it, in which case we update it.

This line of reasoning is based on the same assumption as were accounts of communication in most twentieth century branches of semiotics and linguistics, and also in other types of research which drew on semiotic and linguistic models – in the areas of sociology, narratology, literary studies, film studies, communications studies, and cultural studies more generally. In other words, the argument takes for granted that a person's thought, meaning, or will is a specifiable *something*, which can be unidirectionally transferred to another person's mind, partly by means of an appeal to a unitary context within which language and action are interpretable.

Obviously there will be huge number of communicational interchanges in which this set-up will apply, and in which communicants will therefore have relatively few hermeneutic difficulties. The efforts of twentieth century semioticians and linguists, and of other scholars influenced by their theories, were not based on entirely false premises, and did much to illuminate some types of human interaction. What got overlooked, however, was that interaction is sometimes very strongly dialogical.

5. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 15–21.

One possible source of dialogicality is that the thoughts, ideas, impressions, feelings, memories, impulses, intuitions, and intentions which I have just described as circulating within the consciousness of a single individual can circulate there *between opposite poles*. Self-communion, that is to say, can already be a dialogue, albeit an internal one. So much so, that individuals are often very undecided, not really knowing what they think or mean or want. Under these circumstances, their main motivation for snapping out of solipsism will not be to transmit to other people some kind of hard and fast statement, but rather to compare notes about whatever they happen to have in mind, as a way of exploring, from within more than just one individual's lifeworld, what *might* be thinkable, *might* be meanable, *might* be wantable. The type of interchange to which this gives rise is totally different from the type within which people think of themselves as exchanging mental, intentional, and volitional certainties.

There is also another main motivation an individual can have for opting out of communication in the amply studied form of a *something* sent by an *A* to a *B* within a single context: namely, a solicitude for the human autonomy of the person in the *B* position. Whether by temperament or upbringing, some individuals seem to be more habitually kind and considerate than others, and there are also many types of situation in which friendly deference is positively encouraged. In fact the level of acceptable aggressiveness is much lower in some cultures or subcultures than in others, there being a marked difference between, for instance, the strongly agonistic persuasiveness of academic writing as trained in the United States and the more leisurely, multifaceted and courteous argumentation of scholars with roots in continental Europe.⁶

Uncertainty and friendly deference, two of the main motivations to dialogical communication, tend to co-occur and reinforce each other. After all, communicants who were undecided as to what they think, mean, or want would clearly be rather unwise not to have a certain respect for the opinions of other people. *Vice versa*, communicants who respected other people's opinions would be unlikely to assert their own with too much emphasis. What we are dealing with here is something very close to the quality that Keats called "negative capability": the capability of "of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason", a frame of mind which Keats found clearly apparent in Shakespeare but far less evident in Wordsworth. Wordsworth, he felt, was too "egotistical".⁷

6. Maria Isaksson-Wikberg, *Negotiated and committed argumentation: A cross-cultural study of American and Finland-Swedish student writing* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi Press, 1999).

7. John Keats *Selected letters of John Keats*, ed. Frederick Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 53, 172.

As more or less a synonym for “negative capability” I have suggested the term “genuine communication”, a label which is both descriptive and ethically evaluative.⁸ By genuine communication I mean any kind of communication which respects the autonomy of the human other, which guards against unempathetic solipsism, and which is therefore proactively dialogical in spirit. Schematically, genuine communication involves a triangulation. It is the kind of interaction in which *A* and *B* bi-directionally compare notes about a *C* which can be anything under the sun, including *A* and *B* themselves (as when you and I talk about you and me). *A* and *B* both come to the discussion from within their own lifeworlds, two contexts which will never be totally co-extensive, even though they must partly overlap in the form of mental common ground if communication is to happen in the first place. Then as the result of the participants’ genuine communication, this area of overlap between their lifeworlds will be further extended in terms of knowledge and understanding, so that what happens will be communication in the term’s etymological sense – a “community-making” – even in cases where, because the communicants’ heuristic empathy does not develop into a more long-term sympathy, they simply end up agreeing to disagree with each other. Sometimes their dialogue with otherness will be truly dynamic, prompting them to change their view of anything from the world in general to themselves in particular. But even an agreement to disagree is ethically superior to the plain disagreements, frictions, and conflicts fostered by interchanges that are more unidirectional, non-dialogical, and uni-contextual. Ethically superior: because undistorted by inequalities between one human individual or grouping and another. And because egalitarian, also more peaceable.

Genuine communication is not some ivory-tower fantasy. Human history is often thought of as an endless tale of violence, injustice, oppression, and war, and there is more than enough truth in this to account for the frequency, and indeed the widespread institutionalization, of non-egalitarian communication in symbiosis with many different forms of coercion, divisiveness, and even cruelty. Yet a substantial record could also be compiled of peaceful coexistence: of human tolerance and cooperation under many different kinds of circumstance, all of it made possible by genuine communication.

Its egalitarianism ensures that genuine communication is non-hegemonic. As I say, one of its possible outcomes is disagreement, albeit a disagreement that is agreed upon. This is not at all the same thing as a higher consensus in which

8. Roger D. Sell, “Wordsworth and the spread of genuine communication,” in *Literature and values: Literature as a medium for representing, disseminating and constructing norms and values*, eds Sibylle Baumbach, Herbert Grabes and Ansgar Nünning (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2009), 125–43.

lower-order differences are all levelled out. So little does genuine communication have to do with self-surrender that, having pointed out the value of Keats's term "negative capability", I must now register an important qualification. For Keats, negative capability was sometimes so un-egotistical as to be almost a kind of humble quietism. He said about himself, for instance, that because he was a poet he had no personal identity, and that when he was in a room full of people he had no sense of his own self – as if his negative capability were totally absorbed by the pressing reality of so many human others.⁹ To his way of thinking Shakespeare was amorphous in exactly the same way, a view which anticipated the idealist aestheticizations of Victorian commentators such as Edward Dowden. "Just when we have laid hold of [Shakespeare]", Dowden wrote, "[he] eludes us, and we hear only distant ironical laughter". So in Dowden's view, the best gloss on Shakespeare was a line from *Troilus and Cressida*: "The secrets of nature have not more gift in taciturnity".¹⁰ In point of fact, though, Shakespeare's work was both historically rooted and deeply personal,¹¹ and the same was far more true of Keats than he himself apparently imagined.¹² Conversely, the strong sense which readers often have of Wordsworth's own personality does not mean that negative capability was beyond his reach. True, we are far more aware of Wordsworth's presence in, say, the amazing passage about crossing the Alps in Book VI of *The Prelude* than of Shakespeare's presence during the equally amazing heath scenes in *King Lear*. But in no small part these two different kinds of sublimity are merely those associated with autobiography on the one hand and drama on the other. Elsewhere I have suggested that, despite complaints about Wordsworth's obtrusiveness, he is one of the most genuinely communicational of all poets.¹³

In speaking of Keats, Wordsworth, and Shakespeare in this way, I am already presupposing that literary activities do amount to one kind of communication

9. Keats, *Letters*, 172.

10. Edward Dowden, *Shakspeare* [sic]: *A critical study of his mind and art*. [1875] (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1906), 6.

11. Jonathan Bate, *The genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997), 133–153.

12. John Bayley, *The uses of division: Unity and disharmony in literature* (New York: Viking, 1976), 105–156; Christopher Ricks, *Keats and embarrassment*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

13. Roger D. Sell, "Wordsworthian communication," *Literature as Communication*. Special Issue, ed. Roger D. Sell, *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 6 (2007): 17–45, and "Wordsworth and the Spread". [The fullest statement is Roger D. Sell, "Wordsworth's genuineness," in his *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011), 151–194.]

among others.¹⁴ Within such a perspective, the features which in Kantian, Romantic, and literary-formalist accounts of literature were seen as contributing to a special aesthetic status are conceptualized anew. Literature's beauties and pleasures; the fictionality of many literary texts; literature's lack of a feedback channel from readers to writers: all such characteristics are seen as themselves communicational.

Beauties and pleasures can arise from non-literary uses of language as well – conversation analysts have long been studying the “poetics of talk”.¹⁵ And although a work of art can have an attraction that is psychologically very real for us, so real that we experience it as something positively “there” in the work, and although this impression will certainly not occur unless there are details in the work which give rise to it, a great deal also depends on our own prior conditioning – on what we ourselves *bring* to our appreciation. In ways that pragmatist aestheticians have helped to explain, there are social contracts as to what shall count as agreeable.¹⁶ Our pleasure as readers of literature arises from our communicating membership of a reading circle within which matters of taste and value are under constant, albeit often tacit negotiation.

Fictionality, too, is an element in many everyday, non-literary uses of language whose communicational function nobody would question. As I say, communication is not confined to the statement of hard-and-fast facts, opinions and feelings. Especially by making up stories, a communicant can explore and question general or moral truths that go beyond the detail of particular empirical cases, and opinions and feelings that have yet to be socially stabilized into constant attitudes.¹⁷

As for literature's lack of an obvious feedback channel from reader to writer, genres with no such channel can still allow for a powerful dialogicality of spirit. Late-twentieth-century linguists in the fields of conversation-, discourse- and dialogue analysis pointed out that all writing, no less than all speech, has addressivity.¹⁸

14. Cf. Roger D. Sell, *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000).

15. Deborah Tannen, “Repetition in conversation: Towards a poetics of talk,” *Journal of the Linguistics Society of America* 63 (1987): 574–605, and “Ordinary conversation and literary discourse: Coherence and the poetics of repetition,” in *The uses of linguistics*, ed. Edward H. Bendix (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1990), 15–32.

16. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist aesthetics: Living beauty, rethinking art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

17. Roger D. Sell (2004), “Blessings, benefactions and bear's services: *Great Expectations* and communicational narratology,” *The European Journal of English Studies* 8 (2004): 49–30.

18. Sell, *Literature as communication*, 80–88; Edda Weigand, *Language as dialogue: From rules to principles of probability* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2009).

Still more to the point, the addressivity chosen by literary authors is not solipsistic. Even when they have written under the auspices of a formalist aestheticism, even when they have written drama, a mode in which all the communication may seem to be happening, less between the dramatist and the audience, than between the characters on stage, they have written with other people in mind, the people to whom they have been offering their work for contemplation. By the same token, just as the stipulations of a last will and testament, whose words so obviously prompt survivors to a conscientious reading, may need to be interpreted by expert lawyers, so the readers of a literary text will sometimes hone their responses to it with the help of, say, a literary historian, who thereby begins to serve as a mediating go-between. At best, readers' sense of responsibility towards the fellow-humanity of writers is very strong.

Literary-communicational theory is in harmony with an already clear trend in the marketing and reception of published writing. Over recent decades there has been a major shift in taste and cultural perceptions. While most readers would probably still not object to the writings they admire being labelled as "literature", the term may no longer be regarded as particularly necessary, except, perhaps, by those defending a cherished institutional boundary within universities trying to rid themselves of academic archaism. In the late 1980s Bernard Bergonzi was already resigning himself to a future in which the discipline of English Studies would "explode" into many different enquiries – "cultural studies" and "communications", for instance – which would have nothing fundamentally to do with what he himself had been brought up to think of as literature. Yet he still hoped that universities would afford space to one very small and specialized rump which would devote itself to poetry.¹⁹ Where such territorial anxieties have never arisen or are a thing of the past, the word "literature" has a more neutral loading, which may even be winning back something of the concept's eighteenth century breadth. We can speculate that, before long, it may come to include, not only popular science, philosophy and religious studies, for instance, but history, biography, autobiography, travelogue, children's books, and much else as well. Certainly the nineteenth century's aestheticist limitation of literature to mainly poems, plays and novels is much harder to sustain after the huge ideological upheavals of the late postmodern era.²⁰ From the last decades of the twentieth century onwards, distinctions between high-, middle- and low-brow have been so steadily eroded that their decline may prove to be terminal.

19. Bernard Bergonzi, *Exploding English: Criticism, theory, culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

20. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society* (London: Fontana, 1988), 183–188.

Although a writer such as Pinter is still sometimes perceived, at least in Britain, as “a representative of a high, bourgeois and, sometimes, avant-garde culture” that is simply inaccessible “to those who are excluded from it by class, education and intermediaries such as the *Sun*”,²¹ some of the finest writers in our own time, like Shakespeare in his, have creatively hybridized genres that were basically popular, in this way greatly extending the sheer variety of texts which readers of all backgrounds like to read.²²

Even if we retain the term “literature”, then, any essentialistic definition of it will seem old-fashioned and too restrictive. Literary-communicational theory starts from premises that are down-to-earth and nominalistic. It still refers to poems, novels, and plays as “literature”, but uses the term “literature” as a way of grouping together *all* the texts which many readers have *de facto* found, from whatever causes, most interesting, enjoyable, and lastingly valuable.

Part of the reason why some texts attract large audiences over long periods of time whereas others do not is precisely that they are communicationally genuine. I repeat: *part of* the reason – the claim being made is really *not* essentialistic. Genuineness can never be a *sufficient* precondition for high literary status, and it frequently occurs in many other kinds of communication as well, the vast majority of it quite unrecorded. Also, readers have always applied additional, more exclusively “literary” criteria which have been specific to their own particular phase of culture. Rather, genuineness is a *necessary* precondition – a *sine qua non* – for widespread admiration, even in cases where it is not a feature explicitly praised by reviewers or literary critics. Wordsworth, though accused by Keats and others of egotism, became canonical partly thanks to a communicational genuineness that runs far deeper than any such appearances to the contrary.

Even the three genres valorized by nineteenth-century aestheticism can channel a communicational genuineness that is no less effective than that to be observed in much ordinary everyday conversation. What can happen in poems, plays and novels is unusually easy to see from one of Coleridge’s sonnets:

21. Harry Derbyshire, “Pinter as a Celebrity,” *The Cambridge companion to Harold Pinter*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 266–282, esp. 277.

22. Sell, *Literature as communication*, 253–279. [See also Roger D. Sell, “*Watership Down* and the rehabilitation of pleasure,” *Neophilologische Mitteilungen* 1 82 (1981) 28–35 (rep. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 357, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau (Farmington Hills: Gale, 2014), 5–10), and Karen Ferreira-Meyers, “From minor genre towards major genre: Crime fiction and autofiction,” in *Major versus minor? Languages and literatures in a globalized world*”, eds Theo D’haen, Iannis Goerlandt, and Roger D. Sell (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2015), 171–186.]

TO A FRIEND WHO ASKED, HOW I FELT WHEN
THE NURSE FIRST PRESENTED MY INFANT TO ME

Charles! my slow heart was only sad, when first
 I scanned that face of feeble infancy:
 For dimly on my thoughtful spirit burst
 All I had been, and all my child might be!
 But when I saw it on its mother's arm, 5
 And hanging at her bosom (she the while
 Bent o'er its features with a tearful smile)
 Then I was thrilled and melted, and most warm
 Impressed a father's kiss: and all beguiled
 Of dark remembrance and presageful fear, 10
 I seemed to see an angel-form appear –
 'Twas even thine, beloved woman mild!
 So for the mother's sake the child was dear,
 And dearer was the mother for the child.²³

What gives this poem its paradigmatic significance is the explicitness of its dual address.

In the first word of the first line, Coleridge addresses by name the friend mentioned in the poem's title as its recipient. Charles is the sonnet's addressee persona, to which any other reader can also imaginatively latch on for the purposes and duration of reading it, even though the original Charles (probably either Charles Lamb or Charles Lloyd) was of course a unique individual with his own positionality.²⁴ Exophoric address to a particular reader or group of readers in the real world outside the text sometimes is explicit like this, but is most often implicit. Either way, it is not something a text can do without, and it is bound to be historically specific. No utterance can be directed to the whole human race throughout the whole of human history. Exophoric address always assumes addressees of some particular formation or range of formations, even though our powers of imaginative empathy allow us to process language that is addressed to somebody different from ourselves, as when we read this poem now.

Then in line 12 there is equally explicit endophoric address when Coleridge directs some words to his wife, whom he has so far been describing, together with the baby and himself, within the world of the poem. But what the poem fairly strongly hints is that his relationship with his closest family is a good bit more problematic

23. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The complete poems*, ed. William Keach (London: Penguin, 2004), 122.

24. Sell, *Literature as Communication*, 158–175.

than his relationship with Charles. There is something spontaneous about that exclamatory opening word, and about its being the man's Christian name. Coleridge's little son, by contrast, is merely an "infant", complete with "face of feeble infancy", merely a "child", merely a sexless "it". Even if, at the time of writing, the boy still had no name (even if, that is to say, Coleridge had not yet persuaded his wife to let him be called David Hartley after the philosopher), words such as "he / him", "son", "boy" and "baby" are notably absent. When he addresses his wife, similarly, he does not call her Sara but resorts to the anonymizing poeticality of the second-person-singular pronoun, plus an even more artificial apostrophe: "beloved woman mild!" Then again, although the poem's last lines do describe a moment of shared happiness for the three of them, that happiness seems oddly precarious. There is surely something rather gauche about the claim that the baby and the mother increase each other's value to Coleridge – the wording of line 13 makes it sound as if the baby in particular might otherwise have struck him as worthless. As for the claim that the mother now seems angelic, this reads like a sentimental over-correction of what has gone before: not only of the diabolization of Coleridge himself, but of the prospect of the child's turning out to be no less disastrously sinful than his father.

Within the poem Coleridge is portrayed as a pathologically and self-knowingly introverted individual, who at first instinctively projects his intense guilt feelings on to the new-born baby. His difficulty in casting off his total self-absorption here is even marked in the punctuation. When he puts Sara's more outgoing response to the child within parentheses, it is as if he cannot at first bring her feelings into main focus, as if he does not immediately recognize and identify with them, and also, perhaps, as if he thought of them as merely womanly, and not the kind of feelings to which he himself would immediately confess in the company of Charles and other cronies.

As represented within the poem, then, Coleridge's solipsism is detrimental to his family life. With Charles, by contrast, and with other readers who are able, willingly or reluctantly, to imagine their way into Charles's shoes, Coleridge's communication is in its own terms frank and untroubled. It is here that we have the clue to poets', novelists' and playwrights' most important role within society and culture at large: in the sense there can be of their own communication with their audience as *replacing*, or as being a *better model* than, the communication represented within the world of the poem, novel, or play about which they invite us to compare notes.

Another poem whose exophoric address is explicit is Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. It is Coleridge, perhaps Wordsworth's most important associate, who is the addressee here, and "the poem for Coleridge" was always Wordsworth's own way of referring to this work. Wordsworth's affection for his dazzling but difficult friend can seem to carry over to any other reader of the poem, but for long stretches of text Coleridge in any case falls into the background, so that other readers will have

the very normal experience of belonging to a valued audience which, though by no means universal, is large and only vaguely specific.

Here again, though, the relationship which the writing promotes with readers can be far more humanly rewarding than the communication represented within the world of the poem. Sometimes, indeed, what the poem describes is a total lack of communication between one human being and another – solipsistic monads whose isolation, outside a literary work, would usually be quite without mitigation.

[...] I saw
 A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,
 The beacon on the summit, and more near
 A girl who bore a pitcher on her head
 And seemed with difficult steps to force her way
 Against the blowing wind. It was in truth
 An ordinary sight, but I should need
 Colours and words that are unknown to man
 To paint the visionary dreariness
 Which, while I looked all round for my lost guide,
 Did at that time invest the naked pool,
 The beacon on the lonely eminence,
 The woman and her garments vexed and tossed
 By the strong wind.²⁵

Wordsworth's rather cerebral little disquisition, in the middle of this extract, on his own rhetorical and linguistic difficulty, with its slightly assertive claim for the visionary dreariness of what he saw, is the kind of thing for which he was often criticized. The complaint was that, while his greatest writing is poetry at its most impersonal, he all too often lapses into the kind of opinionated egotism noted by Keats, sometimes in the form of a fussy intrusiveness and bathos.

The irony is that this kind of criticism assumed notions of great literature's special imaginative power which Wordsworth had himself helped to propagate,²⁶ and which did serious injustice to a note of eighteenth century companionability that is his own greatest communicational strength.²⁷ In this passage here, the rather prosaic lines in which he confides to us his rhetorical and linguistic problem are on either side surrounded by the imagistic impersonality of the lines in which that

25. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1799 version), II ll. 314–337, in Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and, Stephen Gill (eds) *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850: William Wordsworth* [1970] (New York: Norton 1979).

26. Robert J. Griffin, *Wordsworth's Pope: A study in literary historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

27. Sell, "Wordsworth and the spread" [and "Wordsworth's Genuineness"].

problem is actually solved, as his eye takes in the ordinary scene, not just once, but twice over, and without imposing ordinary preconceptions or conclusions. In this alternation between the more prosaically personal and the more poetically impersonal, both styles retain their distinctive qualities. The primitive force of his more apophatic perceptions has not been prosified away, yet has nevertheless become a topic of discussion between the intelligent and cultivated writer and readers who are also credited with some sophistication.

The net result is a poetry which at once pierces to the marrow and takes us into the poet's friendly confidence. It thereby actually compensates for, and replaces, the sheer starkness of the non-event which it describes: that total separateness of the two human existences, Wordsworth's and the girl's, each of them in their own desolate universe, Wordsworth having lost his guide, the girl's defining relationship being merely with the wind. Within the poem's *mimetic* world, the gap between Wordsworth and the girl seems quite unbridgeable. In the *discoursal* world which he brings into being, he builds a bridge to his readers. True, readers who register the a-human bleakness of the moment in the poem will do so in their most private being, and may even acknowledge that they themselves can be routinely self-isolating. Yet Wordsworth's prosaic intervention can also draw them into a warmth of dialogue, as it were, a conversation precisely about the strengths or weaknesses of language as an interface between perceptions held in solitude and perceptions shared.

The interpersonal conditions described within Coleridge's sonnet and the passage from *The Prelude* are saddening and incipiently tragic. But even tragedy, thanks to our communion with the tragedian, and with other spectators or readers, becomes a source of pleasure, and communicational breakdown can just as easily become a focus of comedy. Then again, both Coleridge's sonnet and the lines from *The Prelude* are autobiographical, whereas many other poems, and most novels and most plays are largely not so. In fact most novels and most plays are largely fictional as well. But this in no way lessens the tragedy or comedy of the communicational difficulties represented. Nor is a good autobiographical poet's communication with readers necessarily more genuine and exemplary than that of any other good writer.

In the case of a novel entirely written in the form of a first-person-singular narration and therefore *purporting* to be autobiographical, the communicational difference between the author's own, more indirect address to readers and the I-narrator's more direct address both to other characters in the novel and to its readers can create the impression that the I-narrator is unreliable. Readers can have a sense of the author winking at them behind the I-narrator's back, as if prompting them to note symptoms of communicational disability.

The I-narrator in George Orwell's *Coming up for air* (1939), is George Bowling, a beer-bellied travelling salesman, who is at least as self-preoccupied as any character

within the stream-of-consciousness novels of Virginia Woolf. In fact the novel's passages of dialogue between Bowling and other characters are indicatively few and far between.²⁸

For much of the time Bowling's solipsistic musings are somewhat paranoid and self-pitying. They revolve around what he sees as two particular threats to his own comfort and well-being: the sheer ugliness of the suburbia which, during the inter-war years, he sees spreading all around him; and the demands made on him by his own wife and children. Children are in fact something of a problem as far as he is concerned, and Wordsworth, for instance, got it all wrong. The *poetry* of childhood? "There was a time when meadow, grove, and all that"? Baloney! "The truth is that kids aren't in any way poetic, they're merely savage little animals, except that no animal is a quarter as selfish".²⁹ In his utter frustration at his lifestyle as a suburban family man, he suddenly drops everything and makes a bee-line for East Anglia, where he vaguely hopes to escape back into the simplicities of rural life as at the turn of the century. What he discovers on arrival is that his natal village has grown into a suburban sprawl that is indistinguishable from the one in which he has been living as an adult.

He ought to have known better, of course. And he ought to have understood himself better. His hold on fatherhood, in particular, is far more visceral than that of Coleridge. Even though he usually tells himself that he finds his children quite insufferable,

[s]ometimes I've stood over their cots, on summer evenings when it's light, and watched them sleeping, with their round faces and their two-coloured hair, several shades lighter than mine, and it has given me that feeling you read about in the Bible when it says your bowels yearn. At such times I feel that I'm just a kind of dried-up seed-pod that doesn't matter twopence and that my sole importance has been to bring these creatures into the world and feed them while they're growing up.³⁰

This is very close to the uneroticized family values of *Lyrical Ballads*, and leads directly into a rather meadow-grove-and-all-that memory of his own childhood.

It was nine in the morning and I was eight years old, and all round me it was early summer, with great tangled hedges where the wild roses were still in bloom, and bits of soft white cloud drifting overhead, and in the distance the low hills and the dim blue masses of the woods round Upper Binfield.³¹

28. [For a fuller study of *Coming up for air* along literary-communicational lines, see Sell, *Communicational criticism*, 259–275.]

29. George Orwell, *Coming up for air* [1939] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 73–74.

30. Orwell, *Coming up*, 12.

31. Orwell, *Coming up*, 58–59.

At one point he even experiences an epiphany of sorts in the here and now. Leaning on a five-bar gate, he contemplates a field, some primroses in the grass under the hedge, and the remains of what was probably a tramp's fire – a little pile of white embers with a wisp of smoke oozing out of them.

What I felt was something that's so unusual nowadays that to say it sounds like foolishness. I felt *happy*. I felt that though I shan't live for ever, I'd be quite ready to. If you like you can say that that was merely because it was the first day of spring. Seasonal effect on the sex-glands or something. But there was more to it than that. Curiously enough, the thing that had suddenly convinced me that life was worth living, more than the primroses or the young buds on the hedge, was that bit of fire near the gate. You know the look of a wood fire on a still day. The sticks that have gone all to white ash and still keep the shape of sticks, and under the ash the kind of vivid red that you can see into. It's curious that a red ember looks more alive, gives you more of a feeling of life, than any living thing. There's something about it, a kind of intensity, a vibration – I can't think of the exact words. But it lets you know that you're alive yourself.³²

The words he does think of are pretty exact even as they stand. What may help us as readers to approve of them, and what perhaps helped him, more than he knows, actually to find them, is that original poem about “meadow, grove, and all that”, a poem which we, with Orwell, may remember slightly better than does the I-narrator:

O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!³³

This is one of many little ironies by which Orwell, to gently comic effect, is hinting that the fat salesman, though very much wanting to pamper his own sensibility, has actually underestimated his own capacity for joy and happiness. He has been solipsistically slow to derive such feelings from the everyday world around him, and from his everyday relationships with those to whom he is closest.

If this makes the novel sound like a cautionary tale, that is entirely the fault of my exposition. Orwell's communication with us, his readers, is completely free of preachiness or superciliousness. There is not the slightest implication that either he or we ourselves could do any better than George Bowling does in the book. The

32. Orwell, *Coming up*, 163.

33. William Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of immortality from recollections of early childhood”, ll. 131–134, in Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (eds), *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* [“Evening Voluntaries” etc.][1947] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 279–285, esp. 283.

implication is merely that we ought to. Or more exactly: that we ought to get on with other people at least as well as we get on with Orwell *while we are reading what he has written*. This again, though, is merely something which, if we are so minded, we work out for ourselves.

As readers of a good novel, and even of a novel purporting to be an autobiography, then, we can have a sense that the real author is in communication with us about the human relationships represented in the story, and that the author does not have “a palpable design upon us”, to use Keatsian language again.³⁴ With a good play, theatre-goers’ sense of the writer’s presence can be, as I say, less immediate. But they would be no less grateful, if they were to think about it, for being allowed to make up their own minds, and what preoccupies them will be no less centrally a matter of the communicational engagements of the people in the story.

In Pinter’s play *Landscape*, Duff and Beth are sitting on either side of the kitchen table in a large country house. They take turns in making both longer and shorter speeches, but apparently without hearing each other’s voice. Though married, they inhabit two different universes, which are minimally co-extensive, not unlike Wordsworth and the wind-swept girl in the passage from *The Prelude*.

Beth remembers a beach, sand dunes, the sea, her man lying in the dunes, herself suggesting that they have a baby. “Would you like that?”³⁵ She used to feel beautiful, and she remembers the gentleness, the lightness, as men held her arm through a door, down steps, or touched the back of her neck. But *with one exception*, she registers. Then there was that day after the party, when she went out with the dog into the misty morning in her blue dress, and later watched children running through the grass, up the hill. She used to draw, too, but did not draw her man. She drew bodies in the sand, trying to keep in mind the basic principles of drawing “[s]o that I never lost track. Or heart”, even though sometimes “the cause of the shadow cannot be found”.³⁶ Finally, he turned to look at her, though his own face was in shadow. His touch was soft. “Oh my true love I said”.³⁷

As for Duff on his side of the kitchen table, the first thing he would like to tell her is that the dog has gone. Then he describes his walk in the rain: how he wondered what the youngsters under the trees were laughing at, how he saw a man and a woman who then disappeared from view. Near the pond there was “[d]ogshit,

34. Keats, *Letters*, 72.

35. Harold Pinter, *Plays Three* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 167.

36. Pinter, *Plays Three*, 186.

37. Pinter, *Plays Three*, 188.

duckshit ... all kinds of shit ... all over the paths”³⁸ and a bit later on a man in the pub criticized the beer, so prompting the landlord to give him back half a crown. But the man said his pint had cost only two and three, which meant that he now owed the landlord threepence. The landlord told him to give threepence to his son instead. But

I haven't got a son, the man said, I've never had any children. I bet you're not even married, the landlord said. This man said: I'm not married. No-one'll marry me.³⁹

Then the man bought drinks all round and Duff, as an experienced cellar-man, told him something of beer's mystery. Beth, too, he feels, is a professional. She made Mr Sykes an excellent housekeeper, and the two of them together were a good team. That Mr Sykes bought her a blue dress was only natural; he was concerned about what his guests would think. But he was certainly a gloomy bugger, and once when he gave a dinner party Beth was very late getting to bed afterwards, and fell asleep immediately. On one occasion Duff was unfaithful to her, but it was nothing serious, he says, and he told her about it, after which they walked to the pond and she kissed his face. Now, they live in the house alone, and

I booted the gong down the hall. The dog came in. I thought you would come to me, I thought you would come into my arms and kiss me, even ... offer yourself to me. I would have had you in front of the dog, like a man, in the hall, on the stone, banging the gong, mind you don't get the scissors up your arse, or the thimble [...] I'll hang it [the gong] back on its hook, bang you against it swinging, gonging, waking the place up, calling them all for dinner, lunch is up, bring out the bacon, bang your lovely head, mind the dog doesn't swallow the thimble.⁴⁰

Duff and Beth's parallel streams of memory will leave an audience with some open questions. One of these has to do with the curiously insistent motif of children, and the couple's own apparent childlessness: a greater sorrow to Beth, one might assume, though it could be that Duff is taciturnly masculine here; some fellow-feeling certainly seemed to develop between him and the childless man in the pub. Then again, does Duff quietly suspect, and does Beth silently remember, that she and Mr Sykes made love on the night of the party? If so, was Duff's own infidelity in retaliation? And if so, in retaliation to his retaliation did Beth then go completely cold on him, so that in his desperation he has finally raped her? – which could be the one exception to all the gentleness she remembers. And *did* the dog

38. Pinter, *Plays Three*, 179. In quotations from Pinter, three dots are authorial punctuation. When I make a cut, this is indicated by three dots within square brackets.

39. Pinter, *Plays Three*, 174.

40. Pinter, *Plays Three*, 187.

swallow the thimble during some such violent commotion? – which could indirectly explain Duff’s opening mention of the dog’s absence.

But what is absolutely clear is the sheer power of their respective desires which, thanks to the way Pinter has spaced their utterances, culminate at exactly the same moment, desires so different in tone – she ravished by the thought of an utter gentleness, he in a white-hot fury – yet both of them utterly dependent for full consummation on the self-giving of the other. Bearing in mind the way things seem to have turned out, both of them are clearly wounded. Yet on both sides of the kitchen table, the desire for a more genuinely communicational union lives vigorously on, fuelled by memory. There are places in their hearts to which they have denied each other entry. But given the undying strength of their longing, and given that they are under no illusion that the final self-surrender they are hoping for in each other can be induced by coercion, each of them might still come to realise that the responsibility for maintaining the reserve between them has not been all on the other side.

Here again, my own exposition may tend to distort the literary text under consideration into a cautionary tale or sermon. It is I who have introduced the element of moralizing, not Pinter. But my fundamental point is that he has left me free to do so, and has left other playgoers or readers equally free not to do so. His uncoerciveness, and the variety of responses it is likely to invite, mean that he and his audience will be in far more genuine communication than Beth and Duff themselves at the moment, or than the vast majority of characters in his other plays as well. During his unusually long career as a playwright, the number of cases in which he dramatized genuine communication as taking place without any obstacles or qualifications was very limited. To be exact, he did so only twice.⁴¹

One instance was the 1959 sketch *Last to Go*, in which an old newspaper seller and a barman compare notes. David Lodge has already analysed this as a prime example of phatic communication.⁴² Neither of the men is really informing the other of anything very important, and neither of them has any kind of axe to grind. They are simply being sociable. “I sold my last one about then. Yes. About nine forty-five.” “Sold your last then, did you?” “Yes, my last ‘Evening News’ it was. Went about twenty to ten.”⁴³

41. [For a communication-ethical assessment of Pinter’s entire dramatic production, see Roger D. Sell, “Communicational ethics and the plays of Harold Pinter,” Sell, *Communicational criticism*, 293–363.]

42. David Lodge, “Pinter’s *Last to Go*: A structuralist reading,” *The Practice of Writing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), 270–285.

43. Harold Pinter, *Plays Two* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) 234.

The other case is the short play *Night* of 1969, which is Pinter's only dramatization of completely uncoercive, genuinely communicating lovers. This couple are in their forties, and are reminiscing about their shared past, but each from their own point of view. Even their first kiss has lodged as two very different memories or, by now, fantasies: *he* is sure that he touched her breasts from behind her, *she* that she was facing him. He tends to remember "women on bridges and towpaths and rubbish dumps", while she remembers her "bottom against railings and men holding [... her] hands and men looking into [... her] eyes".⁴⁴ They disagree, then. He even asks, "Why do you argue?" But she replies, "I don't. I'm not".⁴⁵ Neither is he. He said he would adore her always, and he always has, and still does. And one point of crucial importance in Pinter is that they seem to have children – they think they hear a child crying at one point. Perhaps partly on the strength of this, they can agree to disagree, even about the most fundamental thing they share: their memories of loving each other.

So why only two such cases in the whole of Pinter? For the same reason, I suggest, that there are so few similar cases in other major writers. The radical dramaturgy by which Pinter underlines communicational impasse in a play like *Landscape* has earned him a reputation as the great connoisseur here. But the phenomenon is no less crucial in writers who would never dream of highlighting it with Pinter's directness. The point, I think, is not that most writers have experienced or observed very few cases of genuine communication in real life, but rather that genuine communication has low tellability.⁴⁶ Interesting stories are about genuine communication's absence, disruption, or total breakdown, and a story in which genuine communication is restored thereby comes to an end. That is why *Last to Go* and *Night* are both extremely short. Over any greater length, the topic would have been unsustainable.

In sum, the communicational exemplariness of poems, novels and plays generally has far less to do with the relationship between characters within the world created by the text than with the relationship between the writer and the public. Paradoxically, the writers of significant works in these genres tell us, or agree with us, or convince us, through their depiction of human interaction, that relationships can be far from ideal, while at the same time giving us, through their own exophoric addressivity, an on-the-pulses experience of an additional, more comfortable human truth. Such works have always been basically *about* communicational dysfunction. But the works themselves have been communicational ameliorative

44. Pinter, *Plays Three*, 219.

45. Pinter, *Plays Three*, 215.

46. Sell, "Blessings."

within society as a whole, a dimension of literary history which is at last coming in for some detailed scholarly examination.⁴⁷

My comments here on Coleridge, Wordsworth, Orwell and Pinter are miniature samples of such examination when it takes the form of a post-postmodern communicational criticism.⁴⁸ As I say, such criticism draws particular attention to modes of literary address which, despite their historicity, acknowledge the human autonomy of any and every reader, so bringing about communities of readers that are indefinitely large but also indefinitely heterogeneous. For critics and teachers drawn to this task, the goal partly recalls an assumption already at work in the rhetorical treatises of the ancient world: the idea that some texts are more suitable than others as models to be emulated in language use more widely. But whereas the rhetoricians of earlier ages were often mainly looking for models of style and persuasiveness, post-postmodern communicational critics will focus on writers' ways of entering into human relationships, both with individual readers and with readers in larger groupings. It is by fostering a greater self-consciousness about the connections between language use and human relationships that communicational criticism will aim to improve, to however small an extent, the chances for greater equality, peaceful coexistence, and fruitful cooperation in a future which ideally would be globalized without being hegemonic.

Granting, as we surely must, that Aristotle was right to claim that human beings learn to do things by imitating examples, critics and teachers do need to highlight cases of communicational good practice. Communicational good practice – as many examples of it as the available page-space or teaching hours will permit – needs to be identified, discussed, and held up for emulation. In communicational criticism as I envisage it, this upbeat task is central. What a communicational critic now seeks to develop is, I would say, a new form of that pleasurable kind of assessment that used to be called literary appreciation. The newness would lie partly in the post-postmodern ideological goal, partly in the heightened sensitivity to communicational ethics, but above all in a pleasurability now consciously stemming from the satisfactions of genuine communication between writers and readers.

47. Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (eds), *Religion and writing in England, 1558–1689: Studies in community-making and cultural memory* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009). [See also Roger D. Sell, Anthony W. Johnson, and Helen Wilcox (eds), *Community-making in early Stuart theatres: Stage and audience* (London: Routledge, 2017).]

48. Cf. Sell, *Communicational Criticism*

Review¹

Till Kinzel and Jarmila Mildorf (eds).

*Imaginary dialogues in American literature
and philosophy: Beyond the mainstream*²

Till Kinzel and Jarmila Mildorf claim to have brought together nineteen papers discussing American literary and philosophical texts which stage imaginary dialogues between people who may be either historically real or entirely fictional. This claim is not strictly true, since the paper by Christoph Schubert analyzes stance marking in an interview which, even if it was rehearsed and edited prior to being broadcast by NBC, really did take place, between Gertrude Stein and the journalist William Lundell in 1934. With this exception, however, the papers are as described, and apart from Schubert, who is a linguist, the book's contributors are all experts on literature, cultural studies, history, or philosophy. What they have to say about the larger contexts within which their chosen texts were written and have been read is helpfully illuminating, even if the book's subtitle is rather confusing. Many of the writers dealt with are mainstream American literary authors and philosophers, and the feature of imagined dialogue itself is pretty mainstream as well, being much more widespread than often supposed. Kinzel and Mildorf's chief claim to originality, both here and in their earlier *Imaginary dialogues in English: Explorations of a literary form* (2012),³ is to have marshalled illustrations of precisely this point.

Their introduction offers a simple formal typology (25), with, on the horizontal axis, dialogue participants who are real historical figures *versus* participants who are invented fictions and, on the vertical axis, dialogues based on real conversations, dialogues involving topics relevant to the real world, and dialogues where the topics are referential only within an invented world of fiction. If the book's contributors received something like this as their guideline, it would help to explain why some of them – Betsy van Schlun, for instance, in her study of

1. [First published in *Language and Dialogue*, 5 (2015): 340–347.]

2. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014.

3. Till Kinzel and Jarmila Mildorf (eds), *Imaginary dialogues in English: Explorations of a literary form* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012).

Poe's "Mesmeric Revelations" (1844) as combining Socratic dialogue with Gothic trappings, or Walter Göbel, in his account of Leon Forrest's novel *Divine Days* (1994) as reflecting African-American oraculture – have given the dialogic nature of their chosen texts fairly short shrift. The features to which the editorial typology draws attention can indeed be read off at a glance, so satisfying an old-fashioned phonocentric preference for the prototypical meaning still assigned to the word *dialogue* in common parlance – for dialogue, that is to say, as an interchange in which two or more people are talking with each other face to face and frequently turn-switching. This understanding of the term is recommended as "concrete", albeit "narrow", whereas "global" approaches are more or less rejected (15–16) out of an apparent reluctance to acknowledge what readers of this journal [*Language and Dialogue*] may already take for granted: that all language use is fundamentally dialogical, even when it is formally a monologue, even when it is written, and even when it is an entire literary work – in which case the dialogicality arises between the person or persons who wrote the work and those who respond to it. The present reviewer's account of all literature as dialogical is mentioned as merely "metaphorical" (15–16);⁴ Antonio Lastra's paper arguing that Thoreau, Heidegger, and Celan enter into dialogue with each other through their texts is welcomed somewhat coolly (Lastra "[raises] the concrete dialogue situation to more abstract philosophical levels" (15)); and Virgil Nemoianu's paper on Washington Irving's sense of books as his "best, most reliable, loyal, and faithful friends" (97), and of himself as continuing the literary tradition by offering warm friendship to his own readers, receives no introductory notice at all. Dismissing out of hand considerations raised by David Fishelov,⁵ the editors merely say that "when a ... text is said to engage in a dialogue with earlier texts by referencing them or alluding to them", this is just another example of the "metaphorical" understanding of dialogue (16). By the same token, the introduction gives little space to communicational ethics, being far more geared to insisting that David Bohm's "wider notion of dialogue" is "implicitly tied to ... [the term's] narrower, more concrete meaning of conversation among two or more people" (15).⁶ Although Bohm's concern about a breakdown of genuine dialogue within and between entire societies is not completely overlooked, the practical value of his desire as a scholar to address the situation by promoting "real" listening is thrown in doubt (15).

4. Roger D. Sell, *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000), and *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011).

5. David Fishelov, *Dialogues with/and great books: The dynamics of canon formation* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010).

6. David Bohm, *On dialogue* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Correspondingly, in Mildorf's own paper the present reviewer's ideas about the social responsibilities of literary critics are frowned on as "political" (313). In another respect, however, Mildorf's paper breaks remarkably free of the introduction's tunnel vision. In considerable detail she shows that, after all, "Sell's concept of [literary] 'dialogicality' applies to [Corey] Mesler's novel *Talk* [2002] in a *more than metaphorical way*" (313, reviewer's italics). Mesler's *Talk* consists of nothing more than the actual words of the characters in dialogue with each other, a postmodernist sub-genre of novel-writing that has become increasingly widespread,⁷ other instances being Nicholson Baker's *Checkpoint* (2004) and Cormac McCarthy's "novelistic drama" *The Sunset Limited* (2006), examined here by, respectively, Sabrina Hüttner and Markus Wierschem. Mildorf's conclusion would apply to all three texts: they are "about talk and dialogue, thus foregrounding the structures, functioning and effects of everyday verbal interactions among people; by placing dialogue center-stage, as it were, the ... [writer] thus invites readers to reflect on the nature of talk and, by implication, perhaps on their own conversational experiences and practices" (313.) The only caveat that should have been mentioned here is that in describing such literary dialogicality we have to be scrupulous about our phrasing. Although it often makes sense to speak of a text's "implied reader", one cannot say, like Hüttner (431), that some particular character in a novel gives voice to remarks and objections which "reflect the reader's reaction", since "the reader" (*tout court*, in the singular, and with the definite article) is a formalist construction that has nothing to do with the historical heterogeneity of real readers. What Hüttner probably wants to say is that the character's remarks and objections are similar, either to those of the text's implied reader, or to her own remarks and objections, both of which propositions may be perfectly viable, but only if formulated with no implication that the said remarks and objections necessarily have a universal human valency. To take a second example, Hüttner also claims that at one point in *The Sunset Limited* "the reader" (as she persists in saying) is "forced" to have a certain reaction (317–18). Writers cannot force readers to do anything at all.⁸ Writers are powerless even to make readers read their texts in the first place, let alone continue reading them – if a book is not to readers' taste they can always, like Dr Johnson, throw it out of the window. Much closer to the mark is Mildorf's talk of writers inviting readers (indefinite plural) to reflect on something, phrasing

7. Cf. Nina Muždeka, "Multifaceted postmodernist dialogue: Julian Barnes's *Talking it over and Love, etc.*, in *Literature as dialogue: Invitations offered and negotiated*, ed.. Roger D. Sell, Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2014), 67–77.

8. Roger D. Sell, (ed.), *Literature as dialogue: Invitations offered and negotiated* (Amsterdam Benjamins, 2014); Roger D. Sell, Adam Borch, and Inna Lindgren (eds), *The ethics of literary communication: Genuineness, directness, indirectness* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2013).

echoed by Wierschem when he says that McCarthy's handling of issues such as the existence or non-existence of a caring God is not an argument pro or con, "but rather an invitation to both readers and the audience to enter the debate" (345).

Kinzel, too, goes against the editorial introduction in his own paper. For one thing, he disregards its taboo against literary dialogues with the dead, describing the critic Jerome J. McGann as engaged in just such a dialogue in his *Swinburne: An experiment in criticism* (1972). For another thing, this topic inevitably involves him in communicational ethics. McGann's choice of the dialogue form resulted partly from his worries about "the impossibility of achieving closure, of reaching a final verdict on any given topic of literary criticism" (259), and partly from a no less troubling suspicion that critical pronouncements in monologue form can fail to capture a question's full complexity and often come across as too authoritarian. Even though Kinzel does not say so, McGann's subtitle for his book about the poet Swinburne (1837–1909) alludes to C. S. Lewis's *An experiment in criticism* (1961),⁹ in which, by developing an empathetically historical mode of interpretation, Lewis sought to eliminate expectations and values extraneous to the true character of particular texts under discussion, and so to beef up literary criticism with a dose of certainty. Lewis's kind of affirmativeness is what makes McGann uneasy, and Kinzel is right to point out that McGann's own "experiment" is modelled, not on Plato's dialogues, where Socrates more or less rules the roost, but on Plato's *Symposium* and Friedrich Schlegel's "Gespräch über di Poesie", texts which, even if the conversations they stage seem rather stilted, do allow a fuller expression of views that are mutually exclusive. Such liberal alternatives to dialectics *à la* Socrates come up for discussion at many points in Kinzel and Mildorf's collection, and are sometimes shown to meet with disapproval, as when the novelist Coulson Kernahan (1858–1943) is represented by McGann as complaining that "this discussion [about Swinburne] is going nowhere and resolving nothing". Yet Clara Jane Watts-Dunton, author of *The Home Life of Swinburne* (1922) and here enlisted by McGann as Kernahan's imaginary conversation partner, gives him a good enough answer: "What are you looking for? A solution to riddles in this man and his work?" (264). We can perhaps add that, if Mrs Watts-Dunton had read Keats's letters, she could also have suggested that both Swinburne himself and the discussion they are now having about him exemplify the kind of "negative capability" admired by Keats in Shakespeare – the capability of being "in uncertainties, Mysteries [*sic*], doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".¹⁰

9. C. S. Lewis, *An experiment in criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

10. John Keats, *Selected letters of John Keats*, ed. Frederick Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 53.

The same would go for another striking exercise in literary criticism: the novelist Henry James's discussion in dialogue form of George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876), examined here by Hans Ulrich Seeber. Though in places faithful to the subtleties of James's text, Seeber sometimes writes as if James had actually made up his own mind and expected readers to get the point: "it is hard to say which ... [of the three different critical verdicts embodied in the imaginary conversationalists] the reader is meant to interpret as the most important and relevant one" (171), a comment whose presupposition surely underestimates not only James's negative capability but also his consideration towards fellow human beings, not least towards George Eliot, to whom an unnuanced opinion could have seemed unjust. Seeber is clearly still drawn to the view, so widespread in semiotics, linguistics, and communicational and literary theory during the twentieth century, that all communication is ultimately transitive – that it communicates *something*, that it "sends a message". So, too, is Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński, who in adopting Seeber's kind of assumption in his paper on George Santayana's *Dialogues in Limbo* becomes equally self-contradictory. On the one hand, he spontaneously salutes his chosen author's negative capability. His portrait of Santayana as a laid-back epicurean with no particular urge to reconcile the different facets of his eclectic mindstyle could hardly be more sensitive or convincing. On the other hand, he claims that Santayana has a "philosophical and literary message", that there is always a "message to the readers of his books", and that his way of writing aims at "conclusive statements" (241, 230, 229).

Five other papers are about writers who probably do use their imaginary dialogues in the hope of getting across a message, but with so much concern for the sensitivities of likely readers that their writing, though not negatively capable in the fullest sense, is significantly undogmatic. First, David Janssens' paper looks at the dialogues in which the main character of Melville's novel *The Confidence Man: His masquerade* (1857) manages, through his many different disguises, to entrap his fellow human beings in his web. As Janssens argues, Melville's own view of human nature could well be just as darkly cynical as that of his main character, and he may indeed be trying to shepherd readers into that same bleak philosophical fold. Yet neither the Confidence Man nor any other character in the novel is an authorial spokesman, and readers are merely invited to interpret the dialogues very carefully. Secondly, Nicole Maruo-Schröder's paper on Charles Brockden Brown's *Alcuin: A Dialogue* (1798) traces how Alcuin, under the influence of a conversation partner by the name of Mrs Carter, moves from a view of women as homemakers unequipped for serious discussion and civic responsibilities to a total rejection of a society whose fine egalitarian principles are so sparingly applied in practice. He even begins to dream of a Godwinian utopia in which the institution of marriage would not exist. Mrs Carter, on her side, defends marriage, partly so as not to be taken for a dangerous libertine, and the dialogue has so many fascinating twists

and turns that it becomes, as Dmitri Nikulin would say, “polycentric”.¹¹ On balance, however, Mrs Carter’s more soberly realistic vision of social justice seems to have the last word, more than likely because Brown, too, is diplomatic. Thirdly, Thomas Sukopp’s paper on Paul K. Feyerabend’s *Three Dialogues on Knowledge* (1991) quotes Feyerabend himself as saying, “[A]n author who presents a view to his readers should never be so shortsighted as to believe that there is nothing more to be said” (285). Fourthly, William James, whose *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), with its final chapter “A Dialogue”, is studied here by Miriam Strube, firmly rejects an endlessly tolerant relativism, yet still gives voice to opposing points of view, so “opening up a space for interpretation, reinterpretation and renegotiation” (221). And fifthly, in that same pragmatist vein, C. S. Peirce believes, as Vincent Colapietro’s paper shows, that a dialogue, even though it may be “inconclusive with respect to a specific answer”, can still reach agreement as to how a question should be addressed. “While the particular issue is left unresolved, a general *method* of resolution [can be] ... proposed” (189). For the pragmatists, any such method will be communal and dialogical through and through. Even when the matter examined belongs to the realm of inanimate nature, it is actually composed within, and by, the process of shared human inquiry, the relationship between one inquirer and another being mediated “by a publicly available domain and ... by widely shared symbols” (191). Peirce particularly stresses that texts which are not dialogues in the formal sense can still “leave upon the reader the impression of having listened to a dialogue” (194). For him, “all thought is addressed to a second person, or to one’s future self as a second person” (201).

In setting up their imaginary dialogues, McGann, Henry James and Santayana seem negatively capable and generous-minded, while Melville, Brown, Feyerabend, William James, and Peirce seem tactful but self-respecting. Writing of this high ethical calibre fully deserves the comparisons drawn by Kinzel and Mildorf’s contributors with dialogicality as so glowingly described by Bakhtin, Martin Buber, and Peter Womack.¹² But the fact remains: dialogues are not always ethically superior to monologues.¹³ Socrates was neither the first nor last human being to manipulate a dialogue, treating his dialogue partners as so many pipes to be played upon, as did also Melville’s Confidence Man, even if Melville himself, as a writer addressing

11. Dmitri Nikiulin, *Dialectic and dialogue* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 81.

12. M. M. Bakhtin, *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Martin Buber, *Between man and man*. (New York: Macmillan, 1978); Peter Womack, *Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 2011).

13. David Fishelov, “Dialogue and dialogicality: Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* and Plato’s *Crito*,” in *Literature as dialogue: Invitations offered and negotiated*, ed. Roger D. Sell (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2014), 23–40.

readers, did not. Conversely, negatively capable dialogicality is sometimes a procrastinating refusal to take responsibility, while a formal monologue, though answering to the twentieth century's transitive model of communication, can be decidedly benevolent, as when its "message" is helpful information or a timely warning.

Some contributors wrestle with exactly these kinds of ethical complexity and communicational paradox. Jack Fruchtman points out that Thomas Paine's political dialogues contain "mini-speeches", whereas "[a] true dialogue must allow the first person to make a point and the other to rebut the arguments on an equal basis" (32, 37). Joe Lockard makes the same observation with reference to the many imaginary dialogues written as between American masters and their slaves, texts which, precisely because of the social inequality between the participants, are disingenuously utopian from the start. And Kurt Müller shows that Benjamin Franklin, though at pains to cultivate a companionably dialogical style modelled on the *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, was also capable of using dialogue more deviously, particularly by adopting a Socratic "mask of humility for the purposes of aggression ... [or as] a means of gently influencing the habits and opinions of others" (45). This, though, tended to leave him with a guilty conscience, because in one part of his mind he really wanted to show his human fellows due respect. Müller thinks that, in his life and works as a whole, his good nature got the upper hand. He actively promoted and participated in "institutions working for an improved culture of both face-to-face conversations and written communications" and strongly endorsed "communicative partnership and exchange" rather than genres such as "the lecture, the sermon, and other forms of 'hierarchical instruction'" (62–63). Franklin "provided a model of social and political interaction based not upon the concept of fixed hierarchies but upon the idea of an open-ended dialogical exchange between different voices which are in principle equal" (63). In all of which, both Müller and Franklin himself are very close to Bohm's "global" take on the failures and successes of dialogue in societies at large, the topic declared off-limits by Kinzel and Mildorf's introduction.

So despite the introduction's preoccupation with easily detectable surface features, and despite some self-contradictions and inaccurate phrasing, both the editors and their colleagues are very much concerned with communicational ethics. Alongside cultural and sociohistorical contextualization, communicational ethics is the collection's other main area of discussion. Especially since the papers are not preceded by abstracts, this, their true character, should have been helpfully signalled from the start, just as the book's mystifying subtitle should have been firmly cut. Nor are these the only improvements the editors could have made, since there still remain a number of factual errors and failures of idiom. Yet even so, students of dialogue, American literature, and philosophy will here find matters of compelling interest.

Political and hedonic re-contextualizations

Prince Charles's Spanish journey in Beaumont, Jonson, and Middleton¹

1. History

The journey to Spain undertaken between February and October 1623 by Prince Charles and George Villiers, Duke (as he became while abroad) of Buckingham, not only triggered a dramatic revolution in English foreign policy but was touched on by a number of literary writers. The present essay deals with some poems by Sir John Beaumont, Jonson's masque *Neptune's Triumph for the Return of Albion*, and Middleton's play *A Game at Chess*. Its first, unsurprising claim is that some knowledge of the political process to which they relate can alert a present-day reader to both resonances and silences in the texts themselves.²

Beaumont, who three years earlier had been introduced by his kinswoman Maria *née* Beaumont, Countess of Buckingham, to her son George Villiers, Marquis

1. [First published in *The Ben Jonson Journal* 22 (2015): 163–187 (2015 Ben Jonson Discoveries Award Essay).]

2. Here I draw on: Martin Butler (ed.), *Neptune's Triumph for the Return of Albion*, in David Bevington, Martin Butler and Ian Donaldson (eds), *The Cambridge edition of the works of Ben Jonson*, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5: 643–672; Thomas Cogswell, "Thomas Middleton and the court, 1625: *A Game at Chess* in context," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 47 (1984), 273–288, and *The blessed revolution: English politics and the coming of war, 1621–1624* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Richard Dutton, "Receiving offence: *A Game at Chess* Again," in Andrew Hadfield (ed.), *Literature and censorship in Renaissance England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 50–71; Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and theatre: Thomas Middleton and opposition drama under the early Stuarts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); T. H. Howard-Hill, *Middleton's "Vulgar Pasquin": Essays on "A Game At Chess"* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995); T. H. Howard-Hill (ed.), *A Game at Chess: Thomas Middleton* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); C. F. Main, "Poems on the 'Spanish Marriage' of Prince Charles," *Notes and Queries* 200 (1958) 336–340; Glyn Redworth, *The Prince and the Infanta: The cultural politics of the Spanish match* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Roger D. Sell (ed.), *The shorter poems of Sir John Beaumont: A critical edition with an introduction and commentary* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University, 1974); Gary Taylor (ed.), *A Game at Chess: An early form and A Game at Chess: A later form*, in Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (eds.), *Thomas Middleton: The collected works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 1773–1885.

(at that time) of Buckingham, and then through Buckingham himself to the King, was a recusant favourably disposed to the plan for a Spanish match. His first poem on the subject, "Of the Princes Journey," must have been written in February or early March 1623, and on March 14th was forwarded by Maria to her son in Spain with the note, "I have sent you some verses of the Princes Jurney. I thinke you will know the father. You see your best Kinsman doeth not forget you."³ The poem was full of optimism, strongly underlining that Charles is very eager to reach Madrid, "[a]nd drawne by love, drawes all our hearts to *Spaine*"⁴ The second poem of the series, "Of the Princes departure and returne," was clearly written after, or in immediate anticipation of, Charles's return to English soil, but merely expressed huge relief, making no reference at all to the Spanish journey's original purpose. The third poem, "Of the Princes most happy returne," said a lot more about how wonderful it was to have Charles in England again, but also claimed that he was still in love with the nymph to whom "*Hesperian* Orchards yeeld . . . golden fruit", and that his way home had been strewn "with Songs, in which the hopes appeare / Of joyes too great for human eares to heare"⁵ This poem, then, was written soon after Charles's homecoming, before either the breakdown of the marriage negotiations or Charles and Buckingham's new ideas about foreign policy had become public knowledge. A fourth poem, "To the Duke of Buckingham at his returne from Spaine," must date from the same time, but like the second poem of the series made no mention of the journey's purpose at all.

Jonson and Inigo Jones planned *Neptune's Triumph* for performance during the Twelfth Night festivities in January 1624. Jonson evidently grasped that at that precise moment in time English foreign policy was far too delicately poised between James's wishes and the wishes of Charles and Buckingham to be clearly mentionable. Although Poet, the masque's Jonsonian character, stressed that he had delayed writing about the Prince's journey till after "the vulgar's chimes" had died down and "every songster had sung out his fit,"⁶ and although the newsmongers featuring in Cook's first antimasque could be imagined as having babbled on the same subject just as unreliably as the common songsters, Poet himself made no direct reference to the Spanish trip's actual aim or outcome, seeming to accept that ordinary mortals would never understand *arcana imperii* in any case, which as it happened had been the main point of James's own poem on the Spanish journey: although the departure of "Jacke and Thom" had "darkt of late / The glorie of th'Arcadian state",

3. Sell, *Shorter poems of Beaumont*, 17.

4. Sell, *Shorter poems of Beaumont*, 129.

5. Sell, *Shorter poems of Beaumont*, 132.

6. Butler, *Neptune's Triumph*, 659.

the “Kinde Sheepeardees” should “bee not soe rashe, in Censuring wronge” but should rather “remitt the Care to Royall Pan / Of Jacke his son and Tom his man”.⁷ At the outset of the masque Poet merely said that Neptune (James) sent Albion (Charles) forth “[u]pon discovery, to themselves best known,” a point taken up no less uninformatively in one of the closing songs, which acknowledged some regret that the triumphal celebration could not carry on a bit longer “[f]or such a prince and his discovery past” (657, 669).⁸ Hardly more illuminating was the Chorus’s assertion that James’s real reason for sending Charles away was to test the people’s love for him. All of which was not only very politic on Jonson’s part, but also fairly characteristic. That his writings did not always reflect a personal voice or opinion is a recurrent theme in Ian Donaldson’s biography,⁹ and when he recycled large chunks of *Neptune’s Triumph* in *The Fortunate Isles*, his masque celebrating the marriage of Charles and Henrietta Maria of France and staged on Twelfth Night 1625, he again seemed to side with unfathomable wisdom against foolish ignorance, whose vanity was on that occasion represented in the Rosicrucians’ Faustian dreams of power. Even more cool-headedly diplomatic, however, was the complete silence of *Neptune’s Triumph* as to the threats to its own staging. By the time Jonson was writing it, everybody in the know had begun to realize that, with the failure of the Spanish journey and the mooted of Henrietta Maria as a suitable replacement for the Infanta, there were tensions between the Spanish and the French ambassadors to London, tensions which did finally lead James to cancel the plan for Twelfth Night 1624. Not until eight months later, in August, did a Jonson masque venture an explicit dig at Spain’s deteriorating role in British affairs: in *The Masque of Owls at Kenilworth*, mention was made of a Spanish teacher who had been hoping to coach English ladies, “[h]ad the match gone on”, but who “since the breach / ... has not a scholar to teach.”¹⁰ The crucial turning point had been March 23rd, when James, having instructed parliament to come to a decision after hearing Buckingham’s account of the Spanish trip, reluctantly agreed to tell Philip IV that the whole thing was off. By August, the new foreign policy was not only irrevocable but common knowledge. For English ladies to study Spanish could now have seemed as pointless as Jonson’s jibe alleged.

Also in August 1624, from the 5th to the 14th, Middleton’s *A Game at Chess* was performed by the King’s Men at the Globe, and to a quite exceptionally

7. “Off Jacke and Tom,” *The Poems of James VI*, ed. J. Craigie (Edinburgh: STC, 1958), 192–193.

8. Butler, *Neptune’s Triumph*, 657, 669.

9. Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), e.g. 254.

10. Ben Jonson, *The Masque of Owls at Kenilworth*, ed. James Knowles, in Bevington et al., *Cambridge Jonson*, 5: 673–684, esp. 683.

enthusiastic reception from all classes of society. Its popularity was partly the result of Middleton's having made the same calculation as Jonson in his *Kenilworth* masque: that it was now open season for unflattering references to Spain and Spaniards. The play directly tapped in to populist tracts by John Gee and Thomas Scott, *The Foot out of the Snare* and *The Second Part of Vox Populi*, whose take on the Spanish journey was already helping to stir up a huge surge of anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic feeling.¹¹ Scott's tract in particular, by squarely supporting Buckingham's parliamentary travel narrative, greatly improved (for the time being) his public standing. Before and during the Spanish journey, Buckingham had often been demonized as a king's favourite far too enamoured of Spain. Now, he was more likely to be seen as a hero who had helped Charles rescue the entire nation from Spain's clutches. Especially given Middleton's sustained metaphor of Anglo-Spanish relations as a game of chess, the play could seem to endorse such black-and-white perceptions. Whereas Beaumont's first poem had said Charles was drawn to Spain by love, and whereas the Chorus in *Neptune's Triumph* had said he was sent there by James to test his compatriots' love for him, in *A Game at Chess* Charles and Buckingham are lured by the enemy to their bastion in an attempt to win them over to evil Spanish ways, and the satire of Count Gondomar, Spain's ambassador to London from 1613 till 1622, could seem especially virulent. In fact some recent scholars have wondered how a play apparently so critical of a great foreign power, and of an ambassador with whom James had enjoyed a warm personal friendship, could have been licensed and performed in the first place. At the request of the new Spanish ambassador, James himself, not unconcerned about the offence that might be taken by Philip as a fellow-monarch, did finally put a stop to it, and official questionings and reprisals were also set in motion. But neither Middleton nor the players got into serious trouble. As things turned out, they could not have chosen a better moment.

A fifth poem by Beaumont is dateable by its title: "Upon the anniversary day of the Princes returne, October the fifth [1624]." Buckingham could have presented this to Charles while he was recovering from a riding accident. Like the second and fourth poems in Beaumont's series, it dealt only with the nation's joy at seeing Charles in England once again. There was no allusion to the Infanta, no hint of the recent disagreement between Charles and James or of the increasing certainty of war with Spain, and no mention of the now likely marriage between Charles and Henrietta Maria, even though Beaumont was before long to celebrate that union in an epithalamium, and to include a passage in "The Crowne of Thornes", his

11. John Gee, *The Foot out of the Snare* (London: Robert Milbourne, 1624) and Thomas Scott, *The Second Part of Vox Populi* ([London: N. Okes and J. Dawson], 1624).

unpublished devotional *magnum opus*, on Henrietta Maria as the English Catholics' "second Marie", who would hopefully have "a farr securer life" than the first one did – Mary Queen of Scots, "our glorie of the north".¹²

2. Formal features

Political re-contextualizations, then, can be very worthwhile. But what a present-day reader of these texts could also find helpful is another kind of re-contextualization, which would explain why the earliest respondents to them might have found them pleasing or unpleasing. Pleasure is one of the things that a text does have to provide before it can win literary status within the community, and the exact nature of the pleasure it first offers is partly specific to that particular community at the particular moment in time. If historical scholars describe a literary text's context without including this hedonic dimension, they are not really being historical *enough*. Their re-contextualization will be insensitive to the kind of thing the text really was in its there-and-then, and to the full range of things it was really likely to do. And by evoking no historical pleasures with which present-day readers' own sources of enjoyment can be brought into relation, it will offer them less than full assistance in negotiating the past.

Many literary pleasures can be grouped as pleasures of literary form. These are always communal, and can indeed consolidate a community. A community is not the same thing as a consensus, but can be internally divided. So representatives of different religious, political, or other groupings can be brought together in deriving precisely the same formal pleasures from one and the same literary work, written within some of the shared traditions associated with a shared language. Or to spell out a corollary, a respondent can greatly enjoy and admire a literary work's formal features without necessarily sympathizing with all the sentiments or values it entails.¹³ In this sense, literary-formal pleasures are independent of content.

More precisely, literary-formal pleasures arise as co-adaptations between each new instance of literary writing and pre-existent sociocultural norms as regards genre, prosody, style more generally, and language. Basically, this means that writers and those who respond to them are for ever meeting each other half-way. Writers have no choice but to adapt to pre-existent formal expectations, but can be far

12. Roger D. Sell, "Sir John Beaumont and his three audiences" in Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (eds), *Writing and religion in England, 1558–1689: Studies in community-making and cultural memory* (Ashgate: Farnham, 2009), 195–221 [= item 4 in the present selection], esp. 211.

13. Roger D. Sell, *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000), 233.

from slavish, and presumably hope that the community will reciprocally adapt to their own projects, some of which may entail formal innovations. At best, anything challengingly unexpected will come into symbiosis with the reassuringly familiar, the new never being absolutely new – which would be impossible – but always building on the old. For a writer, the pleasure is in fulfilling, exceeding or breaking with formal expectations. For a respondent, it is in grasping, though often only subliminally, what is going on here, and sometimes in acquiring an extended sense of the textually possible, which can from then on be enjoyably shared with others, albeit often tacitly.¹⁴

The five texts by Beaumont would have been immediately experienced as court poetry. They referred to Charles as a celestial body far brighter than the sun, who disappeared to both the nation's and nature's utter despair. The wit ranged from fairly intricate astrological considerations and playful pathetic fallacies to tableaux featuring personnel from classical mythology. Such motifs and imagery were thoroughly familiar from many earlier Renaissance poems, paintings, and masques. During the descriptions of Charles at sea, aquatic fantasies such as the marriage of the Thames and the Medway in *The Fairie Queene* or Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" were, culturally speaking, close at hand, and the figuration of the James-Charles-Buckingham trio as Anchises-Aeneas-Achates evoked heroic Virgilian connotations that were par for the course in Humanist epics and encomia.

By some readers the verse form in "Of the Princes journey" would have been recognized as, no less appropriately, the heroic stanza, while the use in "Of the Princes departure and return" of the Petrarchan sonnet form, but with a resounding final couplet as in a Shakespearian sonnet, would have seemed somewhat distinctive but also decorous, some of the effect stemming from Beaumont's mastery of parison and antithesis. As for the other three poems, they were all in iambic pentameter couplets, his most customary verse form, and one which was wide-spread and already skilfully used. Beaumont would have understood Jonson's complaint about "Womens-Poets" who "write a verse, as smooth, as soft, as creame; / In which there is no torrent, nor scarce streame."¹⁵ He himself both advocated, and wrote, couplets which "like a milky torrent flow",¹⁶ an alliance of smoothness to force which anticipated not only Denham's emulation of the Thames ("Strong without rage, without ore-flowing full")¹⁷ but also the regularities and antithetical structures of the fully-fledged Augustan heroic couplet.

14. Sell, *Literature as communication*, 145–158, 178–193.

15. *Discoveries*, ed. Lorna Hutson, in Bevington et al., *Cambridge Jonson*, 7: 481–596, esp. 524.

16. Sell, *Shorter poems of Beaumont*, 123.

17. Sir John Denham, "Coopers Hill"; in his *Poems and Translations with the Sophy* (H. Herringman: London, 1668), 1–22, esp. 12.

In terms of language, Beaumont adapted more readily to his readers' expectations than he assumed his readers would adapt to anything unexpected in his own phrasing. Anticipating Dryden and Johnson on what was to become known as Metaphysical poetry, he deliberately avoided "termes of Arte" and "strange conceits" hidden in "dusky clouds". There was no pedantry, none but "fit Epithets" and "pure" phrases, no archaic words, and no hint of social or regional variation either.¹⁸

The net result of all this could be decidedly charming:

See how the water smiles, the wind breathes faire,
The cloudes restraints their frownes, their sighes, their teares,
As if the Musicke of the whisp'ring ayre
Should tell the Sea what precious weight it beares.¹⁹

This met every formal expectation. Even those magical last two lines would have fallen pleasantly into place with cultural memories of other remarkable boat trips, real and imagined – Queen Elizabeth on the Thames, Plutarch and Shakespeare's Cleopatra in her barge at Cydnus. Beaumont, albeit the poet of a marginalized religion, in terms of form achieved centrality, and lastingly so. No word now strikes us as odd here.

Some of the verse passages in *Neptune's Triumph* were broadly speaking in the same courtly idiom as Beaumont's five poems, and there was even one close parallel. During Charles's sea journey home, Beaumont had "old *Nereus* on his Dolphin" calling his daughters "from their secret caves, / (Their snowy necks are seene above the waves)." Charles, he tells them, is the only son of "that great Lord, about whose Kingdomes run / Our liquid currents, which are made his owne". And

See how his lookes delight, his gestures move [!]
Admire and praise, yet flye from snares of love:
Not *Thetes* with her beauty and her dowre,
Can draw this *Peleus* to her watry bowre.²⁰

Jonson for his part included reports to the effect that "silver-footed nymphs" "had their several hairs made into net / To catch the youths in as they come on shore" and that, although the sirens had done their utmost to entice Charles, they "have him not".²¹ If Jonson had seen a manuscript copy of Beaumont's lines, he could well have taken note. Yet he could easily have written his own lines in any case, so predictable were such motifs and mythological figures in court writing. It was all part of the expected delightfulness.

18. Sell, *Shorter poems of Beaumont*, 123–124.

19. Sell, *Shorter poems of Beaumont*, 129.

20. Butler, *Neptune's Triumph*, 132.

21. Butler, *Neptune's Triumph*, 665–666.

Even so, in Jonson's hands it could take on new life. This is something to which Martin Butler, at one point in his edition of *Neptune's Triumph*, does not pay full attention. In effect, he tries to force home a political re-contextualization *at the expense of* imaginative delightfulness. The masque's first reference to the sirens came at the beginning, when Poet told that Cook that the entertainment was *not* going to show "how the sirens wooed him by the way".²² Here Butler's footnote reads:

The fable casts Charles as Odysseus (Ulysses), journeying by sea between countries and resisting the Infanta's bewitching charms Possibly this account of his escaping the seductive sirens echoes the English anxiety that, while at Madrid, he might be forced to convert to Catholicism. Certainly it plays on the fear of many that for a time he had effectively become a prisoner of the Spanish.²³ (658)

This overlooks the facts that the sirens' wooing happened "by the way [home]" (whereas the Infanta had of course remained in Spain), and that Poet spoke of sirens in the plural (whereas the Infanta was of course a single individual). In suggesting that it was the sirens here who channelled Englishmen's remembered anxiety about Charles's virtual incarceration in Spain, Butler also blurs the fact that this particular function was served by the immediately previous line, where Poet said the masque was also not about to show "what the arts used to make him stay". Above all, Butler misses both the Jonsonian self-irony and the Jonsonian urge to free-wheeling imaginative hedonism at that later stage in the masque when it *did* show the sirens plying their charms, and in amusing detail that went a good bit further than Beaumont's parenthesized peep at the Nereids' "snowy necks":

SARON	And the sirens have him not,
PORTUNUS	Though they no practice nor no arts forgot
	That might have won him, or by charm or song,
PROTEUS	Or laying forth their tresses all along
	Upon the glassy waves –
PORTUNUS	Then diving –
PROTEUS	Then
	Up with their heads, as they were mad of men –
SARON	And there the highest-going billows crown,
	Until some lusty sea-god pulled them down. ²⁴

22. Butler, *Neptune's Triumph*, 658.

23. Butler, *Neptune's Triumph*, 658.

24. Butler, *Neptune's Triumph*, 666.

Butler too quickly adopts Herford and Simpson's suggestion that the females involved here were not in fact the sirens, of whom, at least according to *Odyssey* 12: 52, there were only two, but Mermaids or Nereids, of whom there were, as one of the masque's sea deities later points out, fifty.²⁵ Jonson would not have made that kind of mistake. Rather, he was imagining two different rounds of temptation, the one very closely following on the other: first, in the immediately previous lines, the many Nereids (one of whom is named Doris) or "silver-footed nymphs" (a Homeric phrase which in his marginalia is noted as applying to "Thetis, Panope, Doris, etc.")²⁶ wove together *their* "several hairs" to try and net the two "youths"; and then, in the lines just quoted, the two sirens invitingly laid *their* tresses along the waves, for Charles only.

The formal pleasures arising from a masque involved conventions, not only in the writing of both verse and prose, but in stage architecture, machinery, costume, acting, music, dancing, and overall structure. And if the poetic conventions for mythological fantasy could be pleasingly followed, developed, broken, played with, so, too, could other conventions. At the beginning of *Neptune's Triumph*, for instance, Poet and Cook had a kind of meta-masque discussion about one key feature: the antimasque. At first it looked as if this time there was not going to be an antimasque at all. Poet professed to think antimasques were no "worthy part of presentation, / Being things so heterogene to all device, / Mere by-works, and at best outlandish nothings".²⁷ An audience's heart would have sunk at this, and when Cook himself supplied his "metaphorical dish" of an antimasque of newsmongers emerging from a kitchen pot,²⁸ spirits in the Banqueting House would have risen all the higher, only to rise even higher still when, just as everything seemed to be coming to a close, Cook suddenly introduced a second antimasque! – of wildly dancing sailors. True, some interpreters have seen Cook as embodying the non-literary showmanship which Jonson allegedly despised in Inigo Jones. What this reading fails to see is that Jonson actually endorsed Cook's pro-antimasque views, not just once but twice, and would have been robustly teasing his audience here. Just as the masque at first apparently refused to talk about the sirens but then later on did so with almost pornographic gusto, so the initial ostensible refusal to meet the audience's appetite for antimasques would have made the subsequent, and re-doubled concession to it all the more gratifying. Anybody in the audience would have instinctively enjoyed the unusualness of the second antimasque, even

25. Butler, *Neptune's Triumph*, 670.

26. Butler, *Neptune's Triumph*, 672.

27. Butler, *Neptune's Triumph*, 660–661.

28. Butler, *Neptune's Triumph*, 661.

if connoisseurs might have been able, like Butler in a much better footnote, to draw comparisons with *Pan's Anniversary* and *Campion's Masque of Squires*.

The wild energies and jocularity of the two antimasques invite the label “carnavalesque”, and so do many other features: the bandying about of Latin tags, Cook’s terms of art – the expression *olla podrida* is not to be found in Beaumont!²⁹ – and Cook and Child’s low-life slang. But the carnivalesque in literature is not restricted to a socio-political wavelength. Granted, when Child described some of the human ingredients in the first antimasque dish as “A fine laced mutton / Or two, and either has her frisking husband”,³⁰ there was a calculated and, if you will, subversive scurrility in the demotic mention of prostitutes and their oversexed menfolk in blank verse, traditionally the vehicle of higher topics as discussed by a higher order of characters. But Jonson’s hedonic drive was far too powerful to content itself with being impolite. On the contrary, he extended the limits of imaginative topsy-turvydom in every kind of register. Take, for instance, Cook’s transmogrifying parody of Poet’s solemnly expounded main device – the whole business of Albion coming home on a floating island sent by Neptune:

I would have had your isle brought floating in now,
In a brave broth and of a sprightly green,
Just to the colour of the sea, and then
Some twenty sirens singing in the kettle.³¹

Once again, Jonson *knew* there were only two sirens in Homer. Cook’s kettleful of twenty is sheer delighted hyperbole. Such lines were not sociopolitically loaded, but were boisterous, ingenious fun. Or take a more courtly passage:

Now turn and view the wonders of the deep,
Where Proteus’ herds and Neptune’s orcs do keep,
Where all is ploughed, yet still the pasture’s green,
The ways are found, and yet no path is seen.³²

The wonders to which this pointed were a contraversion of the ordinary. They included, not just the mythological deities and beasts, but also the element in which those beings lived. In a painting, sea would have remained merely sea. In Jonson’s wording, sea was something new and strange, because he gently teased out meanings of *plough* and *way* that were slightly less literal than the most normal ones.

29. Butler, *Neptune’s Triumph*, 661.

30. Butler, *Neptune’s Triumph*, 662.

31. Butler, *Neptune’s Triumph*, 659–660.

32. Butler, *Neptune’s Triumph*, 667.

Whereas stale language goes together with stale perceptions, carnival word-games of Jonson's delicacy were, and remain, refreshing. There is a sense, after all, in which nothing "is" until it is put into language, and something which "is" can disappear or change if language is used differently. As Wallace Stevens remarked, "Life consists / Of propositions about life."³³

Moving on again to August 1624, perhaps the main formal challenge Middleton was offering in *A Game at Chess* was hermeneutic. Here was a drama à clef. The various chess pieces represented, and sometimes even directly impersonated, the main movers and shakers in Anglo-Spanish affairs. But not everyone in the audience was going to work out who was who. Nor would everyone be able to follow the fairly complicated plot. Purportedly, the idea of chess structured the entire story, and certainly it had a clear general function as moral and national allegory: the White pieces were virtuous English Protestants, the Black pieces evil Spanish Catholics. But that an entire audience would be able to trace every detail of the story in terms of chess-moves was unlikely, and the real action could always seem somewhat elusive. Particularly during the last part of the play, where the White Knight and White Duke, the Charles and Buckingham duo, have been lured by the Black Knight, the Gondomar character, into Black HQ, it would have been extremely difficult for an audience to foresee how they could possibly re-emerge free and victorious. It could well have felt as if the play had got stuck in a cul-de-sac.

Then, precisely when the puzzle was at its most troubling, Middleton pulled off an impressively co-adaptive *coup de théâtre*: an unforeseeably witty come-uppance for the Black Knight, but one which anyone could enjoyably recognize as poetic justice, and which more learned theatre-goers could also relish in terms of the Epimenides paradox (which had Epimenides, himself a Cretan, saying "All Cretans are liars"). Similarly, and to crown it all, the remaining Black pieces were then swept off the board into a bag which, "like hell-mouth, opens / To take her due",³⁴ a totally unpredictable spectacle, yet drawing on comfortably ancient imagery.

Pleasures were no less guaranteed by Middleton's somewhat less astonishing co-adaptations. As with the antimasques in *Neptune's Triumph*, *A Game at Chess* had structural features which any audience would experience as satisfyingly usual or unusual and which seasoned spectators might be able to contrast or compare with particular precedents. The Black Queen's (female) Pawn's resort to the so-called bed-trick could have recalled *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure* and Middleton's own *The Witch* and *The Changeling*. Then at the beginning of the last

33. Wallace Stevens, "Men made out of words", in his *Selected poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), 90.

34. Howard-Hill, *Game at Chess*, 188.

act, on the arrival of the White Knight and White Duke in Spanish parts there was a kind of mini-masque of welcome. Music played, and an altar was revealed with statues standing on either side of it. Then after the singing of a song, the two statues started to move, doubtless recalling for some theatre-goers the animation of Hermione's apparent statue in *The Winter's Tale*, though the device was also well within the capabilities of masque-makers such as Campion or Jonson and Jones. Part of the fascination, however, was parodic, in that the spectacle, even if it had all the dignity of Albion's welcome back into the court of Neptune in Jonson, was actually laid on by the sinful Black side, whose very blackness would normally have been associated with an antimasque, the expectation also challenged in Jonson and Jones's first collaboration, *A Masque of Blacknesse* (1605). Then again, when the White Knight and the White Duke professed to their Black hosts their own total unsuitability for high station, laying claim to substantial indulgence in some of the seven deadly sins, the most obvious of several forerunners was *Macbeth* (an earlier text of which Middleton himself may have revised for a court performance),³⁵ where Malcolm had made similar self-accusations as a way of testing Macduff.³⁶

As for language, that spoken by the virtuous characters had a certain high-tone rigour, but that of the Blacks was far more varied and exciting. When writing line 26 of *Lycidas*, "Under the opening eyelids of the morn," Milton may have remembered the erotic lyricism of the Black Bishop's Pawn,³⁷ and if so, we can hardly blame him:

Upon those lips, the sweet fresh buds of youth,
The holy dew of prayer lies like a pearl
Dropped from the opening eyelids of the morn
Upon the bashful rose.³⁸

And as the run-up to the aforementioned masque parody, the same Pawn welcomed the White Knight and the White Duke with a ten-line speech in florid Latin prose. But the most ear-catching language of all was spoken by the Black Knight, whose blank verse ranged from a lofty formal manner close to that of the high Whites, through racily realistic passages, sometimes studded with terms of, say, military or

35. Stephen Greenblatt (gen. ed.), *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 1997), 2563.

36. R. C. Bald (ed.), *A Game at Chesse by Thomas Middleton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), 72; David M. Holmes, *The art of Thomas Middleton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 193.

37. *The poems of John Milton*, eds. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (Longmans: London, 1968), 241. Milton's apparent borrowing was pointed out by Alexander Dyce in his edition of *A Game at Chess* for his *The works of Thomas Middleton*, 5 vols (Edward Lumley: London, 1840), 5: 301–403.

38. Howard-Hill, *Game at Chess*, 77.

culinary art, to carnivalesque parody of all things sacred or honourable. If he had been a lower-class character this last mode could have come across as undermining the social hierarchy. But because, though of different nationality and religion, he wielded power at the same elite level as the high Whites, it would not have worked that way, but rather contributed to an amused and amusing self-criticism. He was for ever boasting of his own achievements in terms which, imaginatively, rumbustiously, sardonically, demeaned them. Instead of saying something along the lines of “I have exercised considerable influence at court,” he said

Sirrah, I have sold the groom o’ the stool six times,
And received money of six several ladies
Ambitious to take place of baronets’ wives;
To three old mummy-matrons I have promised
The mothership o’ the maids.³⁹

The main linguistic similarity between *A Game at Chess* and *Neptune’s Triumph* was in the variety and intensity of wording. The main difference was that in *Neptune’s Triumph* the beautiful high courtly style of Poet, the sea-gods, and the Chorus had on balance the upper hand over the less polite registers, which merely threw it into higher relief, whereas in *A Game at Chess* the Black Knight was such a dominantly voluble character that it was his idiom, backed by that of other Machiavellian cynics such as the Fat Bishop, which became the play’s norm. As a result, the blank verse of the high Whites could potentially seem a rather precious deviation. Black and White were stylo-linguistically transvalued, in other words, so offering the audience abundant formal pleasures in the nature of sharp addictive surprises.

3. Dialogicality

Other pleasures arising from literature can be grouped as pleasures of literature as dialogue. Unlike the often less conscious pleasures of literary form, these are pleasures of which a respondent will probably be able to give some immediate account. This is because they are directly bound up with the particular text’s content, about which writers and respondents in effect compare notes, such being the whole essence of literature as dialogue.

But literary-dialogical pleasures, too, though taking on changing inflections as a text continues to attract respondents over time, must be covered in any historical re-contextualization that aspires to adequacy. Present-day readers will be unable to enter into their own kinds of dialogue with Beaumont, Jonson, and Middleton,

39. Howard-Hill, *Game at Chess*, 154–155.

for instance, unless they grasp the addressivity of those writers as having in the first instance been directed towards contemporaries, sometimes very specific contemporaries.

This, in the cases I am examining, brings us back to political re-contextualizations, since very specific addressees were agents in the foreign-political process to which the texts related. But a re-contextualization in terms of literary-dialogical pleasures complements a political one with considerations best described as humanizing. What it deals with is questions of ethics, the phenomenon at issue being the communication which takes place between literary writers and those who in one way or another respond to them.⁴⁰ When both sides in this writer-respondent dialogue duly respect each other's human autonomy, and when the complexities of human thought and experience are not coercively oversimplified, pleasure arises for the simple reason that such ethically acceptable communication always *is* pleasurable, whether under literary circumstances or any other.

Beaumont's joy at the prospect of a Spanish marriage was unmistakable, and his admiring love of Charles, that "precious weight" entrusted to the sea, equally clear. A passage in "Of the Princes most happy returne" expressed an almost fatherly concern for Charles's safety, taking sixteen lines to tell how he was nearly drowned in a storm when trying to get out to the British fleet, newly arrived off St. Andrea. In the anniversary poem there was even an elaborate conceit to the effect that, from now on, Vertumnus would supply the fruits of autumn out of love, not for his Pomona, but for the returned Charles. No less jubilant was the same poem's emphasis on the chastity of Charles's own amatory inclinations. Nereus told his snowy-necked daughters that the reason for Charles's total lack of interest in their charms was his unwavering love for that "Nymph of high and heav'nly race", recipient of golden Hesperian fruit,⁴¹ a claim which chimed in well with the dignifying allusion to Aeneas.

Nor did Achaten-Buckingham pass unpraised, "My Patron and (too bold I speake) my friend".⁴² But Beaumont was also doing what, in her note to her son, Maria had done on his behalf ("You see your best Kinsman doeth not forget you"). C. F. Main is right to say that, as compared with contemporary poems which illegally criticized the Spanish venture, Beaumont's writing on the subject could make fulsome reading.⁴³ Buckingham was James's Lord High Admiral, but when

40. Roger D. Sell, *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011); Roger D. Sell (ed.), *Literature as dialogue: Invitations offered and negotiated* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2014).

41. Sell, *Shorter poems of Beaumont*, 132.

42. Sell, *Shorter poems of Beaumont*, 143.

43. Main, "Poems on the 'Spanish Marriage.'"

Beaumont wrote that the ship carrying Charles across the Channel was “rul’d by him, who can the waves command”,⁴⁴ the cultural memory of Christ’s mastery over the wind and the waves in *Mark* 5: 35–41 was potentially disconcerting. So was that suggestion that the return of Charles had brought Vertumnus to snub Pomona. In early-modern England, male beauty was much more freely discussed than in Victorian times and later. But any hint of a homo-erotic attraction in such close proximity to Buckingham, known as the King’s Ganymede, could give a hollow ring to the poem’s mention of Buckingham and James as Achates and Anchises.

Beaumont was a fine poet who deserves to be better known today. But in writing this group of poems he was in an unenviable position. His reason for seeking a court career was that he wanted to win over Buckingham, James, Charles and thereby the whole country to the Old Religion. But this meant that his social inferiority *vis à vis* these poems’ immediate addressees was all the more frustrating. The dialogicality he was attempting with his superiors was not really genuine, because the spirit in which it was conducted could not normally be egalitarian. This resulted in some desperate awkwardnesses, as when the poem to Buckingham not only reminded him of favours past, but complained that James’s reliance on Buckingham “in great affaires” was now so heavy as to leave Buckingham no time or energy to support his best kinsman.⁴⁵ No less gauchely, the anniversary poem to Charles asked him to acknowledge the services of Buckingham – that servant chosen for him by James as “best of guides”.⁴⁶ If Buckingham did present these lines to Charles, both he and Charles could only have perceived them as scratching Buckingham’s back in the hope that he would scratch their author’s in return. That Beaumont enjoyed committing such pleas to paper is inconceivable, and it is difficult to believe that the addressees would have enjoyed them either, except insofar as content-neutral pleasures of form were still on offer.

Neptune’s Triumph was written in no less awareness of social hierarchy than the five poems by Beaumont. True to genre, it celebrated James, but also his entire court. In the Chorus’s concluding couplet Jonson came pretty close to relaxing his diplomatic discretion by concurring with James’s pacific foreign policy: “... both at sea and land our powers increase, / With health and all the golden gifts of peace”.⁴⁷ In principle this took a stand against the already more bellicose aims of Charles and Buckingham. But they were unlikely to allow themselves to be offended, and the lines could also be taken to express a reasonable hope that was perfectly

44. Sell, *Shorter poems of Beaumont*, 129.

45. Sell, *Shorter poems of Beaumont*, 143.

46. Sell, *Shorter poems of Beaumont*, 133.

47. Butler, *Neptune’s Triumph*, 670.

uncontroversial. All the exquisite spectacle, poetry, music, singing, and dancing would in any case have been gratifying to all parties, not only to James as the honoured recipient, but to Charles and Buckingham as Albion and Haliclyon, the silent stars of the show.

While the masquers were transferring from Jones's floating island to solid land, the Chorus besought James to remember his subjects: "of thy glorious triumph let it be / No less a part that thou their loves doest see, / Than that his [Charles's] sacred head's returned to thee".⁴⁸ But apart from this, there was nothing remotely approaching Beaumont's miserable kow-towing to his betters. Jonson's extraordinary merits entitled him to a robust self-confidence and artistic licence which could even joke at his own expense while at the same time implicitly mocking the taste of his courtly audience: the Jonsonian Poet explained himself to Cook as "a kind of Christmas engine: one that is used at least once a year for a trifling instrument of wit, or so".⁴⁹ When the sea deities invited the court ladies to dance, similarly, the writing's saucy grace showed formidable social ease:

Why do you smell of ambergris,
Of which was formèd Neptune's niece,
The queen of love, unless you can,
Like sea-born Venus, love a man?⁵⁰

This kind of thing was, and remains, immensely enjoyable, because it came from a mind which was its owner's own kingdom, and because it recognized a corresponding independence in its addressees. The mockery of the ladies was cancelled out by the flattery, and vice versa. Socially speaking, the attitude struck was neither superior nor inferior.

By the same token, underneath all the imaginatively ceremonious praise of royalty there was ultimately a wise objectivity. Jonson did not finally *love* Charles as Beaumont did. He was not so foolish as to ignore social hierarchy when he saw it – and when he depended on it for a living. Yet he had his own opinions and was his own master. Poet's initial refusals to provide an antimasque, and all the embroidery of the sirens tempting Charles, were not *only* a matter of Jonson's teasing the audience before satisfying their wish. There was indeed something in his make-up that hesitated to do what was expected of him. Poet also said that the masque was not going to tell "how near our general joy was to be lost"⁵¹ – how near

48. Butler, *Neptune's Triumph*, 666.

49. Butler, *Neptune's Triumph*, 654.

50. Butler, *Neptune's Triumph*, 668.

51. Butler, *Neptune's Triumph*, 658.

Charles came to drowning off St Andrea, the topic on which Beaumont's love had produced those sixteen lines. This was one refusal the masque did not relent on. Jonson would hardly have ranked Beaumont (on whose death he wrote a magnificent elegy)⁵² with the songsters whose singing-out of their fits at Charles's return drew Poet's scorn. But he would not have had much time for *The Joyfull Returne*, a tract which, translated from the Spanish of Andrés de Almansa y Mendoza, sentimentally news-mongered about the accident at still greater length.⁵³ Nor, unlike Beaumont, was he particularly sold on the idea of Charles's chastity. By the end of 1623 it was looking increasingly unlikely that the Spanish scheme would go ahead; to have repeated Beaumont's claim that on the way home Charles still longed for the Infanta would now have been, not only undiplomatic, but blatantly inaccurate. Yet the only explanation Jonson's text offered for the failure of the cavorting sirens to get their way with Charles was that "some lusty sea-god pulled them down." Described as confronting the erotic onslaught of both the fifty Nereids and the two sirens, Charles and Buckingham could have sounded less like Aeneas and Achates than Guyon and the Palmer in the Bower of Bliss, where the two "wanton Maidens" in the fountain similarly tried to lure Guyon, unloosening their hair and successively displaying and concealing themselves in the water. Guyon was tempted, and the Palmer "much rebukt those wandering eyes of his."⁵⁴ Jonson left open a real possibility, however slight, that Charles was temptable as well, though any notion of Buckingham as a palmer, and as rebuking another man's lust, could have caused some silent mirth in the Banqueting House.

As communication, then, *Neptune's Triumph* was ethically acceptable, and correspondingly enjoyable, not only because of its unflappable mental egalitarianism, but also because it quietly refused simplifications. Ultimately coming down neither one way nor the other in its portrayal of Charles, it had something of the quality Keats saw in Shakespeare: the "negative capability" to be "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."⁵⁵

There has been some resistance to seeing negative capability at work in *A Game at Chess*. And as I say, the play can certainly seem very black-and-white. At least on the face of it, the literary-dialogical pleasure it offered was an almost conspiratorial

52. ["Of the honor'd Poems of his honoured Friend Sir *John Beaumont*, Baronet," in Sell, *Shorter poems of Beaumont*, 63.]

53. Anon. *The Joyfull Returne* [trans. from Spanish original by Andrés de Almansa y Mendoza] (Nathaniell Butter and Henry Seile: London 1623).

54. *The poetical works of Edmund Spenser*, eds. J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (Oxford University Press: London, 1913), 137–138.

55. *Selected letters of John Keats*, ed. Frederick Page (Oxford University Press: London, 1954), 53.

thrill at seeing the wicked enemies of England satirized and trounced, plus a sense of patriotic solidarity with the victorious virtue of the Whites. This, for scholars mainly concerned with political re-contextualizations, is sometimes as far as they get. Thomas Cogswell argues that the play was outright propaganda in support of Charles and Buckingham's anti-Spanish stance.⁵⁶ Martin Butler, too, finds its treatment of the Spanish crisis unsubtle – far less subtle than Massinger's in *The Bondman*.⁵⁷ T. H. Howard-Hill thinks its audience would probably have been unable “to shift between a serious and a satirical understanding,” and that James, Charles, Buckingham, and Archbishop Abbot would have been delighted with the way they themselves were depicted – “[c]ertainly there is nothing offensive in their treatment in the play.”⁵⁸

Glyn Redworth, however, points out that even Thomas Scott, that most effective of propagandists on Charles and Buckingham's behalf, left room for reservations.

For all Scott's praise of Charles as a lion among princes, the heir to the throne was portrayed as having been led by the nose by Gondomar. The devilish ambassador had tempted the Prince to go to Madrid where he could place him at the mercy of the king of Spain. At the very least, Scott's double-edged esteem served as a public warning to Charles that he should never allow himself to be led astray again. Indeed, a consequence of the visit was the disturbing thought that Charles might not be quite as steadfast in his Protestantism as he wished to appear. Whether he had ever entertained the idea of abandoning his religion while in Madrid remained a question mark that hovered like a storm cloud whenever people were dissatisfied with Charles and thought back to what had really happened during his six months in Spain.⁵⁹

And another conundrum was, as Jonson may or may not have hinted, the moral character of Buckingham. *A Game at Chess* took this up as head-on as could reasonably be expected. Richard Dutton points out that there are certainly passages which could have brought to mind his homo-erotically charged relationship with James, and that when, in the scene mentioned earlier, the White Duke confessed to lechery and gluttony, ostensibly lying and covering up his real virtues, his words would in fact have rung true for some spectators in an entirely literal manner.⁶⁰ This scene,

56. Cogswell, “Middleton and the court”.

57. Martin Butler, “Massinger's divided communities,” in Roger D. Sell, Anthony W. Johnson and Helen Wilcox (eds), *Community-making in early Stuart theatres: Stage and audience* (London: Routledge, 2017), 338–352.

58. Howard-Hill, *Middleton's "Vulgar Pasquin"*, 107 and n. 46.

59. Redmond, *Prince and Infanta*, 139.

60. Dutton, “Receiving offence.”

over and above the formal pleasures arising from the intertextualities, was also enjoyable dialogically precisely through raising the complicating possibility that both Charles and Buckingham were guilty as self-accused. The two of them were already well known for their secrecy and disguises – their creeping away to Spain as John and Tom Smith. And after all, they had been enthusiastically in favour of Spain and the Spanish match at one time. How could anybody ever be really sure about them?

What I have described as a hermeneutic challenge in the play's form had, in fact, a literary-dialogical dimension. Throughout, questions were constantly being raised about what the various chess pieces really thought or wanted, and the prologue enacted by Ignatius Loyola and Error presented the story as very much one about Jesuits, notorious as masters of equivocation. I have already pointed to the Blacks' parody of a White masque, and to Black and White's stylo-linguistic transvaluation. Correspondingly, the one thing which could not but emerge from all the twists and turns of the story-line was that Black could be White and White could be Black. So here was another intertextuality with *Macbeth*. Fair was foul and foul was fair. For Middleton, no less than for Wallace Stevens, life consisted of propositions about life, or to put it another way, the only truth was in the label. When, in the final scene, the White Knight and the White Duke were virtually prisoners in Black HQ and the high Blacks were doing their damndest to win them over, this was by no means the first time that the audience had watched pieces tempted to switch label, and some pieces had indeed switched long ago. The fundamental tendency of the plot was to activate in the audience an intense awareness that human beings could always jump in either one of any two directions. Many spectators must have found themselves wondering whether the peripeteia was going to be a *departure* from history, such that the White Knight and White Duke would remain in Black HQ and undergo a colour-change. All such uncertainty provided Middleton and his audience with excellent opportunities for a negatively capable comparing of notes without drawing hasty conclusions.

Some of the continuity was provided by three pieces who were on their own admission dissatisfied with their present colour, and whose regular reappearances on stage kept the uncertainty at a high pitch. They were: the White King's Pawn, a whited sepulchre whose treachery was scandalous in one so close to the King, and whose white robe was sensationalistically stripped off him to reveal his blackness underneath; the Fat Bishop, who in pursuit of worldly wealth and power easily changed colour more than once, and who might always change it yet again; and the Black Knight's Pawn, who suffered from harrowing guilt because he had castrated the White Knight's Pawn, and who, finding no forgiveness or consolation from Black churchmen, sought it from his former victim, for whose whiteness he now seemed to yearn. Just as typically of Middleton's plotting, the White Knight's Pawn's

response to this appeal was a *blackish* show of specious friendship, under the guise of which he planned revenge.

Most pleasurably uncertain and suspenseful of all was the story of the White Queen's Pawn. She had formerly been betrothed to the White Knight's Pawn, which was why the then jealous Black Knight's Pawn had castrated him. Then at the beginning of the play she was tempted to sin by the Black Bishop's Pawn, in sensuous lines already quoted. When he directly threatened her honour, she protested, and the White Knight and White Duke rescued her from his wiles, only to cause the Black Knight brazenly to accuse *her*. Next, the Black Queen's Pawn tricked her into thinking she could be legally united with a handsome man, who was in fact the Black Bishop's Pawn in disguise, whom the Black Queen's Pawn actually wanted to lure into her own bed, so as to get revenge on him for having earlier deserted her. She even won from the White Queen's Pawn an admission that sex with him would be "A meeting 'twixt my fear and my desire", which led to Act 3's dramatic close, with the Black Queen's Pawn's exultant "She's caught".⁶¹ In Act 4 the White Queen's Pawn's downfall seemed even more likely. Though feeling that "single life ... / Is grown too straight",⁶² she still demurred when she realized that the promised sex would be extramarital, but then suddenly seemed perfectly satisfied with a marriage licence that was merely trumped up. Although her virtue, just before the climactic temptation of the White Knight and the White Duke, was finally preserved, this was not of her own volition but thanks to the Black Queen's Pawn's successful bed-trick. In other words, there had been the strongest probability that she would consent to fall, which could only mean that the audience's uncertainty as to which way the White Knight and the White Duke would finally jump was now very intense indeed.

It is hard to imagine a plot more highly refined in suspenseful negative capability. Irritable reaching after fact and reason was consistently disallowed. Just when the audience might have been thinking the Black Duke a supreme villain, he suddenly came out with a purely White sentiment of pity for the White King's Pawn, as a poor wretch who hoped his change of colour would bring him worldly profit, but whom the Black Duke and his colleagues now planned to dupe again. Conversely, the White King, whom the audience were bound to link with James, suddenly made himself as unattractive as any Black piece, by allowing himself to believe the Black Knight's accusation against the White Queen's Pawn. Or again, the Black Queen's Pawn, in deceiving the White Queen's Pawn, displays what seems the purest White affection for her.

61. Howard-Hill, *Game at Chess*, 144.

62. Howard-Hill, *Game at Chess*, 147.

It is hard, too, to imagine anything truer to life, life then or now. In our world today, the divisions are what they are. In early modern England, the stuff of politics, both foreign and domestic, was the great divide in religion, which in 1623–1624, hardly less than in 1605–1606, could really put professional, personal, and family lives to the test. Beaumont was Catholic, but Buckingham, his patron, was not, and neither were James and Charles. Yet Buckingham's mother, wife and parents-in-law were Catholic, and Queen Anne had been Catholic, too, as were also both the Infanta and Henrietta Maria. These were glaringly public discrepancies, but fairly representative of society as a whole, and Jonson and Middleton, too, sometimes had to be seen as either the one thing or the other. Religious labels had to be attached. At its most deeply human level, Middleton's play was asking whether this, or any other cultivation of division, really made sense.

Yet divisions, and the politicization of them, can in no way interrupt the enjoyment of literature's formal pleasures. And the pleasures of literature as dialogue, though not greatly promoted by moments of insecurity or partisanship in a Beaumont, in writers like Jonson and Middleton involve a humane respect and abstention from polemics that cannot worsen conflicts, and may even make them somewhat less rigidifying. By enjoyably exploring the propositions about life that life consists of, literature may help to ensure that life moves on and retains its freshness.

Where do literary authors belong?

A post-postmodern answer¹

When I received Marta Skwara's kind invitation to the September 2014 conference in Pobierowo, one of the things that attracted me was the overall theme to be discussed: "National, Regional, Continental, Global". This was something I thought I could deal with in terms of a post-postmodern view of literary activity as one among other modes of communication.² I thought, too, that I would be able to illustrate my ideas with examples from Anglophone literature. What I could not know in advance was exactly how other participants would respond to the conference theme, and in particular the many participants with interests in Polish literature. Having now enjoyed the four days in Pobierowo to the full, I am not much less of an ignoramus about Polish literature than I was before. But at least I have some idea of the issues it raises for Polish scholars and critics.

There is one thing that puzzles me. Polish authors win the Nobel Prize for Literature four times a century, a claim I would support with reference the Laureates of 1905, 1924, 1980 and 1996: Henryk Sienkiewicz, Władysław Reymont, Czesław Miłosz and Wisława Szymborska. If the receipt of the Nobel Prize is a sign that a writer has become, or is about to become, a global phenomenon, Polish literature has definitely had a high global presence. And Joseph Conrad, though not a Nobel Laureate, is a fifth Polish writer of indisputably global significance, who hailed from,

1. [Originally written as a plenary lecture for the 2014 conference on "National, Regional, Continental, Global: Literatures and Discourses on Literature" hosted by the University of Szczecin in Pobierowo. Subsequently revised for publication in *Rocznik Komparatystyczny: Comparative Yearbook* 6 (2015): 47–68.]

2. Cf. Roger D. Sell, *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000); *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001); (ed.) *Children's literature as communication: The ChiLPA project* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001); *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011); "Dialogue versus silencing: Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," in *Literary community-making: The dialogicality of English texts from the seventeenth century to the present*, ed. Roger D. Sell (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2012), 91–129 [= item 7 in the present selection]; "Herbert's considerateness: A communicational assessment," in *The ethics of literary communication: Genuineness, directness, indirectness*, eds Roger D. Sell, Adam Borch, and Inna Lindgren (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2013). 21–28 [= item 9 in the present selection]; (ed.), *Literature as dialogue: Invitations offered and negotiated* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2014).

described, and wrote for, an already globalizing world some thirty years before “globalization” became an English word. Given this formidable record, what I found utterly mystifying in the attitudes of some Polish colleagues in Pobierowo was that they evidently felt that Polish literature has had a raw deal. Unless I am mistaken, they were concerned that Polish writers are too often relegated to merely national status or, if granted a measure of wider, regional significance, are so tightly bracketed together with writers in other Slavic languages that their affiliations within the still wider sphere of continental Europe are effectively obscured. I could not help wondering whether these apparent grudges were a reflection, less on Polish literature than on Poland’s troubled political history, as a country for centuries violently downtrodden, cheated, and partitioned by powerful neighbours and others. But in that case, I asked myself, why does Finland, another country with an unenviable history, the traditional battleground of Sweden and Russia, and a country, to boot, which has produced only one Nobel Laureate, have no comparable literary chip-on-the-shoulder? Is it just “natural” for the merely five million Finns to have lower expectations and be less disappointed?

I cannot possibly have picked up all the nuances in the papers delivered in Polish and only summarized in English, and much of the subsequent discussions were mainly in Polish as well. But even so, the Polish sense of literary grievance came across, it seemed to me, quite unmistakably. Bożena Zaboklick delivered a fine paper on Catalonian versions of Sienkiewicz’s *Quo Vadis*, her point being that in the Catalonian context the work was turned into a model for true religion and patriotism, in ways which to its Polish admirers could only seem to overlook the writing’s rich sensuality. During the discussion of Zaboklick’s findings, I gathered that some conference participants, instead of rejoicing in the human and cultural variety which made a Catalonian *Quo Vadis* no less different from the Polish one than, say, Verdi’s *Otello* from Shakespeare’s *Othello*, or Shakespeare’s *Othello* from the seventh story in the third decade of Giraldu Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi*, were almost indignant that the Polish original had been changed – or violated, as I think they might even have expressed this. Further unfair treatment, according to some participants, was dealt out to the Polish writers who, as Agnieszka Moroz’s fascinating paper explained, joined the Iowa Writing Programme in the hope of becoming truly global writers. Here it seemed to me a great pity that nobody had explained to these writers that you cannot win the Nobel Prize by *trying* to win it. If you aim at universality, you miss the local and have no natural audience of your own. As Keats said, “if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all”.³ Great writers do not force themselves upon the whole world. They do what comes naturally to them, and do so for the benefit of the community of readers – sometimes very large, but sometimes very small – with whom they

3. John Keats, *Selected letters of John Keats*, ed. Frederick Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 84.

most naturally want to be in contact, until eventually the whole world finds its way to their sheer quality and humanity. Then again, the conference also included excellent discussions of contemporary Polish writers who write in German. But some commentators, instead of recognizing that such writers may merely be addressing the audience with whom they feel most naturally at home (like Conrad when he started his writing career in English after many years' acclimatization to Anglophone working and domestic environments), seemed almost to accuse them of adding to Polish literature's trials and tribulations (just as early Polish reviewers of Conrad accused him of betrayal). In other exchanges, too, I thought I again detected a certain slowness to welcome some language other than Polish as a channel for Polish literature, almost as if Klemens Janicki, Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski, Mathias Casimirus Sarbievius and Jan Kochanowski had never achieved European – which in those days meant global – recognition by writing in Latin. Similarly, some conference participants seemed reluctant to accept the opportunities opened up by translations, or by helpful accounts of Polish literature by Polish scholars or critics writing in, above all, English.

To repeat, I still know very little about Polish literature. Nor can I or anyone else be in a position to patronize Polish literature. Yet to my mind, there is not the slightest doubt that, if (a) Polish writers go on doing what comes naturally to them, taking up topics and forms which genuinely interest them, and addressing, in whatever language, the smaller or larger communities to which they feel they belong, if (b) Polish literary texts continue to be well – by which I mean both faithfully and understandably – translated into many other languages, and if (c) Polish literary critics and scholars continue to write helpful presentations and critiques not only in Polish but in other languages as well, then Polish literature will continue to win international recognition, even though literature is not a competition, and certainly not a war, and even though international recognition is not something to be aimed at. From many papers in Pobierowo I got a strong sense that Polish literature, no matter how it is categorized in terms of “National, Regional, Continental, Global”, is so full of life that it is bound to have real staying-power and breadth of appeal.

So far so good. Now, however, I must question some of the terminology I have been using here. Expressions such as “international”, “global” and “the whole world” need, as it were, to be put in inverted commas. In my own contribution to the conference, I suggested that the very notion of “universal” writers of “global” reach is both unfortunate and dated. Granted, most people would probably still agree with Dr Johnson that literary authors are writers who have been widely admired, and for a very long time, or who have the capacity to be so admired. And perhaps some of my new colleagues from the Pobierowo conference would claim that there should be nothing to stop literary authors, not least Polish literary authors, from belonging, so to speak, everywhere and always. Here the idea would be that the many who admire their works could be everybody all over the world, and that the long-lasting

admiration could stretch out to the end of human history. But the aspirations to which this line of thought can lead are deceptive. Indeed, the fact is that such thinking has always been potentially dangerous, involving a utopistic vision which, to borrow phrasing from Tadeusz Sławek's paper in Pobierowo, has unfortunately had no mechanism by which to prevent itself from coming true. The entire notion of global writers really belonged to the era of modernity, an era during which its ominous consequences already became quite plain for all to see. By which I do not mean that literature or literary discussion in either Poland or anywhere else would now benefit from a concentration on *postmodern* concerns and themes. A much more profitable move, it seems to me, would be whole-heartedly to embrace the era of *post-postmodernity*.

By modernity, I mean that phase of western history which, beginning roughly around the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, included the decline of feudalism, the beginnings of parliamentarianism, the rise of the bourgeoisie, the invention of the printing press, the Reformation, the birth of empirical science, and Renaissance humanism. One humanist assumption was precisely that major writing could achieve universality, albeit at the cost of some homogenizing exclusions: universality was not open to women writers, to uneducated writers, or to writers using contemporary vernacular languages such as English unless they carefully modelled their ideas, genres, styles and careers on examples from ancient Greece and Rome. So when Sir Thomas Hawkins, who ticked all the right boxes, published his verse translations of Horace into English in 1625, John Beaumont praised him for making possible a new mutuality – an unprecedented giving-and-taking – between contemporary English readers and ancient classic writers.

What shall I first commend? your happy choice
 Of this most usefull *Poet*? or your skill
 To make the *Eccho* equall with the voice,
 And trace the Lines drawne by the *Authors* quill?
 The *Latine* Writers by unlearned hands,
 In forraine Robes unwillingly are drest,
 But thus invited into other Lands,
 Are glad to change their tongue at such request.
 The good, which in our minds their labours breed,
 Layes open to their Fame a larger way.
 These strangers *England* with rich plentie feed,
 Which with our Countreys freedome we repay:
 When sitting in pure Language like a Throne,
 They prove as great with us, as with their owne.⁴

4. Sir John Beaumont, *The shorter poems of Sir John Beaumont: A critical edition with an introduction and commentary*, ed. Roger D. Sell [= *Acta Academiae Aboensis*, ser. A, vol. 49] (Åbo: Åbo Akademi Press, 1974), 177.

Horace and his ancient colleagues could now feed England “with rich plentie”, and English people could “repay” them by granting them the freedom of the country and enthroning them in the new language. In effect Beaumont was saying, “The classic writers become one of us, and our writers one of them. They belong here and now. We all belong together.” To Beaumont’s perception, an early modern vernacular writer could indeed bring about an enlargement of literary community which eliminated the historical and geographical boundaries of different times and places. And with the Thirty Years War already well under way, this kind of harmonious vision was clearly very attractive to him as a poet at the court of King James, the peace-maker monarch. On the other hand, however, when English writers themselves were thought of as graduating to canonical status, an element of competition could easily come into the picture, competition not only with the ancient Greeks and Romans but also with much more recent Italian writers. With the wisdom of hindsight, we may even wonder whether Beaumont’s poem to James “Concerning the true forme of English poetry” is not one of the first anticipations of British cultural imperialism:

... I never will despaire,
 But that our heads with sucke the freezing aire,
 As well as hotter braines, may verse adorne,
 And be their wonder, as we were their scorne.⁵

During the post-humanist phase of late modernity, which coincided with another tempestuous period in European history, the hopes entertained of literature’s harmonious universalizations were, if anything, even stronger, though now there was something of a tension, not least in Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, between revolutionary egalitarianism and philosophical Idealism – between a view of poets as just human beings speaking to other human beings and a view of them as individuals of exceptional imaginative and emotional powers. Wordsworth’s eloquence on such matters is unforgettable:

In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed, the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time.⁶

On the other hand, here, too, we can nowadays have an uneasy reservation. Given what we know of nineteenth- and twentieth century history, Wordsworth’s talk of one vast empire can have an ominous ring.

5. Beaumont, *Shorter poems*, 124.

6. William Wordsworth, *The prose works of William Wordsworth*, 3 vols, eds W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), I 141.

Psychologists tell us that people who have no incentives to hope may in the long run actually be unable to live. And certainly, it is difficult to believe that, in the absence of some vision of how things might work in a better world, human beings would ever be encouraged to try and bring about reforms. Yet a utopianism which loses all touch with practical or ethical reality can be counterproductive, at worst giving birth to a regime that ends up as nothing short of dystopian. The risk that this would happen with the modern notion of literary authors' eirenic universality was always strong, simply because the notion's own grounding was so flimsy. Not to mince words, the many human beings who admire literary authors can never be all the human beings who will ever have existed, and the long period of time through which they have been admired can never be the whole of human history. So in literary discussions, expressions like "universal", "global" and "the whole world" have never been used literally, but hyperbolically. Shakespeare, who would probably be most people's candidate for the title "Universal Author *par excellence*", might not have been admired by the countless generations of human beings who died before he was born, is not in fact admired in every corner of the world even today, has always been more open to people who are proficient in English than to people who are not, and at some time in the future may for all we know be totally forgotten, or be admired merely with the same kind of lip-service that is now so often paid to Homer, when Homer is remembered at all. In short, the only way in which an author could ever be presented as of universal reach and significance was by a more or less violent and untruthful imposition.

During the 1820s, Goethe was not immune to utopian longings after all the chaos of the Napoleonic wars, and consequently hit upon his own notion of *Weltliteratur*. The influence of this was to be baneful in the extreme. Admittedly, Goethe himself was realistic enough to say that the texts so far written in German-speaking regions were unlikely to become part of *Weltliteratur*. German speakers, he observed, could not yet muster the kind of sociopolitical unity and sheer clout that would be needed to project books within a world forum. But German literature was not long without its champions – its admirers of Goethe himself in particular – and as the fire of nationalism swept across the entire continent, Wordsworth's delusional talk of a single "vast empire of human society" soon enough took on its sinister overtone, as literature after literature became ideological weapons in that great contest of competing empires which resulted in the First World War. At which point there appeared *The Spirit of Man: An anthology in English & French from the philosophers & poets made by the Poet Laureate [Robert Bridges] & dedicated by gracious permission to his majesty the King [George V]*.⁷ In a propaganda exercise like this, no

7. London: Longmans Green, 1915.

suggestions about the spirit of man were to be gleaned from *German* philosophers and poets. Nor was the Great War the end of it. During the interwar years literary nationalism continued to spread, not least through universities, and not only in their departments for national literatures but in departments of comparative literature as well, for which a perception of the “greatest” books of the “greatest” nations as belonging to “World Literature” was foundational. With the onset of the Cold War, scholars such as Auerbach began to warn that “*Weltliteratur*” was all too easily becoming a euphemism for a ubiquitous standardization.

All human activity is being concentrated either into European-American or into Russian-Bolshevik patterns; no matter how great they seem to us, the differences between the two patterns are comparatively minimal when they are contrasted with the basic patterns underlying the Islamic, Indian or Chinese traditions.⁸

Such was the cultural rivalry of empires, each of which insisted that the modern notion of great authors’ universality be taken more literally than was really truthful, and attempted to make it slightly less untruthful by imposing their own authors, not only on each other, but also on the colonized peoples they had come to regard as their subalterns.

“Subaltern” was to become a postmodern buzzword. Postmodernity was the next phase of western history, and set in at some point between 1800 and 1950, the exact date depending on whom you ask. As Jean-François Lyotard helpfully described it, postmodernity was a phase of western history involving a far-reaching crisis of knowledge, politics, and culture, which threw in doubt, not only modernity’s grand narratives of scientific explanation, but also its concomitant political teleologies, with their associated assumptions about identity, legitimation, and power.⁹ In particular, philosophers such as Stuart Hampshire and Charles Taylor, together with sociologists and political theoreticians such as Jürgen Habermas, began to call for a politics of recognition which would acknowledge, respect, and empower the identity of human beings from every possible kind of background.¹⁰ Small wonder, then, that in postmodern literary and literary-critical discourse the major theme

8. Erich Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*” [1952], *The Centennial Review* 13 (1969): 1–17, esp. 2–3.

9. Jean-François Lyotard, *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* [1979] (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

10. Stuart Hampshire, *Innocence and experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992); Charles Taylor, “The politics of recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994), 25–73; Jürgen Habermas, “Struggles for recognition in the democratic constitutional state,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 107–148.

was modernity's counterfactual assumption that great authors belong, or can be made to belong, everywhere and always – that they can be more or less forced upon, and can even speak for, all and sundry. J. G. Farrell's novel *The Siege of Krishnapur*, for instance, published in 1973, purports to describe one of the side-shows of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, and has as its high-point what amounts to a black-humour allegory of British cultural imperialism. As the army of native sepoys advances on the East India Company's Krishnapur station, the man responsible for defending it runs out of cannon balls. So he starts to load his cannon gun with electrometallic busts of the greatest English authors. And of all the poets' heads loaded into his cannon gun, the only one to be really effective was Shakespeare's, which, thanks to "the ballistic properties stemming from his baldness," "scythed its way through a whole astonished platoon of sepoys advancing in single file through the jungle".¹¹

By the last three or four decades of the twentieth century empires were writing back. Drawing on their own and their ancestors' experience, postmodern writers with roots in peoples that had been colonized and even enslaved were exploring and renegotiating the relationship between imperial power and those it had sought to rule. And during this same period, the postmodern crisis of identity, legitimation, and power was also becoming especially acute in some of the world's multicultural urban societies, where communities and interest groupings which had hitherto been marginalized were at last finding their voice. Seen from this point of view, the postmodern climax can be located in the so-called culture wars of the mid-1990s, during which all forms of cultural production, including literature and literary criticism, became a site for the contestation of communal differences. Literary critics of several descriptions – Marxist, post-Marxist, cultural materialist, feminist, gay or queer, ethnic, religious, postcolonial – were now tending to champion particular groupings and to speak, not of a modern-style universal literary canon, but of many different canons for many different readerships. In bookshops, books were actually marketed this way (with shelves for Jewish books, for black women's books, for gay men's books and so on), and in 1995 J. Hillis Miller described what he called the university of dissensus.¹² For Miller, a postmodern university was not a place where people from many different backgrounds came together in order to negotiate a body of knowledge and wisdom which could be generally accepted. To his mind, the difference between a person from one background and a person from another background was absolute. Difference was, as he put it, all the way down, and the function of a postmodern university was, he said, to make visible and preserve that state of affairs. This, he thought, was the best way to resist what he saw as modernity's sinister commodifying hegemony.

11. J. G. Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur* [1973] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).

12. J. Hillis Miller, "The university of dissensus," *Oxford Literary Review* 17 (1995): 121–43.

A commodifying hegemony is certainly sinister enough. But even at the height of the culture wars, there were those who would have found Miller's endorsement of all-the-way-down difference just as sinister in its own way. Not least, this could have been the reaction of people belonging to precisely the categories which the postmodern politics of recognition most sought to benefit. K. Anthony Appiah, speaking from his own experience and feelings as a gay, black male in the United States, seriously questioned the identity which postmodern politics seemed to be scripting for people such as himself.

If I had to choose between the world of the closet and the world of gay liberation, or between the world of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Black Power, I would, of course, choose in each case the latter. But I would like not to have to choose.¹³

So here again, a utopian aspiration could give rise to a problematic reality. The admirable attempts of postmodern intellectuals and politicians to guarantee a common dignity for all the identifiable different types of human being could actually result in a coercive narrowing of the scope for human identity, also throwing radical doubt on the chances for empathetic dialogue between people belonging to different identity groupings. If modernity had been a period of hegemonic universalizations, the postmodern reaction sometimes went to the opposite extreme of sheer divisiveness, so undermining the communicational foundations for any kind of peaceful coexistence. Such, too, would be the risk taken by commentators on Polish literature if, rejecting the modern aspiration to global reach, they were now to lodge postmodern claims to the effect that Polish writers are quintessentially national, quintessentially regional, or quintessentially continental: that they quintessentially belong to some grouping smaller than a global one, in other words, a grouping which has hitherto been unfairly neglected in discussions world-wide but now deserves full recognition. This could turn out to be the quickest way, not only to circumscribe the freedom of Polish writers, but also to undermine Polish literature's natural outreach as a human product.

Central to the unbeneficial kind of postmodern thinking I have in mind was a reductive ethnic, social, cultural and religious structuralism. Saussure, often credited as structuralism's founding father, would have disapproved. Although he had argued that "language [the structures of *langue*] is not a function of the speaker; it is a product that is passively assimilated by the individual", he had also very clearly seen that "speech [each actual *parole*] ... is an individual act. It is wilful and intellectual".¹⁴

13. K. Anthony Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, survival: Multicultural societies and social reproduction," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 149–163.

14. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in general linguistics*, [1916] (London: Fontana, 1978), 14.

Some of the leading postmodern thinkers, by contrast, positively downgraded human individuality, will, and intellect, and tended to attribute agency to animated theoretical abstractions such as society, culture, ideology, language. This was the move through which Barthes and Foucault, in alleging the death of the author, reacted against modernity's elevation of authors to pedestals from which they exercised universal sway. On the extreme postmodern view, writers were simply workers whose production was entirely dictated by the norms of the particular grouping to which they belonged and to whose other members they gave a voice, a history, an identity.

By no means all novelists, poets and dramatists writing during the late twentieth century accepted this historically important but rather limiting role. Perhaps *Roots*, Alex Haley's novel about North American slavery, was mainly intended for the Black American canon.¹⁵ But even *Roots* remains a gripping narrative and has been very widely popular, not only as a book but in a television adaptation as well. Still more to the point, Toni Morrison, Caryl Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar, partly dealing with the same kind of material as Haley, and no less insistent of the facts of difference, were unquestionably broad in their addressivity, so encouraging empathy across lines of ethnic and sociocultural division. They were, we could perhaps say, *post-postmodern avant la lettre*. Similarly, K. Anthony Appiah was by no means the only intellectual who, at the very height of the culture wars, had the feeling that postmodernity's reaction to modernity was going too far. Worried about the narrow addressivity of some postmodern writing, Jan Lederveen Pieterse argued that this drawback could be readily counteracted if only writers were to see more of the scope for hybrid identities and rainbow coalitions.¹⁶ Homi Bhabha even began to revisit the notion of World Literature, his suggestion being that it could perhaps be viewed as

an emergent, prefigurative category that is concerned with a form of cultural dis-sensus and alterity, where non-consensual terms of affiliation may be established on the grounds of historical trauma.¹⁷

In our post-postmodern third millennium, this vision of World Literature as an affiliation of the historically different was to be borne out not only in books themselves, not only in the way books are now actually being circulated, but also in academic discussion.

The changes thrown up by the postmodern maelstrom were so radical as to propel us into the new era of post-postmodernity. Postmodernity really did help

15. Alex Haley, *Roots* [1976] (London: Picador, 1977).

16. Jan Lederveen Pieterse, "Globalization as hybridization," in *Global Modernities*, eds Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (London: Sage, 1995), 45–68.

17. Homi Bhabha, *The location of culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

to empower previously underprivileged groupings, so making many large societies a lot more democratic. This brought important long term benefits to the lives of countless individuals, and some very exciting developments in the field of cultural production as well. True, the world is still riven by systematic violence and injustice on an appalling scale, even though political, economic, environmental, and communication-technological developments now constantly remind us that we are all denizens of just a single planet. True, too, conflicts such as those we have recently been witnessing in Syria, Ukraine, and Gaza cannot be brushed aside, and the new century's horrendous terrorist attacks against societies trying to make a go of multiculturalism have been especially disheartening from a post-postmodern point of view. Yet even so, the new millenium's post-postmodern mood does include a sense that living side by side with human othernesses not only calls for responsible and decent kinds of behaviour, but should, and can, be rewarding and enjoyable.

Post-postmodern literary intellectuals are working towards a new, non-hegemonic sense of *Weltliteratur*, as a body of texts which are valued, not universally, but within communities (plural) that are indefinitely large and indefinitely heterogeneous. Pieterse's emphasis on hybrid identities and rainbow coalitions has been widely taken up by subsequent commentators, with John Pizer already pointing out in 2000 that

literature is becoming *immanently* global ... [I]ndividual works are increasingly informed and constituted by social, political, and even linguistic trends that are not limited to a single state or region.¹⁸

And in applying the notion of *Weltliteratur* to this new situation, post-postmodern scholars' general stance has been one of optimism, tempered with a sharp awareness of possible dangers. No longer falling into postmodernity's narrow determinism, post-postmodern intellectuals rather credit human beings with a certain relative autonomy, as I have tried to explain in much of my own writing.¹⁹ Seen this way, human beings are paradoxically social individuals who, even though they have no choice but to adapt to social, cultural and linguistic norms of every possible kind, often do so in what proves to be a successful attempt to get society, culture, language or, in short, other people to adapt to their own projects. All human interaction, all communication, including the writing and reading of so-called literary texts, is in this sense co-adaptational, and the relative human autonomy on which it is predicated is more than enough to rehabilitate the notion of authorship, even if post-postmoderns will stop far short of worshipfully placing

18. John Pizer, "Goethe's 'World Literature' paradigm and contemporary globalization," *Comparative Literature* 52 (2000): 213–227, esp. 213, his italics.

19. E.g. Sell, *Literature as communication*, and *Communicational criticism*.

authors' busts on pedestals. By the same token, while post-postmodern thinkers affirm that a social individual belonging to one grouping has sufficient autonomy of reason, imagination, and will to be able to empathize and commune with a social individual belonging to some other grouping, they are also careful not to forget postmodernity's most important lesson: that differences are most certainly real, and can indeed *make* a difference, as we might put it; that one and the same literary text will not be interpreted and valued in one and the same way by all groupings of readers; that sometimes agreement is to be had only from agreeing to disagree; and that the desire and means to dominate the human other are all too difficult to eradicate. Some post-postmodern commentators have pointed out that, even today, the old canonical classics may continue to attract a disproportionate amount of attention, becoming a kind of "hypercanon" against which the new authors belonging to previously "small" literatures are mustered into a "counter-canon" that is merely the hypercanon's shadow.²⁰ Others have argued that, in order to remain factually accurate and politically just, literary scholarship does need to uphold some insistence on national and regional distinctions.²¹ Others emphasize that distinctivenesses also need to be maintained in the face of present-day communications technology. As channels for literary texts world-wide, the new digital media clearly have a huge potential. But their formats, and the culture of reading they encourage, could perhaps be too homogenizing – too neo-modern, as we could perhaps express this.²²

In parallel with these literary-theoretical developments, novelists, poets, and dramatists are harnessing a utopian impulse towards a renewed politics of recognition. Although, ideally speaking, this would overcome the narrow divisiveness of recognition in some of its postmodern manifestations, here, too, post-postmodernity involves some realistic qualifications of utopian dreams, as in, for instance, Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* of 2005.

20. David Damrosch, "World literature in a postcanonical, hypercanonical age," in *Comparative literature in an age of globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 443–53.

21. Sarika Chandra, "Reproducing a nationalist literature in the age of globalization: Reading (im)migration in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls lost their accents*," *American Quarterly* 60 (2008): 829–885; Silvia Lopéz, "National culture, globalization and the case of post-war El Salvador," *Comparative Literature Studies* 41 (2004): 80–100.

22. J. Hillis Miller, "A defense of literature and literary study in a time of globalization and the new tele-technologies," *Neohelicon* 34 (2007): 13–22; Ernst Grabovsky, "The impact of globalization and the new media on the notion of world literature," in *Comparative literature and comparative cultural studies*, ed. Steve Tötösy Zepetnek (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2004), 45–57.

On one level, this seems to be a novel about exclusively personal histories, loves, and adulteries. A central character is India, the illegitimate daughter of Maximilian Ophuls, a former United States ambassador to – yes! – India. Both his daughter India and Max himself now live in California, but the story goes back to the period prior to, and during, Max’s efforts as a diplomat in Kashmir. In the small Kashmiri village of Pachigam, young Shalimar, the actor and clown, had fallen in love with the beautiful young dancer Boonyi, and in due course the couple got married. But Boonyi hankered for a life in a wider world, and had an affair with the exciting Max, who positively doted on her. When she gave birth to his baby, Max had to return to America under something of a cloud and the child was seized by his barren wife to be brought up in England. Shalimar, meanwhile, smarting from Boonyi’s betrayal, devoted himself to various Jihadi organizations and in time became a renowned assassin, all in the hope of eventually getting his revenge on the man who had made him so unhappy. After training with insurgent groups in Afghanistan and the Philippines, Shalimar finally left for the USA, though Rushdie also tells us a good deal about several other periods in the life of Max, who, following the death of his parents in a Nazi concentration camp, had been raised in France and became a hero of the French resistance. It was after the war that he married his aristocratic British wife, and after his time in India he ended up as an extremely powerful and mysterious figure at the head of the US counter-terrorism organization. Shalimar, turning up in Los Angeles, gets himself a job as the great man’s official chauffeur, takes the opportunity to assassinate him, and at the very end of the novel intends to kill India as well. All of which makes for a very compelling triangle drama, culminating in a crime, and an intended crime, of long-drawn-out passion.

What I have not yet mentioned, however, is that whereas Shalimar was a Muslim, Boonyi was a Hindu, and their mixed marriage was something that the small Kashmiri village managed to negotiate. Here Rushdie is at his comic best. One of the thorniest issues, for instance, had been to do with the bride’s clothes.

“Obviously,” said the groom’s side, “when the *yenvool*, the wedding procession, comes to the bride’s house, we will expect to be welcomed by a girl in a red *lehenga*, and later, after she is bathed by her family women, she will don a *shalwar-kameez*.” “Absurd,” retorted the Kauls. “She will wear a phiran just like all our brides, embroidered at the neck and cuffs. On her head will be the starched and papery *tarang* headgear, and the *haligandun* belt will be round her waist.” This standoff lasted three days until Abdullah and Pyarelal decreed that the bride would indeed wear her traditional garb, but so too would Shalimar the clown. No tweed phiran for him! No peacock-feathered turban! He would wear an elegant *sherwani* and a *karakuli topi* on his head and that was that.²³

23. Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown* (London: Vintage, 2005), 113.

But the comedy comes very close to a nostalgia for a centuries-long golden age which had preceded the Partition of India and Pakistan. From that historic turning-point onwards, religious differences began to be ever more violently politicized, and the novel mourns the passing of a multicultural paradise in which successful negotiations and pragmatic goodwill had been commonplace. Between the different groupings there had once been, as Rushdie sees things, a down-to-earth harmony within a single, rainbow culture of manifold hybridities.

The pandits of Kashmir, unlike Brahmins anywhere else in India, happily ate meat. Kashmiri Muslims, perhaps envying the pandits their choice of gods, blurred their faith's austere monotheism by worshipping at the shrines of the valley's many local saints, its pirs. To be a Kashmiri, to have received so incomparable a divine gift, was to value what was shared far more highly than what divided.²⁴

There, then, we have Rushdie's post-postmodern utopia, but he is anything but starry-eyed about it. To the extent that it has ever corresponded with reality at all, he is bitterly aware that its chronotope no longer holds. Yes, he is certainly writing about a globalized world in which, as author, he moves with effortless ease from Kashmir's several legendary and historical phases, to Afghanistan, to the Philippines, to Nazi Germany and wartime France, to post-war England, to present-day California, a world in which he can readily see that "[e]veryone's story ... [is] a part of everyone else's".²⁵ Yet what humankind as a whole seems to valorize is not the things which everyone could share, but the things that will divide them, and with inevitably violent consequences. So although everywhere is now "a mirror of everywhere else", this often applies in the grimmest possible sense: "Executions, police brutality, explosions, riots: Los Angeles was beginning to look like wartime Strasbourg; like Kashmir".²⁶

Post-postmodernity, in other words, can involve both utopia and tragic realism, as each other's foil. In fact they are dialogue with each other, and not only within the mind of post-postmodern writers, but within the co-adaptational give-and-take that develops between such writers and their readers. The paradox is, that when a writer like Rushdie compares notes with readers about human relationships as seen through the spectacles of his realistically qualified utopianism, the relationship that blossoms between him and his readers is far closer to the utopian end of the spectrum than any of the relationships bodied forth within his fiction. His own literary community-making is itself melioristic within the real world.

24. Rushdie, *Shalimar*, 83.

25. Rushdie, *Shalimar*, 269.

26. Rushdie, *Shalimar*, 356.

But is post-postmodernity truly as distinctive as I have been suggesting? Well, in some respects it is, but in other respects it is not. If we compare literary-theoretical pronouncements from the post-postmodern new millennium with theoretical pronouncements from the modern and postmodern phases of history, there are very clear differences. Modern theoreticians saw literary authors as enjoying an unlimited autonomy which meant that they could belong universally. Postmodern theory was profoundly suspicious of that claim, and in its most extreme forms saw writers deterministically, as belonging only or mainly to their own particular groupings. Post-postmodern theory sees both writers and members of their audiences as social individuals, inevitably influenced by the configurations of their own historicity, but with relative powers of thought, imagination and empathy which allow writing to cross geographical and historical boundaries and bring about literary communities which are rainbow, hybrid, non-consensual. So much for theoreticians. When it comes to creative writers, however, the differences between the three eras are much less clear. In particular, post-postmodern modes of creativity actually help to highlight two aspects of modern creativity which modern theory tended to overlook.

First, as soon as a novel like *Shalimar the Clown* sets us on the lookout for it, we begin to see that modern writers were no less interested than post-postmodern writers in human individuals as members or potential members of groupings, both smaller groupings and larger. When modern writers portrayed characters in action, they were offering examples of people who somehow or other managed to “make community”, to communicate, or who, for whatever reason, did not make community, did not communicate, and modern texts could be just as torn between utopia and reality as post-postmodern writing today.

Secondly, a writer like Rushdie, whose communication with his readers about communicational breakdown is paradoxically so humanly rewarding, can help us see that modern writers, too, presented themselves, not as the universal dictators we might have expected from late-modern theoretical manifestos such as Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, but as flexible fellow-humans, often positively friendly, sometimes cosmopolitan-minded, mobile even, eclectic, quite possibly sure about some things, but altogether more open-minded about some of the most important issues they touched on, sometimes challenging, sometimes downright difficult, but thereby empowering their addressees to use their own brains.²⁷

As an illustration of both these points, I return to a passage whose paradigmatic significance I have already explored in several earlier discussions: a passage from Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* where he has lost sight of the man who is supposed to be guiding him on his walk through a very dreary stretch of countryside:

27. Sell, Borch, and Lindgren, *The ethics*

[...] I saw
 A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,
 The beacon on the summit, and more near
 A girl who bore a pitcher on her head
 And seemed with difficult steps to force her way
 Against the blowing wind. It was in truth
 An ordinary sight, but I should need
 Colours and words that are unknown to man
 To paint the visionary dreariness
 Which, while I looked all round for my lost guide,
 Did at that time invest the naked pool,
 The beacon on the lonely eminence,
 The woman and her garments vexed and tossed
 By the strong wind.²⁸

Wordsworth, and a girl with a pitcher on her head! Each in what seems to be their own universe of desolate solipsism, Wordsworth has lost his guide, and the girl seems to have her defining relationship merely with the wind. It is as if Wordsworth and the girl could never belong to a shared human experience except of endless and total solitude. Yet if there is no communication going on within the poem's world of mimesis, and if the mimesis here is all too representative of human life in the real world, Wordsworth's utopian impulse will not accept a total defeat. As author, he tries to bring about a very different state of affairs in his relationship with readers. In his thinking about himself there certainly is that trace of philosophical idealism; he truly does believe that, as a poet, he has superior powers of imagination; and in face of a passage like this, we would be both churlish and self-impoverishing to deny his assumption some justice. Twice over, both at the beginning and the end of the passage, his eye takes in the ordinary scene, but without imposing ordinary preconceptions or conclusions. Instead, at these two points his writing is epiphanic, instinctual, symbolic, almost apophatic – visionary, to use his own word. Yet as I began to hint earlier, this awesome level of insight could be in tension, creative tension, I can now add, with his egalitarian instincts. One of his most characteristic traits as a poet is that he can bring about a shift into the mundane that is warmly companionable and interesting, channelling a discussion with his readers which is neither trite nor pompous. There in the middle of this passage is his little comment about his own rhetorical and linguistic problem, and it is surrounded on either side by the imagistic impersonality of those two amazing sets of lines in which the problem is actually solved, as his eye and his wording each do their work. In

28. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1970), (1799 version) I 314-327).

the passage as a whole, then, the primitive power of the nearly inarticulate has not been prosified away, yet has nevertheless become a topic of discussion between the gifted, intelligent and cultivated writer and readers who are also credited with some sophistication and human dignity. The net result is a poetry which at once pierces to the marrow and takes us into the poet's friendly confidence, considerably mitigating the starkness of that human disjunction between Wordsworth and the girl "in the story".

Keats complained that Wordsworth did not understand how much we hate a poem that has a palpable design on us.²⁹ This, I think, is not entirely fair on Wordsworth. Some postmodern writing – Hayley's *Roots*, for instance – may have had a palpable design on some grouping of readers; it may have tried to persuade them of something. And to come full circle, for all I know there may be contemporary Polish writers who are trying to prove something as well – like those misguided participants in the Iowa Writers Programme, who wanted to prove their own claim on universal attention. But at their best, Wordsworth, Shakespeare, and many other writers, including, I have no doubt, many Polish writers, do not fall into the persuasive mode, for the simple reason that they have far too much respect for each and every likely reader. This respect is not something they ingratiatingly wear upon their sleeve. On the contrary, to the extent that they do end up belonging in several different times and places, it is partly because their human touch is so beautifully inconspicuous. Needless to say, in different cultural milieus many different features will be perceived as intrinsically literary. Fashions do vary from place to place and from time to time, so that literary taste is something of a whirligig. But a respect for readers, even if seldom explicitly recognized by critics and reviewers, and even if obviously not a *sufficient* precondition, is certainly a *necessary* precondition, if a writer is going to become a literary author long admired by people of different backgrounds and identities. Respect for other human beings, a frame of mind which the postmoderns deserve the fullest credit for advocating, even if they did not always manage to embody it in their own writing – respect for other human beings does travel well, because what it attracts to itself is respectful responses.

29. Keats, *Letters*, 72.

Honour dishonoured

The communicational workings of early Stuart tragedy and tragi-comedy¹

1. Massinger's *The Roman Actor*

According to Joanne Rochester, Massinger intended his dramatization of the actor Paris and his troop of players in *The Roman Actor* (1626) to show an independent and professional theatre being destroyed by a corrupt and tyrannous state. Massinger's aim, she says, was to defend the independent theatre's social role by suggesting that the stage was necessary "not only for artistic purposes, but for moral and political ones as well".² In her view the play was Massinger's meta-theatrical account of what he saw as his own duty to work for moral and political consensus.

And indeed, Paris himself does say that drama can imitate noble thoughts and deeds of honour, so that "All that have any spark of Roman in them" will "contend to be / Like those they see presented" on the stage.³ This fine mixture of humanism and patriotism, however, is the defence he offers the Roman Senate when pleading with them for his life and livelihood. Its divergence from his more usual turn of mind and phrase is well suggested by the comment of his fellow-player Latinus: "Well pleaded, on my life! I never saw him / Act an orator's part before" (I iii 143–4). The plain fact is that Paris has no real ambition to teach moral values or to guide society in any particular direction. When courtly patrons ask him to lay on their special requests, he shows no sign of feeling under pressure to compromise his own values. Nor are the motives behind the patrons' requests nearly as political as Rochester implies. Paris is not commissioned, like the players at the beginning of Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*, to produce a court masque whose ideological symbolism will consolidate the power of the ruler in the public sphere. The concerns of Paris's patrons are much more intimate. Parthenius asks for a play that will

1. [First published in Roger D. Sell, Anthony W. Johnson, and Helen Wilcox (eds), *Community-Making in early Stuart Theatres: Stage and Audience* (London: Routledge, 2017), 173–198.]

2. Joanne Rochester, *Staging spectatorship in the plays of Philip Massinger* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 18.

3. Philip Massinger, *The Roman Actor*, in *The selected plays of Philip Massinger*, ed. Colin Gibson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), I iii 93–5. Subsequent references (Act, Scene, line) are to this edition, and placed parenthetically within the text.

teach Philargus, his miserly old father, the dangers of avarice. The Empress Domitia herself stage-manages a play which, by placing the handsome Paris stage-centre in the role of a young lover, will fuel her own erotic fantasies. The Emperor Domitian orders a play in which he himself can take part, in a role that will enable him to satisfy his jealous hatred of Paris by really killing him, while seeming merely to mime the killing of the character Paris is playing.

Paris and his colleagues think of themselves as little more than a body of servants hired for the diversion of the Emperor and his court. He does tell the Senators that his plays also show things which are shocking and unpleasant, and which may even give some high-placed spectators a twinge of guilt. But “[w]e cannot help it”, as he repeatedly says (e.g. I iii 123). Nor does he mean any mischief by it. The world his stage imitates simply *is* like that, and he is not in the first instance out to satirize – the satire of avarice is in any case water off a duck’s back to Philargus – but to explore life just as it comes, an undertaking in which he is simply rather successful. Although, for his own safety’s sake, he tries to explain to Domitia that he is only an actor, and that when he is off-stage he is none of the things that he is when he is on-stage, Domitia finds it hard to believe that he is any less noble than the noble men he portrays: “Thou must really be, in some degree / The thing thou dost present” (IV ii 38–9). And when, in one of Massinger’s supreme feats of construction, Paris’s third and final play recapitulates, move by move, the immediately previous seduction of Paris himself by Domitia, what it is giving the courtly audience on stage is nothing more than a representation of their own world in little.

Massinger’s own theatre audience, meanwhile, was invited to compare notes about everything happening both on the stage and on the increasingly inseparable stage-on-the-stage, and to do so under no compulsion to draw any particular conclusion. His play was no more a court masque than those put on by Paris, and as a playwright his stock in trade was neither morality plays nor Shavian dramas of ideas. Just as the spectators shown on stage are very independent in their reaction to Paris’s plays, so there was not the slightest likelihood that Massinger would have expected to regulate his own audience. He would have been foolish even to try. Although the title-page of the 1629 Quarto of *The Roman Actor* states that it was performed “diuerse times” and “with greate allowance” at “the private Play-house in the *Black-Friers*”, although *The Duke of Milan* and other Massinger plays were staged in that same theatre, and although his normal audience has therefore sometimes been described as privileged and rather narrow, scholars such as Andrew Gurr and Philip J. Finkelpearl have already shown that even for performances at court the audience was far from homogeneous.⁴ To prevent all the different types

4. Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London*, 3rd ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Philip J. Finkelpearl, *Court and country politics in the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), esp. 54.

of spectator from having their own different kinds of reaction would have been out of the question. While there were plenty of things about which they could all agree, such consensus would have been at a pretty high level of abstraction, the level of official state propaganda, for instance, or of court sycophancy, wise saws, and Protestantism and Catholicism's doctrinal common denominators. The excitements and tensions of drama arose at a lower level of more detailed exploration, a level at which society's run-of-the-mill platitudes could begin to fall apart. Here, even if Massinger's honest and effective realism "could not help" alerting audiences to grounds for troubling disagreements, he himself did not take sides. His address to them was provocative, but without being aggressive or tendentious.

In other words, his case supports the claim that Shakespeare was not the only early Stuart dramatist to manifest what Keats called "negative capability": the capability to remain "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".⁵ Negative capability was, I suggest, the single most decisive factor for Massinger's entire mode of communication – for the kind of *community-making* in which he was involved, to return "communication" to its etymological sense.⁶ My only caveat is that here "negative capability" does not denote

5. John Keats, *Selected letters of John Keats*, ed. Frederick Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 53. Non-Shakespearean instances of negative capability have been detected by, for instance, M. C. Bradbrook, *John Webster: Citizen and dramatist* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 145; Lee Bliss, *The world's perspective: John Webster and the Jacobean drama* (Brighton: Harvester, 1983), 199–200; Dena Goldberg, *Between worlds: A study of the plays of John Webster* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1987), 2–3; Finkelppearl, *Court and country politics*, 206; T. S. Eliot, "Thomas Middleton" [1927], in his *Selected essays* (London: Faber, 1951), 161–70, esp. 169; Maurice Evans (ed.), *Bussy D'Ambois: George Chapman* (London: Ernest Benn, 1965), xxiv; Tucker Orbison, *The Tragic vision of John Ford* (Salzburg: Salzburg Studies in English Literature, 1974), 85 n. 5, 181; and Dorothy M. Farr, *John Ford and the Caroline theatre* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979), 38.

6. For earlier work on literature as communication, see: Roger D. Sell, *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000); Roger D. Sell, *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001); Roger D. Sell (ed.), *Children's literature as communication: The ChiLPA project* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002); Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (eds), *Writing and religion in England, 1558–1689: Studies in community-making and cultural memory* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Roger D. Sell, *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011); Roger D. Sell (ed.), *Literary community-making: The dialogicality of English texts from the seventeenth century to the present* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2012); Roger D. Sell, Adam Borch and Inna Lindgren (eds), *The ethics of literary communication: Genuineness, directness, indirectness* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2013); and Roger D. Sell (ed.), *Literature as dialogue: Invitations offered and negotiated* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2014). For detailed examinations of drama as communication, see the chapters in *Communicational criticism* entitled "Henry V and the strength and weakness of words" and "Communicational ethics and the plays of Harold Pinter" (51–81, 293–363). For appraisals of the literary-communicational approach, see the review of *Literature*

the suprahistorical impersonality of wisdom so often invoked in nineteenth century interpretations of Shakespeare. What is at issue is rather Massinger's hesitations *vis à vis* some of the burning ideological issues of his own time, hesitations which he did not conceal, and which left him reluctant, perhaps as much from honesty as from tact, to urge some particular view upon his audiences. The net result was probably that the community into which he was moulding them was marked, less by consensus, than by certain historically very specific kinds of questioning.

He was especially frank about tensions that could stem from the early modern notion of honour. Back in the fourteenth century, aristocratic honour had still been a pride of place belonging to the high-born descendants of noble ancestors who had distinguished themselves in the service of kings, above all on the field of battle. But honour in this sense had been gradually displaced by the humanist culture of civility and politeness as transmitted through, for instance, the writings of Castiglione and Giovanni della Casa.⁷ One central element in this was a formalized code for the duelling which was encouraged as the standard response to a discourteous insult. In effect this meant that, especially for a male aristocrat, the new kind of honour was no longer predicated on obedience to a power external to the individual's own person. Although it is often assumed that the main ideological function of the Renaissance culture of courtesy was to please the prince, the pivotal role it accorded to duelling, and consequently to an assumption that a man of honour had the right to seek justice by taking the law into his own hands, clearly undermined not only the authority of the monarch but the central teachings of Christianity as well. So although the strict conventions for duelling, together with the introduction of the rapier (which, unlike the sword, called less for strength than skill), actually reduced the amount of aristocratic and genteel bloodshed in and around early-modern London,⁸ and although duelling was in principle quite distinct from those more ancient practices of vendetta which had extended an obligation to shed blood across several generations, from the 1590s onwards the English authorities felt an ever

as communication by Evan Willner (*Essays in Criticism* 52 (2002): 155–61), the reviews of *Communicational Criticism* by Jonathan Baldo (*Modern Language Review* 109 (2014): 1062–4) and David Stromberg (*Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 11 (2013): 337–9), and Anthony W. Johnson's introduction (1–15) to Jason Finch *et al.* (eds), *Humane readings: Essays on literary mediation and communication in honour of Roger D. Sell* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2009).

7. Markku Peltonen, *The duel in early modern England: Civility, politeness and honour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Cf. the emphasis on the socially transformative power of court etiquette in Norbert Elias, *The civilizing process: Sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations* [1939] (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

8. Jennifer Low, "Violence in the City," in *Thomas Middleton in Context*, ed. Suzanne Gossett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 98–105.

stronger need to assert themselves, and there was also a corresponding popular concern. Duelling was now often represented as an Italianate fad, and as far less acceptable than more ancient and, as it was sometimes believed, more indigenous forms of conflict resolution such as chivalrous jousting and judicial combat.

Opposition to duelling became especially intense during the seventeenth century's second decade, when Massinger's fellow-dramatist Middleton, for one, was directly involved. Not only did Middleton share responsibility (with Rowley) for the humorous satire of contemporary honour in *The Faire Quarrell*, first published in 1617. He also wrote *The Peacemaker*, a pamphlet printed in 1616 and arguing that duelling was a threat to civil law. James I would have agreed with him, and the title-page of *The Peacemaker* could actually give the impression that James was its author. The key text, however, had already appeared in 1614: Bacon's *The Charge of Sir Francis Bacon, Knight, the King's Attorney-General, Touching Duels*. On the one hand, this reflected an attempt, like Richelieu's in France, to increase the power of the state over the nobility. On the other hand, the prestige of the nobility in relation to those beneath them on the ladder of creation remained unthreatened. When Bacon brought cases against two gentlemen duellists, this was not merely as a warning to offenders more highly placed – not merely because he deemed it right and proper that “the dog ... be beaten before the lion.”⁹ He was also worried that the principle of one-man-one-right-to-take-the-law-into-his-own-hands could become a recipe for levelling.

How much the curs even lower down the ladder than gentlemen wanted to copy the great lions prowling around in the royal court is difficult to determine. Popular disapproval of duelling on moral and religious grounds remained strong, and while the cult of revenge had all along been thought the hallmark of violently lawless Machiavellians in the courts of Italian potentates, by the time Bacon published his *Charge ... Touching Duels* James's own court, too, had a tarnished reputation. Verse libels about corruption in English high places were as vituperative as prolific, and their more particular targets were hardly very veiled: the manipulativeness of James's Ganymedes, Somerset and (a bit later on) Buckingham, the latter also sometimes demonized as pro-Spanish; the scandal of Overbury's poisoning; the sexual appetite of Frances Howard, Countess of Essex. All this helps to explain the presence in early Stuart tragedies and tragi-comedies of so much ostensibly Italian and ancient Roman violence and vice.¹⁰ Also, the fact that the period's urban legend was so intently centred on great ones' sexual licence, and especially on the lusts of

9. Quoted in Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The honor code: How moral revolutions happen* (New York: Norton, 2010), 31.

10. Alastair Bellamy, “The court,” in *Thomas Middleton in context*, ed. Suzanne Gossett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 117–25.

a possibly murderous countess, chimed in with the continuing ideological development of honour itself. Ever more frequently, the insults which duellists sought to rebut with their rapiers were no longer to their own physical courage and moral integrity, but to the chastity of their mothers, sisters, daughters, nieces and, above all, wives and fiancées. Here was a cause, to use Othello's word, in which honour could be very prickly indeed. Among men of the higher orders, Othello would have had his sympathizers.

One of most remarkable features of *The Roman Actor* is the sexually proactive Empress Domitia, and another aspect of the play's larger context was an increasing independence for upper-class women. This could go together with, and further consolidate, a certain freedom of conscience which, tacitly, had already applied under Elizabeth in matters of religion. Not only did Anne of Denmark and Henrietta Maria boldly go against precedent by taking on acting parts in masques. They were also Catholics, as were both the mother and the wife of Buckingham, and many other women of high rank as well, whereas many influential men, presumably because of their status or ambitions in the public sphere, toed the official line. Like the code of honour itself, the relaxing of male control over female bodies and souls was spreading downwards through society, gradually preparing the ideological ground for, among other things, the emergence of professional female actors on the Restoration stage.¹¹ In fact the honour code was steadily subverted by this development. With high-ranking women increasingly perceived as agreeably lively, entertaining, and forceful, and as entitled to a measure of spiritual and sexual autonomy, any male insistence on female chastity was in the long run bound to seem old-fashioned and out of place.

Some such subversive trend was exactly what Bacon was hoping to encourage. Before he himself took the lead, official anti-duelling policy had been devised by Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton, who brought out his *A Publication of His Majesties Edict, and Severe Censure against Private Combats and Combatants* in 1614, only a short time before Bacon's own *Charge*.¹² In Northampton's view, the best way to abolish duelling would be to replace it by a Court of Honour, which in trying to settle a grievance arising from an insult would take it very seriously indeed. Bacon argued that such a procedure would be self-defeating. A Court of Honour, precisely by endorsing the notions of courtesy, insult, and honour, would positively encourage men to fight duels. To his mind, the only way to eradicate duelling was to discredit its underlying theory. Honour, as we can put this, would have to be dishonoured.

11. Sophie Tomlinson, *Women on stage in Stuart drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

12. Peltonen, *The duel*, 143–5.

The realism of Bacon's stance has been confirmed in a book by Kwame Anthony Appiah: *The honor code: How moral revolutions happen* (2010). Appiah studies not only the end of English duelling but the end of Chinese foot-binding and North American slavery, and despite his subtitle is not discussing shifts in values that were very deliberate and sudden. He suggests, rather, that moral revolutions have been *long* revolutions. In each of his three cases, the arguments against the controversial practice were by no means new at the point in time when it finally disappeared. The general sense of honour, the value system which people felt they needed to embrace if they were to walk proud, had slowly changed over time. An older sense of honour had gradually come to seem unacceptably at odds with revised perceptions of religious, social, and ethical imperatives. So although the last honour duel in England did not take place until 1852, long after rapiers had been superseded by pistols, the practice was already in terminal ideological decline by 1829, when there was what amounted to a mock-duel between the Earl of Winchilsea and the Duke of Wellington, both of whom deliberately aimed wide. By that stage, dishonoured honour could be satisfied by their merely turning up with their pistols and seconds and performing a charade.

Appiah is careful to register contributions made to the long revolution by literary writers.

From Mackenzie's and Sterne's "Man of Feeling" in the late eighteenth century to Newman's mid-Victorian gentleman there is a developing body of argument, in fiction and the moral essay, that aims to displace the irritable masculinity of the battle-field, jealous of marital honor, with the more amiable civility of the drawing-room.¹³

But the literary contributions started a good deal earlier than this suggests, and a play such as *The Roman Actor* remains in one sense far more interesting, because the code of honour was still at its height in the surrounding society. Mackenzie, Sterne, and Newman, representing later phases of the moral revolution, were to a greater extent – though by no means exclusively – preaching to the converted. In the early seventeenth century, there was more call for uncoercive tact, more scope for uncertainties. Even if representations of honour on early Stuart stages are now sometimes seen as merely reflecting the thought and practice of the time,¹⁴ the

13. Appiah, *The honor code*, 189.

14. E.g. Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan revenge tragedy* [1940] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966); Charles Barber, *The theme of Honour's tongue: A study of social attitudes in the English drama from Shakespeare to Dryden* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 1965); Charles A. Hallett and Elaine S. Hallett, *The revenger's madness* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1980); John Kerrigan, *Revenge tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Low, "Violence in the City."

alliance of Massinger's realism with his unaggressive open-mindedness would have been more than enough to stimulate discussion.

For one thing, he raised intellectual, emotional, and political tensions by dramatizing a story in which honour operates at the very highest level of society, among members of the imperial family itself and those most closely associated with them. Domitilla, the Emperor Domitian's cousin-german, and herself one of his rape victims, discusses the sense of grievance she shares with Julia, on whom Domitian has forced an incestuous relationship with himself. Furiously outraged, they both long for justice. Yet Domitilla advises caution because "[t]he immortal powers / Protect a prince, though sold to impious acts" (III i 58–9). Many theatre-goers would probably have agreed with her, in effect acknowledging the Stuart doctrine of the divine right of kings. As hinted by Martin Butler's later chapter here,¹⁵ other members of the audience, and especially those with links to parliament, were more likely to remember the king's impositions, forced loans, monopolies, and arbitrary imprisonments, in a resentful frame of mind which, as time rolled on, would in some be ready to entertain the possibility of deposition and even regicide.¹⁶ When Domitilla further develops her thought, she explicitly says that the "roaring crimes" of a prince will in the end awake the justice of the immortal powers (III i 60), even though at this stage it still remains rather vague what this could mean in practice. As if unable to imagine that the divine verdicts might somehow be enforced by human intervention – what legal instance could trump the power of Caesar, after all? – she merely says that the gods may "leave him to his wickedness, which sinks him / When he is most secure" (III i 65–6). Yet by the end of the play, it looks as if human punishers certainly can come into the picture, even if they themselves need to be violent and prepared to break the law. This means that the tension between a sense of honour which is ready to move against even royal crimes and one which regards royal crimes as off-limits becomes still more acute. When Parthenius, Domitia, Domitilla and Julia have each taken their revenge on Domitian by personally stabbing him, the interchange with which the play then quickly ends is much too finely balanced – much too negatively capable – to allow any resolution here. On the one hand, Parthenius says that they have done "[w]hat Rome shall give us thanks for", and Stephanos that they have "[d]espatch'd a monster". On the other hand, the Tribune tells them:

15. [Martin Butler, "Massinger's divided communities", in *Community-making in early Stuart theatres: Stage and audience*, eds Roger D. Sell, Anthony W. Johnson, and Helen Wilcox (London: Routledge, 2017), 338–352.]

16. See also Martin Butler, "Romans in Britain: *The Roman Actor* and the early Stuart classical play", in *Philip Massinger: A critical reassessment*, ed. Douglas Howard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 139–70.

Yet he was our prince,
 However wicked, and in you 'tis murder,
 Which whoso'er succeeds him will revenge. (V ii 77–9)

Amid these tortuous imperial matters, Paris is in some respects an irrelevance. Douglas Howard has described him as “peculiar among Massinger’s tragic protagonists in being a believable near-miss at perfect goodness”.¹⁷ But although Paris is a Roman actor, and although the play’s title is what it is, he is not the hero, it seems to me, partly because, for all his virtue, he never really *takes* action, except when performing on a stage in a dramatic role. At all other times he is passive – the passive object of Domitia’s sexual lust, the passive victim of Domitian’s persecution and jealous anger. From my present point of view, his main interest is as the exponent of a sense of honour which distances itself from the violence and corruption sanctioned by the courtly honour of Domitia and Domitian, and which is indeed that of a man from a lower order of society. His insistence to Domitia that he is *not* the kind of noble-born man he often represents on stage can suggest a concern on his part to let things stay that way. But when his play-acting inflames Domitia’s passion for him to a dangerous level and then provides Domitian with an opportunity to kill him, he is caught up in the *real* palace drama willy-nilly. As for Massinger’s first audiences, here too there could have been a split, not only between different audience members, but quite possibly within the mind of single individuals. While there was bound to be some pity for Paris’s undeserved tribulations, plus some admiration for his outsider’s purity of heart amid all the courtly corruption, the spectacle of true nobility in a man who was not a nobleman could also have provoked some territorial anger. Yet Massinger’s own sympathies are so obviously with the pro-Paris camp that in this area the characterization is unusually low on negative capability. Paris, apart from his theory and practice of acting, is not especially memorable. His role as token victim is necessary to the story, but fundamentally idealized – and his nearness to what Howard calls perfect goodness rather boring. If he had been more readily responsive to Domitia’s overture, or had even made an amorous overture himself, or if he had plotted against Domitian’s life, his honour would have been either fascinatingly tainted or splendidly resolute – the scope for discussion would have been considerable. As things are, the play is far more subtly interrogative in its treatment of Domitia and Domitian.

Having been wrested by Domitian from the arms of her worthy husband Aelius Lamia, Domitia is profoundly offended, and finds her own way to rectify the dishonour, as she explains to her ravisher himself:

17. Douglas Howard, “Massinger’s political tragedies”, in Douglas Howard (ed.), *Philip Massinger: A critical reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 117–37, esp. 121.

Thy lust compell'd me
 To be a strumpet, and mine [i.e. my vengeance] hath return'd it
 In my intent, and will (though not in act)
 To cuckold thee. (IV ii 135–8)

This alone could have polarized both an audience as a collective and the minds of many individual audience members. Domitia's explicit and vindictive sexual schemes could have seemed appalling enough, but what might also have played in was the dreadful injury she and her family have suffered, making this desire for an exquisite revenge in kind more understandable, even for those not basically in sympathy with honour's tit-for-tat. The less censorious take on her would also have found nourishment in her reaction to Paris's acting of the despised lover. Even though it was she herself who commissioned and planned the performance, she loses all grasp of the distinction between theatrical fiction and the world of reality, like Partridge in *Tom Jones*, and to hardly less comic effect. In her eagerness to rush up onto the stage and intervene on the lover's behalf, she has the amusing naivety of a little girl who day-dreams of Prince Charming. Before long, though, it becomes clear that she is inclined to formidable sexual promiscuity, and not just out of revenge, but under the compulsion of a raging lust which makes her ruthlessly imperious. Paris, she tells him, has no choice but to yield to her:

Thou must! Thou shalt!
 The violence of my passions knows no mean,
 And in my punishments, and my rewards,
 I'll use no moderation. (IV ii 79–82)

Nor is this the end of it, for after Domitian has killed Paris she tells him, in complete confidence of his infatuated doting on her, that he will come to wish

my actor
 Did live again, so thou mightst be his second
 To feed upon these delicates, when he's sated. (V i 67–9)

The psychological humiliation here, the slight to Domitian's sense of imperial and marital honour, could not have been more savagely enterprising. Of the many sexually forward queens, princesses, and noblewomen on early Stuart stages, Domitia is arguably the most hardened, the cruellest, the most dangerous. Even the common people, on one of the few occasions when they are mentioned at all, are said to hate her "more / Than civil war, or famine" (V i 16–17), and members of Massinger's audience could easily have felt the same, even if their condemnation went hand in hand with a furtive wonder at her extraordinary energy and boldness. Yet only a few lines after her most venomous taunts to Domitian, she again mentions "Lamia's wrongs / When thy lust forc'd me from him" (V i 76–7), which is the means by

which the negatively capable Massinger recalls, with no pretence to solving it, the intractable problem: What *is* the appropriate response to a gross injury from such a quarter? To Caesar, to an early Stuart monarch, can one only turn the other cheek?

The play's real hero is, I think, Domitian, whose death brings it to a close, and to whom, despite appearances, its title surely refers. Domitian, in the *coup de théâtre* by which he really kills Paris, turns out to be greatest Roman actor of them all, greatest, if not in his histrionic talents (he cannot be bothered even to learn his lines), then certainly as the highest-placed Roman ever to tread the boards. In his own eyes, too, he is a hero. He believes he is a god, and seeks to demonstrate his power by killing and raping people without the slightest compunction, and by subjecting Lamia and two Stoic philosophers to psychological tortures at least as grimly imaginative as those he himself will suffer at the hands of Domitia. Which brings us to the crucial point: Massinger's negative capability displayed Domitian to early Stuart audiences in all his gruesome despicability, prompting all those positive feelings towards the indignant outrage of the victims whose honour he has defiled; and it also displayed him, *with equal force*, as the honour code's supreme scapegoat. He himself speaks, and not lightly, of "the cruelty of honour". If it were not for the code of honour, his own life might have been so different!

For one thing, his relationship with Paris could have turned out much more agreeably. Paris himself, anticipating his own destruction for reasons of honour, is very clear-sighted. He knows that even though he was unenthusiastic when Domitia came on to him, and even though he is her social inferior, the honour code requires that he be seen as a guilty party, and a guilty party whose standing is not quite low enough for him to be merely horsewhipped. Domitian, as the outraged husband and emperor, simply has no choice, as Paris, perhaps noticing some inner reluctance in him, frankly spells out:

Alas you cannot, nay, you must not [pardon me], sir,
 Nor let it to posterity be recorded
 That Caesar, unreveng'd, suffer'd a wrong
 Which if a private man should sit down with it,
 Cowards would baffle him.

(IV ii 193–7)

Domitian's immediate reply is that he pardons Paris all the same, which at first seems to be yet another way for him to demonstrate that he is far superior to ordinary mortals – that his hands are *not* tied by honour's code. But almost in the same breath he commissions Paris to put on *The False Servant*, in which Paris, playing the part of the false servant, will indeed be killed by Domitian, playing the part of the wronged master. In society as it stands at present, Domitian simply cannot allow himself, simply cannot allow Caesar, to appear an unprotesting cuckold, and his anguish is all the greater because Paris is the one human being for whom he

feels something almost like affection and even admiration. While doubtless partly revelling in the sadistic beauty of his own scheme, when he says to the dying Paris that his intention has been to reconcile his own marital and imperial honour with Paris's honour as an actor, he could be telling the truth:

[B]efore life leave thee, let the honour
I have done thee in thy death bring comfort to thee.
If it had been within the power of Caesar
(His dignity being preserved), he had pardon'd thee;
But cruelty of honour

– that telling phrase! –

did deny it.
Yet, to confirm I lov'd thee, 'twas my study
To make thy end more glorious, to distinguish
My Paris from all others, and in that
Have shown my pity. Nor would I let thee fall
By a centurion's sword, or have thy limbs
Rent piecemeal by the hangman's hook (however
Thy crime deserv'd it), but as thou didst live
Rome's bravest actor, 'twas my plot that thou
Shouldst die in action, and to crown it, die
With an applause enduring to all times,
By our imperial hand. [PARIS *dies*]

(IV ii 285–300)

Domitian's subservience to honour is just as troublesome an Achilles heel in his relationship with Domitia. Were it not for the honour code, were it not for the jealousy which the code endorses or dictates, Domitia would be quite powerless to humiliate him so viciously. In all probability, neither he, nor Massinger, nor anybody in Massinger's first audiences was yet capable of imagining a world in which honour was so different as to allow for what we should now call free love. But at the very heart of the uncertainties, mysteries and doubts arising from Domitian's predicament is the question, which Massinger does not rush in to answer either one way or the other, of whether some different regime of honour *might* be possible, a regime which would leave Domitian free to adore Domitia without shame, quite irrespective of how and where she granted or withheld her favours. For if his one moment of apparent greatness is when, by at first seeming to pardon Paris, he seems superior to honour, then his moment of greatest agony is when, truer than ever to honour's code, he fumes at his own inability to raise his hand against his great tormentress:

I am lost;
 Nor am I Caesar. When I first betray'd
 The freedom of my faculties and will
 To this imperious siren, I laid down
 The empire of the world and of myself
 At her proud feet. Sleep all my ireful powers?
 Or is the magic of my dotage such,
 That I must still make suit to hear those charms
 That do increase my thralldom? Wake, my anger!

(V i 81–6)

Massinger's negative capability makes Domitian both a terrifying monster and a pathetic wretch, mentally trapped in the very ideology which condemns his own crimes.

There is a sense, indeed, in which Domitian's entire life, in both victory and adversity, *is* a kind of Roman play-acting, his part's artificial lines having been dictated by the honour code, and suggesting not a single cultural form that could channel human happiness. Happiness, it would seem, is something which neither he nor Massinger can imagine, even if the play does move outside the honour box by dimly intimating a human need for it. By which I am not implying that happiness can only be seen as universally the sole good, or that we today necessarily know what happiness really is. The point is merely that Domitian's emotional responses seem to include a large element of rather dogged rote-learning. Perhaps this was what T. S. Eliot had in mind when he said that Massinger "dealt not with emotions so much as with the social abstractions of emotions".¹⁸ Eliot meant this as a criticism. But if, unobtrusively, unjudgementally, and without proposing some specific direction for ideological change, Massinger's dramatic entertainments were stirring his audiences at least to think about stereotyped honour scripts and their impact on actual human lives, then his due is surely praise. Bacon would certainly have thought so.

18. T. S. Eliot, "Philip Massinger" [1920], in his *Selected essays* (London: Faber, 1951), 205–20, esp. 215.

2. Plays by Middleton, Chapman, Beaumont and Fletcher, Webster, and Ford

In dealing with honour in a negatively capable way that began to raise questions about it, *The Roman Actor* was far from exceptional. On the contrary, it was representative of what was a period mode of address on what was a major period topic. This means that the present chapter will in its own way complement previous chapters' accounts of overall professional trends in early Stuart theatres.¹⁹

My claim, however, is not that early Stuart tragedians and tragi-comedians were all basically writing the same play over and over again in different guises. In now surveying plays by several more dramatists, what I hope to indicate is not only the strong commonality of negatively capable address and ideological concern, but also the rich variety by which this is offset in other important dimensions. Any play still worth noticing is very much the creation of the individual or individuals who wrote it.

To begin with plays where Middleton had a hand, their most distinctive feature is that so many of the characters on stage embrace views and modes of action that are quite beyond morality's outermost reaches. As shown in detail by Andrew Hiscock in his chapter below, Middleton's people are for ever charging headlong to excess.²⁰ Drama arises from the sense that some ominous boundary is about to be crossed, or that the individuals bodied forth have gone much too far already. In *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606/7), Vindice's scheme for avenging the death of his mistress, poisoned by a duke who was unable to win her over to lechery, gathers speed and sophistication throughout the play, until his honour's self-vaunting resourcefulness finally triggers his own downfall. In view of the society in which he lives, this comes as no surprise. Extremes of greed, luxury, lust, violence, and sheer evil are rife in every quarter. With huge gusto, and without the slightest scruple,

19. [The previous chapters in *Community-making in early Stuart theatres: Stage and audience* are: Richard Dutton, "Dramatic censorship: Social cohesion and division"; Stephen Orgel, "What is an audience?"; Andrew Gurr, "Lower class theatre communities under the early Stuarts"; Anpam Basu, Jonathan Hope, and Michael Witmore, "The professional and linguistic communities of early modern dramatists"; Suzanne Gossett, "Collaborative playwrights and community-making"; Alison Findlay, "For love not money: Community-making in non-commercial drama"; Ros King, "Disgust and delight: *Apollo Shroving*, *The Roaring Girl*, and community theatre"; and David Lindley, "Musical community in early modern theatre". The chapters on period trends are followed by ten chapters on individual playwrights.]

20. [Andrew Hiscock, "'Cut my heart in sums': Community-making and -breaking in the prodigal drama of Thomas Middleton", in *Community-making in early Stuart theatres: Stage and audience*, eds Roger D. Sell, Anthony W. Johnson, and Helen Wilcox (London: Routledge, 2017), 311–337.]

the entire establishment is becoming ever more deeply embroiled in heinous vice, while their strident appeals to honour become ever more obviously a pretext for irrepressible bloodlust. At the play's close an audience, instead of sensing that the action has now come to an end, could just as easily assume that the same mad mechanism will now kick in afresh. A new woman character is already being moved up into the role of sexual victim and, since honour's ideological hold is still unbroken, could prove just as catalytic as her unfortunate predecessor. Nor are things so very different in Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* (1622). Here, too, there are characters quite unable to change their minds, no matter how dangerous their trajectory. In Beatrice-Joanna's fierce gallop away from honour, the first boundary she transgresses is when she wants to reject Alonzo, the suitor proposed by her father, in favour of Alsemero. Her second transgression is when she hires De Flores to murder Alonzo. Her third is when she yields to sexual advances from that murderer.

Yet despite all the extremism on stage, these two plays would have been far more challenging than the *parti pris* of Middleton's efforts in *The Faire Quarrell* and *The Peacemaker*. Precisely because they show values, attitudes, and modes of behaviour coming to passionately full expression, they problematize the same historically specific issues as *The Roman Actor*, and with a basically similar abstention from persuasiveness. In fact for Bacon, their dishonouring of honour might even have seemed too complex to be socially constructive. To some members of the heterogeneous first audiences in The Globe, The Phoenix and Salisbury Court, and at the royal court in Whitehall, Beatrice-Joanna's transgressions could have seemed interesting and perhaps even understandable, while others could have roundly disapproved. But the sheer intensity of the writing would have promoted empathy in any case, so that many spectators would probably have contemplated her unfolding fate in a mood of horrified admiration. Especially in view of the on-stage characters' own choice of terminology, the central issue she raised would indeed have been one of honour. But what conclusions were to be drawn? To the extent that theatre-goers were sympathetic towards her, she could have seemed as entitled as any other sexually autonomous woman on the early Stuart stage – or in early Stuart audiences – to make up her own mind in resistance to the dictates of masculine honour. But if the energy and willpower needed to establish such independence could also run to murder ...? Conversely, if honour could justify Vindice and other *dramatis personae* in their extravagant crimes, how safe was a society in which the honour code was positively endorsed? But then again, given that even an uncorrupted legal system might not deter wrong-doing on a satisfactory scale, how safe was a society within which honour could *not* be relied on to exact redress for injuries?

Even noisier and more obstinate about his own honour than Vindice is the main character in Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois* (registered in 1607). Bussy bellows forth huge Marlovian tirades and, like Edmund in the roughly contemporaneous

King Lear, is especially keen to insist that honour is not a matter of birth: "I am noble. / And noblesse in his blood hath no gradation, / But in his merit".²¹ His peers, too, stand on their dignity, which quickly results in his killing a number of them in duels, even if, as in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, motivation is more than just a matter of avenging shameful insults. Bussy deliberately creates occasions for his honour to take offence, so as to have an excuse for clearing rivals from his path. Nor is he alone in what seems a pathological hunger for both sex and power. Every man's wife is a target for every other man's lust; every man, including the king, is every other man's political enemy; and men's amorous and political conquests are intricately interwoven. So if members of the first audiences could be fascinated by Bussy's world of honour for all its energy and boldness, there was ample scope for other reactions as well. Admittedly, the fact that Bussy's role was first played by one of St Paul's boy actors may not have rendered his viciousness as obscene as might nowadays be supposed. After all, Rousseau's *Émile* was not published until 1762, whereas Chapman and his contemporaries still assumed, like St Augustine before them, that children, too, are sinners, even at their mother's breast. On the other hand, the child actor's performance could certainly have had a depersonalizing effect, so prompting the audience to a weighing-up of pros and cons which was that much cooler and more sober.

One of the learned Chapman's most distinctive features is indeed his aptitude in philosophy, which for the relatively elite audiences at St Paul's could have held a particular attraction. The uncertainties, mysteries and doubts in which he himself remained, and about which he was tactfully inviting them to compare notes, amounted to an unresolved dialogue between Neo-Platonism, an ur-Hobbesian psychology of politics, and Stoicism. Bussy's magnificent poetry about his soul's ability to ascend to a stellar brilliance unclouded by worldly impurity is constantly interrupted by a bitterly sardonic realism as regards his own and other individuals' savage lusts and ambition, and he typically ends up feeling that, in the face of such socio-psychological facts, the only way to preserve his dream of a strong and authentic self is by grinning and bearing them, taking positive pride in his own trials and sufferings. His mind is for ever moving between these three stances, none of which establishes itself as the most truthful or most natural, and each of which places the honour code in a different sort of light. The content of honour, as we might say, is under negotiation here. Albeit with no clear sense of direction, Chapman was undoubtedly provoking audiences towards the first stirrings of moral revolution, and the basic question he was raising could not have been more obvious: If Bussy is a devotee of honour, is honour a good thing or a bad thing?

21. George Chapman, *Bussy D'Ambois*, in Thomas Marc Parrott (ed.), *The plays of George Chapman: The Tragedies*, vol. 1 (New York; Russell and Russell, 1961), 1-74, III ii 76-8. Subsequent references (Act, Scene, line) are to this edition, and placed parenthetically within the text.

The biggest difficulty the play dramatizes has to do with the honour code's treatment of female sexuality. Chapman's sexually proactive Tamyra is a far more sympathetic character than Massinger's Domitia, and her fate at the hands of the patriarchal order's now maritalized sense of honour is truly pitiable. Like Massinger, though with greater mental flexibility, Chapman moves outside the honour box, so that Tamyra's feelings for Bussy come across, not as a lust that threatens the entire social system, but as a simple yearning for affection. Neglected by her husband Montsurry, who is having a politically ambitious affair with another woman, she asks the Friar to let Bussy know that any advances he may care to make would not be unwelcome, as long as he never mentions this first, indirect advance by her. Although some members of the audience would have disapproved of her making the advance at all, perhaps harbouring an anti-Catholic view of both the play's Friar and Jesuit priests in England as downright panders,²² she could never be accused of shamelessness, and for some spectators the Friar may have seemed to offer her reasonable enough advice, acknowledging as he did that her relationship with Bussy might even turn out for the best. Montsurry, however, having got wind of her adultery, submits her to the most terrible physical and psychological tortures, and insists on separating from her – even though Bussy has by now, like Middleton's Vindice, been hoist on the petard of his own honour's pride, even though, as it may seem to us today, their marriage is not necessarily beyond repair, and even though, also in his own terms, he still loves her. He forgives her, but

I ... upon my knees
 With hands held up to heaven, wish that mine honour
 Would suffer reconcilment to my love;
 But since it will not, honour never serve
 My love with flourishing object, till it sterue!
 And as this taper, though it upwards look,
 Downwards must needs consume, so let our love! (V iv 204–10)

As a result, the play's closing mood is one of quiet but all-embracing desolation. Honour, Chapman seems to be suggesting, is in some ways so intoxicating, and so deeply rooted in society, that its dictates can be experienced as categorical imperatives. At the same time, he seems to be hinting that honour is a cover for unspeakable evil, and a sure path to misery. His negative capability offers no solution. But thus far, at least, his likely social impact would hardly have met with Bacon's total disapproval.

22. See Arthur F. Marotti, 'Alienating Catholics in early modern England: Recusant women, Jesuits and ideological fantasies', in *Catholicism and anti-Catholicism in early modern English texts*, ed. Arthur F. Marotti (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 1–34.

Although for Beaumont and Fletcher, too, honour is fraught with problems, their tone is completely different from that of Massinger's gloomy realism, Middleton's awed horror, or Chapman's coolly philosophical sadness. Their respect for the lifestyle and values of the court is much more tongue-in-cheek.²³ In their view, honour most certainly is a serious problem, but does not deserve to be. And although to this extent their stance is similar to that of Paris, the plebeian man of the theatre in Massinger's play, the real-life Beaumont and Fletcher would surely have been more spirited than he, and less inclined to serve as their honourable betters' doormat.

Typically, their plays show honour being rigidly upheld, even to the point of killing a king, but upheld by the "wrong" people, since those who "ought" to be upholding it get cold feet. It is as if Claudius in *Hamlet* were finally killed by Horatio, Laertes, or Fortinbras. Those who duck out from under honour's obligations can look very silly indeed, but sometimes honour itself is also robustly ridiculed from a non-courtly point of view. Even the most tragic of the plays have strong elements of comedy, but the partnership's more characteristic mode is out-and-out tragi-comedy, a genre ideally suited to conveying the negatively capable impression that, on the one hand, honour is very important indeed and that, on the other hand, honour, and the people who profess to be honourable, are utterly laughable. Bacon would have been delighted. In both the Blackfriars Theatre and the Globe, among all ranks of London society, Beaumont and Fletcher were clearly preparing the ground for a moral revolution which, as long as it did not undermine king and nobles alike by becoming too democratic, could only strengthen the king's hand against the court's great lions.

To us now, the danger of democracy may seem obvious enough. The plays include, after all, the acts of regicide, some of which we might have expected to be particularly alarming from King James's point of view. And as Philip J. Finkelpearl comments, the Jacobean censorship which allowed the King's Men to stage a court performance of *Philaster* (1609) can nowadays seem quite baffling.²⁴ It is a play in which a wicked king has increased his power, just like James VI & I, by annexing a second kingdom, and Philaster, the rightful heir to one of the kingdoms, is so slow to act upon his own grievance that it comes to be resolved – without the loss of a single drop of blood – entirely through the initiative and organized force of ordinary citizens. A somewhat similar case occurs in *The Maid's Tragedy* (1609), where the wicked king besmirches the honour of Evadne by making her his secret mistress and having her married, with all the ceremony of a specially commissioned court

23. Cf. Finkelpearl, *Court and country*, 55.

24. Finkelpearl, *Court and country politics*, 147 n. 4.

masque, to Amintor as a cover. When Evadne boldly tells Amintor the truth of the situation on their wedding night, he is at first keen to avenge the wrong, then lets her persuade him to keep up the deception, and in the end is simply overawed by the divine right of kings. Under these circumstances, it is Melanthius, his friend and Evadne's brother, who takes the initiative, shaming his sister into killing her royal lover herself, a move which does not keep the scandal within the palace, since one part of Melanthius's scheme of revenge requires the direct support of the common people, with whom he is popular as a military hero.

But James, much of whose childhood was spent as a mascot bandied around from one great Scottish Machiavel to another, fully understood that an early-modern monarch still had far more to fear from the lions at court than from the dogs lower down. He and Bacon would have been very gratified to see well placed and potentially worrying characters such as Amintor and Philaster look so small. Although Amintor's honour re-ignites when Melanthius's zeal begins to make him seem a coward by comparison, it soon calms down again, and although Philaster on numerous occasions draws his sword, he always quickly returns it to its sheath, unbloodied in all but two shameful cases soon to be noted. In fact Amintor and Philaster are both shown up as far less nobly honourable than the women who love them. There is Aspatia, whom Amintor deserted on being forced to marry Evadne, but who returns to be near him, disguised as a man. There is "Bellario", also a cross-dressed woman, who devotedly serves as Philaster's go-between to his beloved Arethusa, the wicked king's daughter. And there is Arethusa herself, who is far more enterprising than Philaster, not only in courtship, but in her relations with her father – "Let me have the reason for it, sir, and then ['and only then!'] she means] / Your will is my command".²⁵ Amintor's cowardice must have seemed at its most absurdly ignoble when the one person he does finally manage to kill is Aspatia. The nadir of Philaster's honour is when he wounds "Bellario" and then ludicrously "*creeps away*" into some bushes so as to evade punishment for the wrongs of which he is accused (IV vi 46).

Especially in the tragedies, passages which focus on questions of honour can have tremendous intensity. Take, for instance, the moment during Amintor and Evadne's wedding night when she has just told him of her oath not to sleep with him but has not yet told him why:

25. Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Philaster*, ed. Suzanne Gossett (London: Methuen, 2009), III ii 23–4. Subsequent references (Act, Scene, line) are to this edition, and placed parenthetically within the text.

complaints have tended to result from an experience of the plays, not as communicating in a theatre, but as pored over in a study. Audiences who had watched Shakespeare's Orsino regain his dignity after so much comical imperceptiveness, pompous self-importance, and murderous jealousy of a loving woman in disguise would have been perfectly willing to let Philaster and his counterparts do the same. Communicationally speaking, Beaumont and Fletcher could not have been more alert. As shown by their very popularity, they knew exactly what they could get away with, and exactly what their acting colleagues could pull off. And it was precisely thanks to their plays' fundamental ideological dichotomy – their portrayal of honour as at once deadly serious and utterly ridiculous – that they built up such a large and heterogeneous community.

In *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) Webster, too, develops a non-courtly perspective on honour, but far more imaginatively than Beaumont and Fletcher. On the one hand, when he moves, like Chapman and to a lesser extent Massinger, outside the ideological box by empathizing with honour-related suffering, his writing can be as intensely grim as theirs, and as horrific as Middleton's. And like Chapman, he allows no wish-fulfilling fantasy of the present order's impending disappearance, strongly suggesting, rather, the need for Stoical fortitude, and suggesting, too, Stoicism's ultimate limitations. Yet on the other hand, while never actually lampooning courtly honour in the manner of Beaumont and Fletcher, he convincingly fleshes out a life conducted under moral auspices which are decidedly different, being those of a lower social order. What we have here is one of relatively few early Stuart plays to be charged with a potential for new, post-honour cultural forms of a clearly particularized kind. Whereas Chapman and Massinger merely raise and do not answer the question of whether some more satisfactory manner of living might be possible, Webster shows one actually under way on stage, a rounded-out vision which also connotes hope.

Quite inimitably, Webster's negative capability takes the form of that hope in dialogue with his darkest of dark despairs. This imaginative and emotional bi-polarity would have had enormous communicational reach, appealing not only to spectators whose own temperament zigzagged between optimism and pessimism, but also to those who were sanguine or saturnine more exclusively – individuals whose emotional predispositions it at once endorsed and challenged. Furthermore, this psychological range was complemented by the play's very broad social appeal. The present order it represented would perhaps have sparked more sympathy with

(London: Heinemann, 1923), 46; John E. Cunningham, *Elizabethan and early Stuart Drama* (London: Evans Brothers, 1965), 82, 90, 94; Christopher Ricks, "The tragedies of Webster, Tourner and Middleton: Symbols, imagery and conventions", in Christopher Ricks (ed.), *English drama to 1710* (London: Sphere Books, 1971), 306–53.

at least some courtly spectators, while its vision of non-courtly cultural newness may have implicated the common people more. That it did very well at both the Blackfriars and the second Globe was only to be expected.

The present scheme of things is dominated by the widowed Duchess's two brothers, the Cardinal and Duke Ferdinand, whose professed honour is their official reason for keeping an eye on her chastity. But as in Middleton and Chapman, so here, honour is a blanket covering some very gross sins. True, the Cardinal, though exposed in one of his sexual liaisons, remains rather aloof from the audience's inspection, figuring largely as an old-fashioned man of ruthless military honour. As for Ferdinand, at one point he says that his reason for trying to prevent the Duchess from taking a new man is that he wants to get his own hands on her estates. But one interpretational commonplace is that he also desires his twin sister herself, as a bedfellow. He has explicit sexual fantasies about her, and submits her to gruesome psychological torments which, as they function in the theatre, can seem a natural expression of his diseased mentality, and through which he obviously hopes to break her resolve. Bravely resisting, the Duchess continues in her love affair with Antonio, in which respect her behaviour could have struck the earliest audiences as less like that of Massinger's Domitia than of Chapman's Tamyra, and as so much the more sympathetic. Yet any such good vibrations notwithstanding, Antonio admits to his friend Delio that "the common rabble do directly say / She is a strumpet",²⁸ and at times she herself comes close to adopting the brothers' public line, more or less confessing to a dereliction of duty both as a duchess and as a widow. No less in the heroine's possible irresponsibility here than in her powerful kinsmen's cynical corruption, the play seems to be hinting the decline of an entire social order. It partly comes across as what J. W. Lever called a tragedy of state.²⁹

Against this political background, its intimacy as also a domestic tragedy is in high relief. Within the very privacy of the relationship between Antonio and the Duchess Webster intimates the revolutionary new cultural possibility. One dimension of this is the breakdown of the rigid class divisions still entailed by early modern honour – the hierarchy also challenged by Bussy d'Ambois. Antonio is not an aristocrat but the Duchess's steward. At the beginning of the play, the proleptic phallicism of his victorious tilting at the ring is already enough to rattle the brothers – the Cardinal remarks that there is a big difference between such courtly sports and the heroics of real war. A second dimension is that it is the Duchess, the

28. John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, in *John Webster: The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi, The Devil's Law-Case, A Cure for a Cuckold*, ed. René Weis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), III i 25–6. Subsequent references (Act, Scene, line) are to this edition, and placed parenthetically within the text.

29. J. W. Lever, *The tragedy of state* (London: Methuen, 1971).

woman, who initiates the relationship, and that, indeed like Chapman's Tamyra in her overture to Bussy, she does so as one human being to another, out of feelings that come across as irreproachably normal. A third element is that the couple have children who are absolutely central to their sense of well-being. Just before her death, the last thing the Duchess says to Cariola, her waiting-woman, is

I pray thee look thou giv'st my little boy
Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl
Say her prayers, ere she sleep. (IV ii 195–7)

Prior to which, the little family's aura of human warmth and mental freedom has been wonderfully caught at the beginning of Act III, Scene ii where, just as the Duchess and Antonio were about to dash off to bed, they happily laughed and joked with Cariola, indulging in entirely innocent sexual humour.

At the close of the play, the remaining sources of hope are Delio, Antonio, and Antonio's nameless son, and a theatre-goer could easily wonder whether, thanks to them, a less aristocratic kind of honour will eventually come to win official recognition. Might the more humane mind-set even positively thrive? Could, for instance, a less hierarchical regime be installed which would more closely resemble the one in France, discussed by Antonio and Delio in the play's very first lines: a body politic in which "a most provident Council dare freely / Inform ... [the king of] the corruption of the times", not afraid "[t]o instruct Princes what they ought to do" or "[t]o inform them what to foresee" (I i 17–22)? As intimated by the play's very last lines, any such establishment of new values might actually amount to a rehabilitation of a much older, Horatian conception of honour –

Integrity of life is fame's best friend,
Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end. (V v 119–20)

And this is certainly the kind of honour flagged up in the preliminaries to the First Quarto of 1623. Webster's dedication to George Harding, Baron Berkeley hopes that his play, having borrowed true honour from this worthy dedicatee, will "make you live in your grave and laurel spring out of it". Added to which, verse tributes by both Middleton and Ford congratulate Webster himself on the merit whereby he has raised his own lasting monument while still alive.

But no, that moment of joy in Act III, Scene ii was soon over and, for the foreseeable future, seems unlikely to recur. Ferdinand entered to give his sister the poniard – presumably the one he had earlier mentioned as a prized inheritance from their father – in order to concentrate her mind on the priorities of family honour. Soon, too, her more private little family of love was driven into flight and exile, and she herself was killed by Bosola on Ferdinand's orders. Nor, in a way, was she to be the only sacrifice to present-day honour, since the story was to be rounded off with

a wonderfully sardonic twist: Ferdinand stricken with grief by her death, and raging at Bosola for having carried out an order which, so typically of deeds of honour, had – as James and Bacon could have warned him – no foundation in due process of law. Honour was *not* going to leave Ferdinand with a sense of justified pride and purpose in life. “I do account this world but a dog kennel”, he concluded (V v 66), to which Bosola, who also came to lament the passing of the Duchess, responded:

I do glory
That thou [Ferdinand], which stood'st like a huge pyramid
Begun upon a large and ample base,
Shalt end in a little point, a kind of nothing. (V v 75–8)

In a directly parallel reversal, the dying Cardinal, too, was to give up every thought of reputation: “let me / Be laid by, and never thought of” (V v 88–9). Like Massinger’s Domitian, both the two brothers and their servant all lived long enough to feel for themselves honour’s unrelenting cruelty and emptiness.

So without irritably reaching after finality, Webster intimates, on the one hand, that honour could certainly give way to something altogether different and more humanly rewarding but, on the other hand, that this will certainly not happen any time soon. Present-day honour, though radically dishonoured by the play’s love story, and though so terrifyingly destructive, is still left standing at the end, and Bacon would probably have wished that its dishonouring could have happened without so clearly undermining the distinction between the leonine and the canine. Even the play’s own tragedy of state may imply a need for sociopolitical stability of a kind which honour’s inhumanity and class distinctions have hitherto helped to cement. All in all, no complex of discordant considerations was more likely to satisfy Webster’s widely heterogeneous audiences. Every spectator would have felt that their own views and feelings were being taken into account and at the same time challenged, perhaps giving rise to inner uncertainties and self-division. The community Webster was moulding was radically non-consensual, and could only grow and grow.

Ford’s *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (? 1630) differs from *The Duchess of Malfi* in that its plotting partly resembles that of *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Changeling*, depending on a main character who is a passionately transgressive extremist in a way that Webster’s Duchess, despite the common rabble’s disapproval, is not. But no less than Webster, Ford has enough imagination to hanker after a more satisfying alternative to the conventional honour scripts. And as in *The Duchess of Malfi*, so in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, the intimations of a post-honour culture are connected with a social class that is lower than the aristocracy.

At the same time, Ford also made such a connection seem rather unlikely. The citizen Florio is uniformly gentle and good, and Richardetto, another citizen, though he would have ample cause for grievance if he were to apply the honour

code, believes “There is One / Above begins to work” for justice,³⁰ and in all kindness advises his niece to protect herself from the world’s wickedness by entering a nunnery. Like Webster’s Antonio and Massinger’s Paris, these men seem reluctant to become involved in the quarrels of great ones, and prepared to turn the other cheek and become victims. If they ever did manage to forge a new society, it would probably be one involving a return to true religion. Yet their Christianity’s quietism, and their apparent lack of upwardly mobile bourgeois drive, tend to throw in doubt any pragmatic *nous* they might have shown as rebels or reformers.

Even so, the most striking opening for cultural transformation is hinted in the relationship between the citizen Florio’s son and daughter, Giovanni and Annabella, though this relationship must count as diametrically opposed to religion, because it is incestuous. Whereas Domitian’s incestuous relationship with Julia in *The Roman Actor* is unambiguously one of his most shocking crimes, and whereas *The Duchess of Malfi*, in implying Ferdinand’s incestuous love for the Duchess, also implies that it is one of the most gravely sinful of all the obstacles placed on her path under the guise of honour, in Ford’s play it is precisely incest that is seen as potentially more humane. Annabella still blushes on confessing to Giovanni that she reciprocates his feelings, and Giovanni, in justifying their actions to the Friar, does so by arguments which would have struck many spectators, even in the private theatres where the play was first staged, as over-intellectual and dangerously extremist in their atheism. But there can be no doubt of their love for each other, and like the love between Webster’s Duchess and Antonio, it is not portrayed merely in terms of sexual desire. Desire here is inseparable from a beautiful gentleness and complete mutuality of thought and feeling. In the penultimate scene Giovanni says to Annabella:

Kiss me. If ever after-times should hear
Of our fast-knit affections, though perhaps
The laws of conscience and of civil use
May justly blame us, yet when they but know
Our loves, that love will wipe away that rigour
Which would in other incests be abhorred. (V v 68–73)

And if Thomas Ellice’s prefatory poem in the First Quarto of 1633 is anything to go by, this prophecy was likely to have been fulfilled among some members of the play’s first audiences. Ford’s play, Ellice says, leaves Giovanni “in his love unblamed”, and Annabella “[g]loriously fair, even in her infamy”.

30. John Ford, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, in Marion Lomax (ed.), *John Ford: The Lover's Melancholy, The Broken Heart, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, Perkin Warbeck* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), IV ii 8–9. Subsequent references (Act, Scene, line) are to this edition, and placed parenthetically within the text.

But again as in Webster, the present-day world which surrounds the lovers is wholly dominated by honour in its most hypocritical and bloodthirsty forms. Justice is unavailable through legal channels, especially to those of lower than gentle birth; both men and women seek honour-satisfying revenges by violent and cunning means; and sexual rivals toss insults back and forth. As Annabella's tutoress points out early on, "Here's threatening, challenging, quarrelling, and fighting, on every side" (I ii 61–3). And to add to the situation's general explosiveness, honour's plotted vengeance can go horribly wrong. Grimaldi kills the harmless oaf Bergetto instead of his real target. Hippolita's elaborately planned murder of her betrayer Soranzo backfires in her own face. The nobleman Soranzo's own jealous revenge against Giovanni and Annabella, children of a citizen, is foiled by Giovanni himself.

Despite its class dimension, Giovanni's success against Soranzo does not mean that the present culture of honour is foiled by the culture of the future. As in Massinger, Middleton, Chapman, and Webster, present-day honour is all too perniciously resilient. In Ford, indeed, its final victory is most appalling of all, in that Giovanni himself, a very short time after his claim (quoted above) for the beauty of the love he shares with Annabella, actually kills her and, by way of explanation, soliloquizes as follows:

Soranzo, thou hast missed thy aim in this;
I have prevented now thy reaching plots,
And killed a love for whose each drop of blood
I would have pawned my heart. Fair Annabella,
How over-glorious art thou in thy wounds,
Triumphing over infamy and hate!

(V v 99–104)

The man has flipped! Now quite unlike extremists in Middleton, who are so one-track-minded, Giovanni has made an extraordinarily abrupt about-turn. All his loving gentleness has suddenly been replaced by the prickliness of present-day honour at its most ambitiously proud. His actions are no longer those of a man who truly loves Annabella. In the final scene, hideously flaunting her excised heart on the point of his dagger, he positively wallows in his sense of injury and, when Florio dies of heartbreak, boasts of himself as "gilt in the blood / Of a fair sister and a hapless father" (V vi 67–8). He exults as a revenger whose cunning courage has put all predecessors – even Middleton's Vindice, as it were – into the shade. He will be famed afar as "a most glorious executioner" (V vi 33). The citizen's son has completely out-nobled the noble-born Soranzo, revealing the same paradoxical mixture of upstart's pride and social conservatism that Chapman caught in Bussy, Shakespeare in Edmund. Giovanni's second road to excess has led him to the palace of reaction.

Bacon might have found Ford's dishonouring of honour pleasingly emphatic. Did the play not show honour's utter madness, and especially when infecting the

wits of a non-aristocrat? Yet the play's communication is neither coercive nor straightforward. Above all, there remain the uncertainties surrounding the sibling lovers. Could their original, revolutionary feelings for each other have lasted? Could they even have become a model for more humane, post-honour relationships in society at large? And above all, should they have been *allowed* such recognition? Ford does not reach after tidy answers. He shows the incestuous love in all its beauty and gentleness. He also shows, I should add, Annabella sincerely repenting of it. And he shows Giovanni becoming the most exuberant exponent of the aristocratic values he began by despising. Whereas in incest stories of the Romantic period sibling lovers tend to remain true to each other even though society despises and excludes them,³¹ and whereas in a real-life story from the East End of London during the 1950s an incestuous brother and sister not only stay faithful to each other but are quietly admired within their working class community,³² in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, for reasons of religion and ambitious honour, the lovers' love is stifled by the lovers themselves. To recall the words of Chapman's Montsurry, their honour did not finally "suffer reconciliation to" their love. They, too, decided that their love, like a taper which "though it upwards look, / Downwards must needs consume", would inevitably have to be extinguished.

From an audience's point of view, the love would have seemed very real when it was in the ascendant, and would subsequently have seemed very convincingly expunged. But even if, on a reading Bacon might not have liked, the play's narrative line could be summarized as "present-day honour dishonoured, only to be re-asserted", there was no binding logic of cause and effect here, and not necessarily a sense of poetic justice either. In the long run, it would partly have been a matter of how theatre-goers found themselves prioritizing their own memories. In the theatre, all of the play's scenes may well have seemed equally intense. But afterwards, was the permanent trace left by the early scenes more vivid than that left by the closing scenes? Or did things work the other way round? Or did both beginning and end seem equally important?

To use another Keatsian expression, exactly because Ford did not have a palpable design on his addressees here,³³ the Fordian community could only go on expanding, as, with considerable internal disagreement, it is still doing today. The editor of a recent popular edition says that "Ford's work is accessible and invites us to take issue with it. His own attitude to his characters is often ambiguous", and the

31. Alan Richardson, "Rethinking Romantic incest: Human universals, literary representation and the biology of mind", *English Literary History* 31 (2000): 553–72.

32. Jennifer Worth, *Tales from a midwife* (London: Phoenix, 2010), 447–60.

33. "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us ..." (Keats, *Selected Letters*, p. 72). Cf. Sell, *Communicational criticism*, 19.

precise nature of his personal views is “still a matter of opinion.”³⁴ The only problem with this phrasing is the self-contradiction of saying that we can “take issue with” Ford while also saying that Ford’s attitude and views are unclear. The truth is that we and our predecessors have always been invited to take issue with different attitudes and views between which the negatively capable Ford has not decided.

3. Epilogue

It was thanks to such negative capability, I have been arguing, that early Stuart tragedians and tragi-comedians in general were communicationally so well equipped to set in motion the long revolution traced by Appiah. Each in their own richly individual way, Massinger, Middleton, Chapman, Beaumont and Fletcher, Webster, and Ford were all exploring a problem which, though inseparable from its specific historical form, had human and social significance of universal bearing. Today as much as ever, we still need a communally endorsed sense of good and worthwhile behaviour, a criterion by which to justify our respect for other people, and our self-respect as well. There still need to be sanctions for when that norm is infringed. In some way or other, power still needs to be distributed between society’s different functions and multifarious members. And we still aspire to a manner of life that is humanly satisfying. In handling these eternal preoccupations within the ideological framework of their own time, the dramatists I have been examining were controversial without being divisive. They wrote plays which, in all their wonderful variety, addressed every member of their audiences in a way that would draw attention to honour as the urgent dilemma it was, but without promoting immediate agreement or disagreement with some particular view of it. For audiences, the only appropriate response was to feel things on the pulses, to think, to discuss, to go home and sleep on it. The dramatists, by dishonouring honour without tendentious oversimplification, were in effect keeping everyone on board as long as possible, an approach which would inevitably tend to encourage communal agreements to disagree – or simply to remain unsure – until a later date, by which time the course to be steered would finally have clarified.

34. Ford, *'Tis Pity*, viii.

Dialogue and literature¹

1. Introduction

For the purposes of the present chapter, literature can be defined nominalistically as a sociocultural phenomenon. Seen this way, literature consists of the texts which *are regarded as* literature in any particular time and place, or consists of the texts which, if the term “literature” is not current within the particular there and then, are regarded as important, valuable, admirable, illuminating, enjoyable. To spell it out, in different times and places the category literature is filled with different kinds of texts, as different kinds of features come to be valorized.

As for the relationship between literature and dialogue, this can be approached in two main ways. One way is (a) to understand dialogue in the traditional prototypical sense of an interchange between two people talking face to face with frequent turn-switching, and (b) to consider the extent to which literary texts, especially novels, plays, and poems with a story element, provide representations of people engaging in such dialogues. The other way of relating dialogue to literature is (a) to see, not just face-to-face interchanges, but *all* language use as fundamentally dialogical in nature, and therefore (b) to describe literature, too, as a mode of dialogue, between the people who create it and the people who respond to it – readers, audiences, performers, commentators.

The chapter’s Section 2 deals with the first-mentioned approach: with face-to-face dialogue as represented *in* literature. Sometimes the linguists, literary scholars, and critics who have adopted this frame of reference have been mainly concerned with the quality of literary mimesis. About any particular literary work the question they have asked is: Does its representation of human dialogues seem realistically life-like? And in cases where the answer has been negative, some investigators have followed up with a supplementary question: Was the mimetic inaccuracy a price that had to be paid for gains on some other level? Sometimes, however, the dialogues in a literary work have been subjected to a markedly different kind of questioning: Are they something to be admired or deplored? Perhaps in terms

1. [First published in *The Routledge handbook of language and dialogue*, ed. Edda Weigand (New York: Routledge, 2017), 127–142.]

of style, perhaps in terms of ethics, do they, or do they not, deserve to be copied in everyday life? In certain cases the conclusion drawn has been that, instead of dialogues in literature imitating real life, dialogues in real life would be greatly improved if they were to imitate the ones in literature.

The chapter's Section 3 explains the other approach: the view of literature *as* dialogue. A main concern here must clearly be to establish the exact nature of the dialogical communication that goes on between the writers of literary texts and those who respond to them. For instance, were the ideas once shared by both linguists and literary scholars about Literature (*sic*) as a form of Art (*sic*) that is timelessly impersonal and non-communicational simply wrong? Or can an account of literature as dialogue actually re-formulate that older sense of an a-historical "specialness" in literary texts? But then again, what about the tendency of postmodern literary theoreticians and critics to describe literary activity as not just historical, but as historically determined, as if the human beings engaging in it had no real chance of communicating with each other as autonomous individuals?

Many of the scholars and critics now approaching literature as dialogue would answer this last question by saying that human beings, though indeed powerfully influenced by cultural, social, political, ideological, and linguistic factors, can nevertheless muster a modicum of empathy, imagination, and will-power, and that this is what enables them to enter into meaningful communication with people unlike themselves. Seen within this perspective, dialogicality brings us straight back to ethical considerations. In the approach to literature as dialogue, ethics is in fact so central that literary discussion is positively re-humanized, as illustrated by the fourth and final Section of the present chapter. This is where the study of dialogue *in* literature and the study of literature *as* dialogue can finally interweave with each other, one significant paradox being that, at precisely the points where the dialogues of characters within a literary work's "story" are, ethically speaking, least exemplary, the work's writer may well be treating its addressees with a genuine respect for their mental autonomy which invites them to be just as respectful in return. The chapter's closing suggestion is that scholarship, criticism and teaching which highlight such mutually respectful relationships as they develop within literary dialogicalities may ultimately help to improve the conditions for egalitarian habits of dialogue within the post-postmodern world at large.

2. Dialogue *in* literature

A prominent example of the interest in the realism or otherwise of dialogue *in* literature was Norman Page's book of 1974, *Speech in the English novel*.² Here Page drew more or less explicit comparisons between dialogues in novels and real-life dialogues as analysed by professional linguists, a procedure still basically followed in more recent studies of, for instance, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* and Friedrich Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*.³ In cases where such comparisons confirm the verisimilitude of a literary text's represented dialogues, discussion usually goes little further than to give the text's author an approving slap on the back. In a case where there appears to be disagreement between a literary writer's representation of dialogue and the observations of professional linguists, a sensible next step is to re-investigate, if possible, real-life instances of the type of dialogue under examination. This way, it may be possible to determine whether professional linguists have hitherto been less than fully alert, or the particular literary writer demonstrably unrealistic.

Ordinary readers have their own sense of such matters. One of their most typical complaints is that some of the people in novels by Sir Walter Scott sound like characters in the high-style parts of Shakespeare. Scholars and critics, however, before damning any such apparent inaccuracies of representation too roundly, do well to check whether compensatory artistic considerations may apply. Scott, it could perhaps be argued, was not so much deaf to the tone and dynamics of natural dialogue as concerned to endow his historical fictions with a measure of stylistic pondus. Shakespeare himself, certainly, was not primarily interested in rendering English dialogues as they actually happen. Not only did he set the high-style parts of his plays in blank verse. His blank verse actually makes the contents and inter-personal interplays of his characters' conversations seem far more important and memorable than those of most ordinary dialogues, as was perhaps his intention. Similarly, some of the characters conducting serious dialogues in the texts of Plato, though not expressing themselves in verse, nevertheless make speeches that can seem unnaturally long, coherent, and elegant, possibly because Plato wanted to ratchet up a high general standard of argumentation, or possibly for a reason suggested by Friedrich Schlegel and to be mentioned later on here. Either way, Plato has had numerous successors in this mode, the anglophone ones including Dryden

2. Norman Page, *Speech in the English novel* (London: Longman, 1974).

3. Gill Philip et al., "Negotiating narrative: Dialogic dynamics of known, unknown and believed in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*," *Language and Dialogue* 3 (2013): 7–33, and Christel Björkstrand, "Politeness and social utopia in Friedrich Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*," *Language and Dialogue* 3 (2013): 34–55.

(in *Of Dramatick Poesie, An Essay* (1668)), Bishop George Berkeley (in *Alciphron, or The Minute Philosopher* (1734)), plus a number of American philosophers examined in recent a book edited by Till Kinzel and Jarmila Mildorf, and we can perhaps assume that most readers have found the unnaturalnesses justified.⁴

Another area in which a writer may legitimately strain the limits of mimetic likelihood has to do with characterization. Dickens in particular is well known for making some of his characters very idiosyncratic, not only in physical appearance, dress and general bearing, but also in the way they talk. Dialogic exchanges between his caricatures can be highly entertaining, and the comedy depends, not on total verisimilitude, but precisely on the element of grotesque exaggeration, which, as compared with a more sober kind of delineation, may sometimes get at more basic truths about the way human beings interact with each other. Nor, except in degree, is Dickens so very unusual in this. As shown by Roger Fowler, in novels by other writers, too, there can be a marked link between characterization and manner of speech in dialogue, and the same is true of much drama and narrative poetry as well. Such links are part of what Fowler discusses under the heading “mind-style” – his term for a person’s world-view as communicated in linguistic behaviour.⁵

A slightly different, but often overlapping kind of acceptable inaccuracy has been pointed out by Raymond Chapman in the regional novels of Thomas Hardy. When Hardy includes dialogues between characters in a dialect variety of English, he is making a very specific appeal to readers in their role as, so to speak, listeners or overhearers. His concern is not basically to give a detailed representation of dialogue in non-standard English. As with many other novelists, the orthographic conventions by means of which he reports dialect speech are pretty rough and ready. His real interest is in drawing readers into the sociocultural and interpersonal dynamics of the relationships described. In our experience both of life and of novels, dialect speech tends to be associated with differences of class and background, with particular individuals’ separateness within, or solidarity with, some particular grouping, with emotional pressure breaking down polite restraints, and with ease of intimacy. As Chapman says, a novelist who purports to convey dialogues in dialect “takes the risk of partially obscuring the text in order to make the conversational situation more realistic and effective.” Or as we might also put this, there is realism and realism. What is unrealistic at the level of language can be realistic

4. Till Kinzel and Jarmila Mildorf, *Imaginary dialogues in American literature and philosophy: Beyond the mainstream* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013). [For my review of Kinzel and Mildorf’s book, see item 12 in the present selection.]

5. Roger Fowler, *Linguistics and the novel* (London: Methuen, 1977), 103–113, *Literature as social discourse: The practice of linguistic criticism* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1981), and *Linguistic criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986), 150–167.

at the level of feelings, attitudes, ethics. “The text may be less important than the hidden message.”⁶

The unspoken human relationships which can lie hidden under the dialogues in literature are further explored by Alan Palmer. Palmer’s main suggestion is that readers understand novels in terms of the mental processes of the characters involved in the story. From all a novel’s scattered references to a particular character, readers develop a sense of that fictional person’s continuing consciousness as a kind of embedded narrative within the novel as a whole. And the combination of several *different* embedded character narratives feeds in to readers’ sense of the overall plot. In showing how this happens, Palmer identifies what he calls fictional characters’ “mind beyond the skin” – their social, public, and dialogic mind.⁷ His point is that, both for characters in novels and for the readers of novels in their own daily lives, many mental processes are actually “intermental”, involving ideas and modes of thought that are shared and, indeed, collaborative. This, Palmer continues, is a main reason why readers can understand what makes a novel’s characters tick, even when, or perhaps especially when, the dialogues between them leave the most important things unsaid. A major aspect of literature’s pleasurable challenge is in the opportunities afforded by its represented dialogues for such reading between the lines.

And to return to the implications of class differences, our understanding here has been greatly augmented by M. M. Bakhtin’s *The dialogic imagination*.⁸ What Bakhtin offers is nothing less than a sociolinguistic poetics. He sees poetry and drama largely as representing the higher, ruling classes, and as therefore linguistically stable, monological, conservative. The genre of the novel, on the other hand, he sees as far more exciting and even subversive, because it can bring into play several different social “voices” from within society’s ever-ongoing “heteroglossia” (= “different-tongued-ness”). By setting these different social voices “in dialogue” with each other through the interchanges between different fictional characters, novelists such as Dostoevsky, Rabelais, and Dickens have, according to Bakhtin, resisted the monologic discourse of society’s power-holders, achieving effects that are sometimes liberatingly carnivalesque in their social topsy-turvydom. Even if many commentators have taken issue with Bakhtin’s low opinion of poetry and drama, his account of socio-politically dialogic oppositions in novels has been

6. Raymond Chapman, “The reader as listener: Dialect and relationships in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*,” in *The pragmatics of style*, ed. Leo Hickey (London: Routledge, 1989), 159–78, esp. 168.

7. Alan Palmer, *Fictional minds* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 157–169.

8. M. M. Bakhtin, *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* [1975] (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press 1981).

widely influential, prompting some critics, for instance, to explore the sociological aspects of whole constellations of caricatures in Dickens.⁹

The political and, more particularly, the ethical thrust of conversing characters in Dickens has been further examined in George Goodin's *Dickens's dialogue: Margins of conversation*.¹⁰ Drawing on Victorian conversation manuals, and also on more recent philosophical, sociological, and linguistic insights into the nature of conversation, Goodin explores the rhetoric employed by three of Dickens's major character types: bullies, con artists, and muddlers. These kinds of character are not so much cooperative in their conversation as implicitly violent, positively deceitful, and otherwise counterproductive. Bullies such as Eugene Wrayburn (in *Our Mutual Friend*) use interruption, interrogation, inattention, silence, and several other devices in order to compete for conversational power. Con artists such as Sam Weller (in *The Pickwick Papers*) seek intimacy or reduced social distance, not only by habitually whispering or shaking hands, but also through what they actually say, whether in flattery or self-deprecation. And muddlers like Cousin Feenix (in *Dombey and Son*) often consciously avoid the perils of clarity by introducing various forms of incoherence, not least by inserting parentheses within parentheses.

Goodin's type of conversational analysis could be applied to characters' dialogues in the texts of other writers as well. And for reasons which will emerge below, it is important to note that both Goodin and any other commentator applying this approach, whether to Dickens or any other writer, are bound to form negative ethical assessments of many of the human relationships portrayed in literature. Goodin makes no secret of the fact that the motivations behind the conversational behaviour of Eugene Wrayburn, Sam Weller and Cousin Feenix are far from entirely benevolent, and countless other literary characters are no better.

That said, an immediate qualification is necessary. Whereas all the types of dialogue analysis noted so far have assumed that dialogues in literature are to be praised or blamed for their fidelity or otherwise to dialogues as they actually take place in real life, there have always been commentators who have found the dialogues in certain literary texts positively exemplary, sometimes because of their very difference from real-life practice. Granted, the difference is not always clear-cut. Faced with the brilliantly witty repartees in the English Restoration comedies of Wycherley, Congreve, and Farquhar, how can we know what was the chicken and what the egg? Did the higher classes of society actually speak like that? Or did they

9. Roger Fowler, "Polyphony and problematic in *Hard Times*," in *The changing world of Charles Dickens*, ed. Robert Giddings (London: Barnes and Noble, 1983), 91–108; Roger D. Sell, "Decorum versus indecorum in *Dombey and Son*," in his *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001), 165–193.

10. George Goodin, *Dickens's dialogue: Margins of conversation* (Brooklyn: AMS Press, 2013).

only pick it up after repeated exposure to it in the theatre? Or was it six of one and half a dozen of the other? – did current dialogue praxis and stage representations of dialogue reciprocally encourage each other's further development? In other cases, however, literature's perceived instructiveness as a model for conversation is beyond doubt. One quality which rhetoricians and language teachers have often recommended for imitation is an idiomatic naturalness of style, as when Renaissance pedagogues encouraged schoolboys to act out and subsequently emulate the conversational Latin on display in the comedies of Plautus and Terence. Advice has also come from the writers of etiquette handbooks or other trend-setters, persuading many upwardly mobile individuals in late-sixteenth-century England, for example, to bolster their claims to gentility by speaking in the preciously artificial manner of interlocutors in John Lyly's prose romance *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wyt* (1578) – a pretentiousness which Shakespeare and other dramatists jovially satirized.

3. Literature as dialogue

Interesting work is still being done on dialogue *in* literature. Judging by current levels of scholarly interest, however, most future research is likely to concentrate on the other relationship which can obtain between the two concepts: on the fact that literature can itself be seen as a form of dialogue, between the people who create it and the people who in one way or another, and in one role or another, respond to it.

Among both professional scholars and lay people, this, too, has been much discussed over the centuries, but not until recently in exactly these terms. There has always been much commentary on how writers have regarded their subject-matter, what impression they have wanted to make, what thoughts and feelings they have wanted to arouse. And there have also been plenty of testimonies to the way people have actually responded to particular texts by particular writers. But the implications of these two kinds of discussion *for each other*, the possible connections between a writer's manner of writing and a respondent's manner of response, have often been left unstated, in part because the relationship between writing a text and responding to it has not been explicitly recognized as dialogical.

True, there have also been many cases in which literature's dialogicality has been acknowledged in all but name. In ancient works of rhetoric, for instance, detailed advice was offered on how to achieve specific kinds of impact on listeners or readers by specific choices of language and subject matter. Even the effect of sublimity, which Longinus described as leaving readers of Homer or Sappho or the book of *Genesis* quite dumb with astonishment, and as simply unachievable by mere fidelity to rhetoric's conventional rules, could be linked to certain specific features which a writer could choose to include – Longinus's list mentioned: great

thoughts, strong emotions, certain figures of thought and speech, noble diction, and dignified word arrangement. And when the notion of the Sublime became freshly influential in the Europe of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, commentators such as Edmund Burke, and many pre-Romantic and Romantic poets, had an equally clear sense of writing and reading as means by which writers and readers interact with each other. An important part of the general understanding was that a sublime impression on readers was especially likely to be made by writers who included natural imagery evoking strong feelings of fear and terror – tempestuous storms, raging seas, craggy heights, dark forests, and so on. Here the particularity of what went on in a reader’s mind was very clearly perceived as correlating with the particularity of what the writer was offering for consideration.

Twentieth century linguists, on the other hand, were in no hurry to think of literature as dialogical, given their frequent phonocentric bias, and given, too, their no less frequent assumption that not even spoken monologues are interactive. For them, the *spoken* word was primary – the true stuff of language! – and was also, therefore, their only proper focus of attention. The *written* word was secondary, a mere reflection of the spoken, and only to be examined as an inadequate clue to the language of periods from which audible evidence did not survive. As for spoken monologues, here linguists were blinkered by the popular understanding of dialogue as an interchange involving frequent turn-shifting, a handicap which was pointed out by Emanuel A. Schegloff. Whereas Schegloff’s own conversation-analytic approach recognized that, even in what appear to be monologues, speech exchange systems are involved “in which more than one participant is present and relevant to the talk, even when only one does any talking”, many other linguists still saw “the lecture, or sermon, or story told in an elicitation interview, campfire setting, or around the table, as the product of a single speaker and a single mind.”¹¹ Since literary texts are written, then, and since many of them involve long, uninterrupted stretches of language emanating only from their writer, linguists were indeed unlikely to pick up on literature’s interactive dimension.

Many nineteenth- and twentieth century literary scholars were labouring under what was in effect an analogous handicap, though in fairness we must also note that it reflected their attempt to capture aspects of literature which until recently have perhaps seemed rather hard to discuss in terms of dialogical communication. For one thing, although certain texts intended for stage production have conveyed, often in allegorical form, some sort of didactic message directly from the playwright

11. Emanuel A. Schegloff, “Discourse as an interactional achievement: Some uses of ‘uh huh’ and other things that come between sentences,” in *Analyzing discourse: Text and talk*, ed. Deborah Tannen (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1981), 71–93, esp. 71–72.

to the audience, most other play texts have given no such clear impression of an authorial intention, because the relationships between the characters on stage have been more fully dramatized as involving stresses and strains by no means easy to resolve or judge. What a theatre audience sees and hears in such a case does not seem to be the playwright's way of "making a point." Rather, it comes across as happening more or less independently in a world of its own, whose bearing on the worlds inhabited by the play's writer and audience can be very open to debate. For another thing, there are also countless literary texts in which we immediately recognize that one part of the writer's aim, sometimes a very large part, has been to create something beautiful. Many Petrarchan sonnets, for instance, and many lyrical poems, especially those likely to be set to music, do not necessarily allow us close glimpses into their writers' own life-stories. Often their expressivity is only apparent, as part of an aesthetically motivated, impersonalized fiction whose chief *raison d'être* is hedonistic. For nineteenth century commentators, from these kinds of observation it was only a short step to seeing the whole of literature through the prism of aesthetics as developed by Immanuel Kant and his followers,¹² an approach which, though valuably sensitive to literature's indisputable kinds of "otherness", overgeneralized them within a theory of Art with a capital "A".

Here Art was seen as offering an aesthetic heterocosm that in and of itself had nothing directly to do with either the world of nature as studied by science or, even more to the point, the world of human interaction as explored by history-writing and philosophical ethics. Instead, Art was taken to be a pleasurable wellspring of lofty Beauty (*sic*) and ideal perfection, and *literary* Art, or Literature (*sic*), even though it drew on the referential medium of language, was not perceived as straightforwardly holding up a mirror to life or as stating an author's own raw feelings and opinions, but as imaginative through and through, and frankly superior to everyday reality. So much so, that literary writers sometimes came to be venerated for performing a deeply spiritual function which official religion had allegedly mismanaged, a form of deference which could only increase authors' distance from ordinary mortals, for whom there was of course no obvious feedback channel. Then as now, an author was usually somebody quite outside a reader's own sphere of acquaintance, and in many cases was already dead and buried. For nineteenth century thinkers, these circumstances merely confirmed that Literature did not in the first instance involve interpersonal agency, whether the author's own or anybody else's. In its special timeless realm, a literary work did not "mean" or "do" anything, but simply "was". This idea proved to be extremely powerful and long-lived. It inspired a wealth of Symbolist, Aesthete, and Modernist creative writing; it also underpinned literary

12. Immanuel Kant, "The critique of aesthetic judgement" [1790 = Part I of his *Critique of judgement*] (New York: Hafner, 1951).

criticism as produced by the early- and mid-twentieth century Russian Formalists and American New Critics; and it still underlay late-twentieth century speech act theory of literature and, in many cases, literary pragmatics as well, approaches whose interdisciplinarity between literary scholarship and linguistics provided academic settings within which linguists' phonocentric bias and reluctance to see literature as truly dialogical were inevitably reinforced.¹³

Within philosophy of language, one of the most widely influential challenges to phonocentricity was Derrida's *Of grammatology*,¹⁴ which spoke of linguistic semiosis as both prior to, and carried by, speech and writing alike. And within linguistics proper, during the last decades of the twentieth century there were increasingly successful attempts to map both spoken monologue and written texts onto interaction. Lauri Carlson, for instance, took a hint from Hintikka's game-theoretical semantics. This enabled him to demonstrate the analytical benefits of dialogical extrapolations, which, by spelling out the "implicit dialogue steps", could "make the connections between the sentences of the text explicit".¹⁵ Today, following pioneers such as Franz Hundsnurscher and Edda Weigand, linguists are increasingly coming to work precisely within the framework of dialogue analysis.¹⁶ As explained in other chapters in the present volume [i.e. *The Routledge handbook of language and dialogue*], one of their cardinal insights has to do with the interactional dialogicality of any kind of language use whatever.

During those same last decades of the twentieth century, strong objections were also raised against Kantian aesthetics and literary formalism. One of the earliest and most perceptive challenges had been that of the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey,¹⁷ but Dewey's *Art and experience* had proved unable to halt the spread of American New Criticism, and has only much more recently begun to win the recognition it deserves.¹⁸ Far more influential to date have been further aspects of Bakhtin's sociolinguistic poetics, and in particular his emphasis on the addressivity of all language use, both spoken and written, both non-literary and literary, and

13. Roger D. Sell, *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000), 28–75.

14. Jacques Derrida, *Of grammatology* [1967] (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

15. Lauri Carlson, *Dialogue games: An approach to discourse analysis*. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983), 146.

16. Franz Hundsnurscher, *Studien zur Dialoggrammatik* (Stuttgart: Verlag Hans-Dieter Heinz, 2005); Edda Weigand, *Language as dialogue: From rules to principles of probability* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2009).

17. John Dewey, *Art and experience* (London: George, Allen and Unwin, 1934).

18. Sell, *Literature as communication*, 241–242.

on addressivity's sociocultural specifics. One of his examples is a passage from Dickens's novel *Little Dorrit* describing the meteoric ascent of Mr Merdle, the celebrated financier who, much later in the story, will be exposed as a bankrupt fraud:

That illustrious man and great national ornament, Mr Merdle, continued his shining course. It began to be widely understood that one who had done society the admirable service *of making so much money out of it*, could not be suffered to remain a commoner. A baronetcy was spoken of with confidence; a peerage was frequently mentioned.¹⁹

The italics here are Bakhtin's, drawing attention to the ironical solidarity of all the other phrasing in this passage with the hypocritically ceremonial and establishment view of Merdle. "Making so much money out of it" is a different, sardonically undercutting, outsider's voice, which readers are invited to experience as a wavelength enabling them, for the moment, to enter into deliciously close communion with Dickens himself.

When Bakhtinian readings began to proliferate, some of the most suggestive came from the novelist and critic David Lodge.²⁰ But no less effectively anti-Kantian and anti-formalist were various kinds of literary theory and criticism grouping themselves under the label "postmodern": Marxist, post-Marxist, feminist, queer, postcolonial, new historicist, cultural materialist, ecological, and poststructuralist. Commentators of all these different schools were mostly seeking, like Dewey and Bakhtin before them, but in their own different ways, to re-situate literary activity within the world of history. Through the abundance and sharpness of their detailed findings, no less than through their reorienting theories and methods, they brought about a major scholarly paradigm shift. From now on, literature could be experienced as decidedly more "for real".

The only problem was that postmodern approaches sometimes involved an element of historicist determinism, implying that it is not human individuals who write and respond to literary texts but entire societies, cultures, or structures of belief.²¹ In poststructuralist theory, language, too, could be viewed deterministically, as when Derridean deconstructionists argued that, thanks to the arbitrariness of the signified-signifier relationship, the process of semiosis continues so interminably, and so totally beyond the control of individual language users, that no such thing as a literary author's meaning can ever be pinned down. In fact to Barthes, Foucault, and Kristeva the role of authors – or "writers," as they preferred to call

19. As quoted in Bakhtin, *Dialogic imagination*, 262–263.

20. David Lodge, *After Bakhtin: Essays on fiction and criticism* (London: Routledge, 1990).

21. Sell, *Literature as communication*, 88–118,

them – seemed in need of a radical toning down, and so did the relationship between writers and other writers. In their view, writers were mere workers, whose job was to craft products from the determining material of language, and who could not be thought of as drawing on each other for inspiration, or as influencing each other, because they lacked sufficiently self-conscious powers of choice. Like everyone else, writers were perceived as adrift on a humanly ungovernable sea of intertextuality. So if the agency of both writers and their audiences had once been undermined by the Kantian and formalist notion of an aesthetic heterocosm, there were times when these later approaches undermined it just as clearly, but from within frameworks of ideas that were foundationally opposed to that kind of aestheticism.

It was against this background that Roger D. Sell started to develop a humanizing literary pragmatics. His approach, unlike formalist accounts of literary pragmatics, was fully historical, but without being, like some postmodern analyses, deterministic, and it soon became a fully-fledged theory of literature as one among other forms of dialogical communication.²² A central concept here is of the human being as a “social individual”, deeply influenced by society, but also endowed with a capacity for imagination, empathy, and choice. Writers, like other social individuals, are bound to take account of language, intertextualities, genres of interaction, knowledge, attitudes, and values as these already exist within society. But they do so in the hope that other people will be attracted to their own project, meeting them half-way, so to speak, in a communicational process which is essentially coadaptational, and which may thereby even tend to change prevailing social norms. Readers, similarly, capitalizing on their ability to contextualize another human being’s language use in the interests of understanding, a pragmatic ability seriously underestimated by deconstructionist critics, can do their best to grasp what a writer is inviting them to consider, and may either modify their own thoughts and feelings as a result of it, or respond in ways of their own. At which point the literary-communicational approach, though viewing communication in the etymological sense of the term as “community-making”, nevertheless makes a strong distinction between a community and a consensus. The common ground resulting from communication can consist, not only of shared understandings and agreements, but also of uncertainties and even disagreements. The communities brought into being through literary, or any other kind of dialogicality can be at once large and heterogeneous.

22. Sell, *Literature as communication*. See also Roger D. Sell, *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001), and *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011).

Some of the many other scholars now working along these lines have collaborated in a series of anthologies.²³ And in much of this work an underlying perception is that even those discursive features which, for nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century commentators, seemed to give literature a special aesthetic status have, in point of fact, a communicational dimension.

For a start, even though a work of art can offer a pleasurable beauty that is psychologically very real for us, so real that we experience it as something positively “there” in the work, and even though this impression will certainly not occur unless there are features in the work which give rise to it, a great deal also depends on our own prior conditioning – on what we ourselves *bring* to our appreciation. In ways explained by Richard Shusterman, one of Dewey’s foremost successors in pragmatist aesthetics, there are actually social contracts as to what shall count as agreeable in any particular time and place, so that much of a reader’s enjoyment of a literary text is the result of prior expectations being met, exceeded, or modified.²⁴ In a skilful piece of writing, coadaptations between the reassuringly familiar and the surprisingly new give rise to the pleasure we as respondents take in metrical, stylistic, formal, narratological, thematic, and genre constructions of any kind at all. Nor would this happen unless we were communicating members of an audience within which matters of taste and value are under constant, though often tacit dialogical negotiation. At any given time, the difference between the communally well established and the communally unexpected is something we have become accustomed to recognize at first sight. And when the one enters into fruitful coadaptation with the other, our delight can itself be communally shared.

Fictionality, similarly, which in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was so often thought of as peculiar to the aesthetic “specialness” of “Literature”, is actually an element in many everyday uses of language whose communicational

23. Roger D. Sell (ed.), *Literary pragmatics* [1991] (London: Routledge, 2015); (ed.) *Children’s literature as communication: The ChiLPA project* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002); (ed.), *Literature as communication: Special Issue*, *NJES: Nordic Journal of English Studies* 6 (2007): 1–172; (ed.) *Literary community-making: The dialogicality of English texts from the seventeenth century to the present* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2012); (ed.) *Literature as dialogue: Invitations offered and negotiated* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2014). Roger D. Sell, Adam Borch, and Inna Lindgren (eds), *The ethics of literary communication: Genuineness, directness, indirectness* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2013). Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (eds), *Writing and religion in England, 1558–1689: Studies in community-making and cultural memory* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009). Roger D. Sell, Anthony W. Johnson, and Helen Wilcox (eds), *Community-making in early Stuart theatres: Stage and audience* (London: Routledge, 2017). Roger D. Sell and Peter Verdonk (eds), *Literature and the new interdisciplinarity: Poetics, linguistics, history* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994).

24. Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist aesthetics: Living beauty, rethinking art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

function nobody would question. The point to grasp is that communication is not always transitive; it does not always communicate *something*; it is not limited to conveying hard-and-fast facts, opinions, and feelings. So fiction can be a means by which a communicator explores general or moral truths which go beyond the detail of particular empirical cases, or probes feelings and opinions which have yet to be stabilized into constant attitudes. In most literature which readers have felt worthy of the name, the invitation extended by any fictional elements to a truly dialogical comparing of notes is very powerful. Conversely, high literary status is not usually accorded to fictional works that are allegorical and didactic unless they expose their dogma to dialogical challenge from its own inversion, so becoming tensely dramatic.

Then there is the question of writing's lack of a feedback channel, this, too, having once been thought to make literature distinctively uncommunicative and aesthetic. Here again, special note needs to be taken of Bakhtin's insights into addressivity. Even when literary authors have written under the auspices of a formalist aestheticism, even when they have written non-didactic drama, they have written with other people in mind, their texts implying addressee personae which we, as the real readers of a novel or a poem, or as the real readers or spectators of a play, can try on for size, not least in terms of the emotional responses they seem to assume in us,²⁵ and just as we negotiate the addressee personae we are constantly offered in everyday conversation. By the same token, writers also imply a persona for themselves: an addresser persona, whose function is to create an impression of their own knowledge, assumptions, attitudes, and values, an impression which is neither truer nor more false than most of the other self-images we all employ in life at every moment. Literary writing, through its use of these basic communicational devices, can not only connect people who are otherwise separated by space, but can extend its dialogicality across time as well.

4. Literary dialogicality and communicational ethics

The human, interactive aspect of the dialogicality between literary writers and those who respond to them is sharply captured by scholars attuned to communicational ethics, who are not necessarily alone in this concern. For any linguist, dialogue analyst, or rhetorician setting out to examine the way human beings enter into dialogical coadaptation, both with each other, and with the forms and opportunities for

25. Anja Müller-Wood, "The role of the emotions in literary communication: Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*," in Sell, *Literature as dialogue*, 137–59.

interaction made available within the surrounding culture, ethics could in principle be of central importance.²⁶

The main distinction to be drawn is between modes of communication in which people fully acknowledge and respect each other's human autonomy, and modes of communication in which people's way of treating each other is more dictatorial, manipulative, coercive, instrumentalist. This second, less ethically acceptable kind of intercourse tends to be less than fully dialogical. More often than not, it conforms with what was the most prevalent model of communication in semiotics, linguistics, rhetorical studies, and literary studies as pursued during the twentieth century: an *A* unidirectionally sends a message to a *B* which is to be interpreted within a single context, also set by the *A*. Communication structured in this transitive mode so as to communicate *something* is not only very frequent but often entirely blameless. To send such a message can be far and away the most suitable course of action under prevailing circumstances, as when, for instance, the *A* is providing the *B* with some helpful information. Yet the flow is always unidirectional here, and while the *A* can be a very active party, the *B* is almost inevitably more passive, and in worst case scenarios can actually be *passivized*, marginalized, victimized. Conversely, the modes of communication in which people respect each other's human autonomy tend to be much more fully dialogical, and to have a form which, thanks to Hundsnurscher and Weigand's insights into interpersonal processes of "adaptation and negotiation",²⁷ is now increasingly likely to receive due scholarly attention: the form of an *A* and a *B* bidirectionally comparing notes about something (which can include themselves) as viewed from within their two different life-worlds. These are the kinds of communication by which the overlap between one person's life-world and another's is most likely to get larger, as the two of them come to share more and more knowledge and understanding. Even here, of course, communicants may have ulterior motives. To empathize with somebody else's innermost dreams and aspirations can be a cynical preliminary to selling them something they do not really need. Perhaps more typically, however, these bi-directional and bi-contextual modes of communication are communicational in the word's etymological sense: they tend to make or consolidate a community, often a non-consensual one.

In current literary-communicational research, communication of this high ethical order is often described as "genuine communication", a term whose deliberately evaluative loading does not detract from its descriptive accuracy, since the ethical appropriateness it claims to identify in an utterance or text is analytically

26. Roger D. Sell, "Dialogicality and ethics: Four cases of literary address," *Language and Dialogue* 1 (2011): 79–104.

27. Weigand, *Language as dialogue*, 373.

demonstrable. The concept is squarely grounded in the Kantian take on ethics which (even though Kantian aesthetics now seems dated) is still so central for our thinking about justice.²⁸ Other connections are with Levinas's account of how we *recognize* the human other,²⁹ and with Habermas's exploration of the ethical protocols which apply for any kind of communicative interaction at all.³⁰

One form of literary-communicational scholarship can be described as "mediating criticism". A mediating critic concentrates on the respondent's side of literary dialogicality, seeking to ensure that readers, performers, and interpreters do not strain the writer-respondent relationship by disregarding the human autonomy of writers. The critic acts as a kind of go-between, basically helping respondents to appreciate and relate to the full richness of a writer's otherness. This is not intended to deprive respondents of their right to assess a text by their own standards of judgement. The mediating critic merely encourages them to refrain from the solipsistic arrogance which would recreate the text's author in their own image. What the critic gently reminds them is that they will be entering into much more genuine communication, and will have a correspondingly more rewarding experience if, while forming their own opinion, they also make an effort to understand the writer on his or her own terms – the net result will be so much the more interestingly dialogical. After all, not even mediating criticism itself can claim to issue from an Archimedean point outside of history. Like constructive mediators within any other sphere of human interaction, mediating critics are bound to acknowledge their own positionality, partly because this inspires trust. On which footing, they can then offer the close readings and various kinds of biographical, historical, literary-historical and cultural-historical commentary which can help to ensure that, as audiences negotiate literary texts, their independence of response is tempered by a fair-minded empathy with writers' otherness.

One example of mediating criticism is Guillaume Lejeune's discussion of the genre of the Romantic fragment as used by Friedrich Schlegel.³¹ Lejeune's main point is that Schlegel's fragments, though far from succeeding in their aims, deserve

28. Immanuel Kant (1998) *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*. [1785] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

29. Donald R. Wehrs and David P. Haney (eds), *Levinas and nineteenth-century literature: Ethics and otherness from Romanticism through Realism* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009).

30. Jürgen Habermas, *The theory of communicative action*, 2 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 & 1987), *Justification and application: Remarks on discourse ethics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998), *On the pragmatics of communication* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998).

31. Guillaume Lejeune, "Early Romantic hopes of dialogue: Friedrich Schlegel's Fragments," in Sell, *Literature as dialogue*, 251–70.

that those aims be fully appreciated for their sheer nobility of spirit. Schlegel was using fragments in an effort to make intuitions which were otherwise incommunicable a topic for genuine dialogue within the larger community. In the background here was the dialectics of Plato, since Schlegel realized, just like the present-day literary-critic-cum-dialogue-analyst David Fishelov,³² that some of the ostensible dialogues reported by Plato are communicationally ungentle, at least within the world created in the texts, where Socrates can very much rule the roost. But Schlegel, again anticipating, as we shall see, present-day students of literary dialogicality, also thought that Plato, in registering this communicational dysfunctionality as something to compare notes about, was trying to set up a more truly dialogical relationship between himself and his readers in the real world. Certainly Schlegel's own aspiration was to bring dialectics up to date, so that social intercourse would no longer revolve around the truth as defined by a monopolar discourse of authority, but would become more democratic in its orientation, allowing a development of thought and sensibility that would be more collaborative. Hence, precisely, his valorization of fragments – of texts which did *not* purport to convey a definitive and comprehensive truth, and whose very fragmentariness cried out for complementation from their readers. For Schlegel, there was actually a sense in which the readers of any text, and especially the readers of a fragment, themselves became authors, by whom the tradition of communicable wisdom was carried on into the future. Viewing his own fragments within this same perspective, he wanted to believe they would generate real sociabilities and reciprocities between people of different temperaments and backgrounds. Admittedly, his texts did not live up to this high hope. In the end Schlegel himself acknowledged that they were fragmentary to the point of incomprehensibility, their indirection becoming, not a round-about way of reaching mental territory otherwise inaccessible, but simply a way of getting lost. Yet even if, in writing them, he was hoping they would offer far more than any text can ever in fact deliver, the fragments were already valuably highlighting the issue of communicational genuineness. Great writers of the past had been communicationally genuine, needless to say. But had anybody ever actually praised them for it in the way that Keats, ultimately under Schlegel's influence, would go on to praise Shakespeare for “negative capability” – for the undogmatic, non-dictatorial capability of being “in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”?³³ Still more commendably, Schlegel practised what he preached. Even at their most difficult, his texts were endorsing, not his own individuality,

32. David Fishelov, “Dialogue and dialogicity: Swift's *A Modest Proposal* and Plato's *Crito*,” in Sell, *Literature as dialogue*, 23–40.

33. Keats, *Letters*, 53.

but the no less precious individuality of each and every reader he was inviting to complete them. From Lejeune's mediation, then, Schlegel emerges as a magnanimous writer whom students of literary dialogicality might even want to hail as a tutelary spirit. *Without* Lejeune's kind of assistance, readers today would probably find the fragments utterly baffling. *With* such helpful mediation, readers can try to reciprocate Schlegel's generosity. Or as Levinas would put this, they can *recognize* Schlegel, just as Schlegel has already recognized them.

Another type of literary-communicational commentary focuses mainly on the writer's side of literature's dialogicality. Such work, sometimes referred to as "communicational criticism", directly raises the question of whether or not particular writers have respected the autonomy of the human beings for whom they are writing. A communicational critic tends to spotlight texts which, like Schlegel's fragments, allow respondents a certain freedom of manoeuvre – the type of generosity which is the hallmark of genuine communication in any time or place or sphere of interaction whatever. In fact one main suggestion here is that communicational genuineness may in practice be a literary *sine qua non*, even though its workings are often not explicitly acknowledged, and even though different cultural epochs will always have their own additional literary expectations as well. The perception is that great authors do not force themselves upon their addressees, but rather compare notes with them in a spirit of negative capability that is essentially egalitarian.³⁴ Which is not to say that their magnanimity merely capitulates to the values and tastes of audiences. Significant writing is always more *coadaptational* than that, and magnanimity does not rule out some very direct indications of a writer's own character and thought-world. As long as such directness is truthful and stimulates free discussion, it, too, is a mark of respect for addressees.³⁵ Nor is a more *indirect* manner of expression necessarily disrespectful either, since indirectness, at least when not so extreme as in Schlegel's fragments, can encourage addressees to make fruitful contributions of their own to the construction and assessment of ideas, experiences, or stories.³⁶

When communicational critics discuss what happens between characters "in the story" of a literary work, they often concentrate on those less edifying features in

34. Roger D. Sell, "Dialogue *versus* silencing: Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," in Sell, *Literary community-making*, 91–129 [= item 7 in the present selection].

35. Jason Finch, "Genuine and distorted communication in autobiographical writing: E. M. Forster's 'West Hackhurst' and its contexts," in Sell, Borch and Lindgren, *The ethics of literary communication*, 61–80.

36. Inna Lindgren, "Kipling, his narrator, and the public sphere," in Sell, Borch, Lindgren, *The ethics of literary communication*, 99–113; Yi Chen, "Silence and dialogue: The Hermetic poetry of Wáng Wéi and Paul Celan," in Sell, *Literature as dialogue*, 41–66.

dialogue and interaction which, as noted earlier, have been highlighted by Goodin in exchanges between some of Dickens's characters. The paradox is the one tentatively registered by Schlegel in Plato's treatment of Socrates: that whereas what goes on within the world represented by a text certainly can involve some such communicational dysfunction, literary texts themselves can be socially ameliorative, thanks to a genuinely communicational relationship which arises between their writers and their addressees as they compare notes about the text-internal people and events. By praising literary authors here for their fair dealing *vis à vis* respondents, communicational critics are by implication holding them up as models for anyone attempting worthwhile interaction in the world at large. No less than some of the commentators from earlier ages, they are seeing literature as exemplary.

An instance of communicational criticism is Bénédicte Ledent's comparison between two novels, Caryl Phillips's *Higher ground* (1989) and Marie NDiaye's *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009) (translated into English as *Three strong women*), both of which address their readers in a manner which can seem oddly *counter-dialogical*.³⁷ Not to put too fine a point on it, at first glance both Phillips and NDiaye seem to suffer from a curious inability to communicate successfully with readers. Although the books are both described on their covers as novels, they both consist of three novellas which are only loosely interconnected, and to this confusion about genre must be added a discrepancy between their titles and their actual stories (if that is the right word). The titles are suggestive of superiority and strength, yet *Higher ground* seems to be about three characters who have hit rock bottom, and *Trois femmes puissantes* about three women who are to all intents and purposes utterly powerless. Further bafflement, perhaps even verging on positive distaste, is likely to be caused by both books' open-endedness, by some of their more unusual linguistic features, and by their explicit descriptions of very intimate aspects of extreme human suffering. And at least for many a Western-based reader, the hermeneutic challenge will be all the greater in that several of the life-stories apparently narrated (or half-narrated) take place in Africa or within the African diaspora. All in all, says Ledent, the textuality of both novels seems hardly less than autistic. Her conclusion, however, is that such uninviting appearances are deceptive. She demonstrates that the textual, epistemological, and to some extent cultural disorientation that can affect readers here is not necessarily so frustrating after all. Our puzzlement as readers can actually pave the way for a consideration of our common humanity's full ethical complexity. The two novelists' powerful but less than obvious invitation to addressees does bear fruit, as soon as readers are prepared to "listen". Phillips and NDiaye themselves are not only energetic but negatively capable, encouraging

37. Bénédicte Ledent, "The dialogic potential of 'literary autism': Caryl Phillips's *Higher ground* (1989) and Marie NDiaye's *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009)," in Sell, *Literature as dialogue*, 99–114.

a high level of free-spirited activity from their partners in literary dialogue as well. In the last analysis, their writing is rewardingly robust, honest, and empowering.

So both mediating criticism and communicational criticism see literature's dialogicality as one among other types of human interaction, and are explicitly ethical in orientation. Indeed, these two types of criticism obviously complement each other. Lejeune's mediation between present-day readers and Schlegel is very much an account of his fragments as a form of communication. Ledent's communicational analysis of Phillips and NDiaye would not work at all, unless she were simultaneously mediating the difficulties which can arise for readers of their novels.

In David Fishelov's *Dialogues with/and great books* (2010), the complementarity between mediating criticism and communicational criticism is even more pronounced. As a result he is able to rehabilitate the pre-poststructuralist study of literary sources and influences, and in this way to shed new light on the process by which certain books come to be canonized as great books. Instead of seeing canonical books as singled out for aesthetic properties of the kind valorized by Kant and the literary formalists, and instead of seeing canonization as resulting from sociocultural, political, and ideological power struggles of the kind detected by postmodern critics, or from the blind intertextual forces described by the poststructuralists, Fishelov highlights the workings, on both sides of the literary dialogue, of a sheer human warmth. He also stresses that authors are in dialogue, not only with other people in general, but with each other. And when an author's work includes a dialogical echo of some other author, this can even be "an act of love", a possibility which Harold Bloom's theory of authors' anxiety lest they be influenced by other authors completely overlooks.³⁸ For Fishelov, the communicational genuineness of both address and response is especially striking in the way successive treatments of one and the same motif are frank but undomineering, each reflecting their own new world of values, but also accepting each other's otherness. So although in one sense the story of Samson, for example, is always the same, between the Old Testament, Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (mid-seventeenth century), Zeev Jabonitsky's novel *Samson* (1927) and Cecil B. DeMille's film *Samson and Delilah* (1949) there are differences which enter into open dialogue. The more a writer's magnanimity enters into communicational genuineness with the magnanimity of other writers who are inspired to respond, the more firmly that writer's works become embedded in the canon. A literary canon is a dialogical product.

Especially, but by no means only, when in tandem like this, communicational and mediating criticism have much to tell us of literature's dialogicality. But as

38. David Fishelov *Dialogues with/and great books: The dynamics of canon formation* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 25; Harold Bloom, *The anxiety of influence: A theory of poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

partly noted already, they may also be able to make for better communication all round – for higher ethical standards of both address and response in the world at large.³⁹ The hope here is that, to however small an extent, research into literary dialogicality will improve the chances for a post-postmodern community where the politics of recognition – the politics which brought so many benefits to previously underprivileged groupings during the late-twentieth-century phase of postmodernity – would be extended even further, but without perpetuating the postmodern tendency to define various groupings in a deterministic manner, as if the socio-cultural differences between them prevented mutual understanding and two-way communication.⁴⁰ In a post-postmodern era of rampant globalization, scholars who focus on ethical exemplariness in the give and take of literary dialogicality may help promote a non-consensual community that is at once indefinitely large and indefinitely heterogeneous, potentially global, but without being hegemonic, the kind of community within which the dialogicality of genuine communication fosters hybridities and rainbow coalitions.⁴¹

This rosy vision does not privilege literary activities, however, as if they were the only site of ethical exemplariness. The plain fact is that genuine communication is human history's greatest untold story. While countless cases of it have occurred everywhere and always, the paradigms of relevant scholarly disciplines have been geared to describing conflict and communicational dysfunction. What remains to be seen is whether students of genuineness in the composition of, and responses to, literary texts can encourage other kinds of scholar to examine its workings in other kinds of circumstance.

39. Johan Siebers, "The utopian horizon of communication: Ernst Bloch's *Traces* and Johann-Peter Hebel's *The Treasure Chest*," in Sell, Borch, and Lindgren, *The ethics of literary communication*, 189–212.

40. Amy Gutman (ed.), *Multiculturalism: examining the politics of recognition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994; Roger D. Sell, "A communicational criticism for post-postmodern times," in *Linguistics and literary studies: Interfaces, encounters transfers*, eds Monika Fludernik and Daniel Jacob (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 127–46 [= item 11 in the present selection].

41. Helena Rimon, "Dialogues of cultures and national identity: Teuven Asher Braudes' *The Two Poles*," in Sell, *Literature as dialogue*, 237–50.

Ben Jonson's Epigram 101, "Inviting a Friend to Supper"

Literary pleasures immediately tasted¹

For Anthony W. Johnson

Anthony W. Johnson is a leading authority on Ben Jonson, with whose love of life, art, learning, and fellowship he clearly sympathizes. I can therefore imagine him taking special delight in Epigram 101, "Inviting a Friend to Supper", the poem in which, despite its relatively short length, the Jonsonian-Johnsonian enthusiasms are so amply represented, and the offer of literary pleasures in particular so generous and sophisticated. On the other hand, I can also imagine that, like me, he has been disappointed by the treatment accorded such hedonic dimensions in some influential types of literary criticism. So before I discuss, in Sections 3 and 4 below, the pleasures of Epigram 101 more extensively, I shall first, in Sections 1 and 2, suggest that criticism is at last becoming more fit for purpose here. What we are witnessing is, I believe, a paradigm shift, which this present essay seeks to endorse.

1.

A convenient starting-point is the well-known remark of Horace:

*omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci,
lectorem delectando pariterque monendo.*²

Whether Horace thought that the best literary works were able to instruct a reader *because* they were pleasing may be less than clear. But that has certainly been the opinion of later neo-Horatians, as we can call them. Not only have frankly allegorical

1. [First published in *Renaissance Man: Essays on literature and culture for Anthony W. Johnson*, eds Tommi Alho, Jason Finch and Roger D. Sell (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2019), 25–57.]

2. *Ars Poetica*, ll. 343–344. "He has won every vote who has blended profit with pleasure, at once delighting and instructing the reader." From *Horace: Satires. Epistles. The Art of Poetry*, ed. and trans. by H. R. Fairclough, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1966) [Loeb Classical Library 194], 479.

texts been seen as enticing readers by sugar-coating their pill of instruction with attractive stories or imagery. Literary texts in general have often been said to have a message whose path from writer to audience is eased by their power to entertain. Nor has such messaging always been thought of as beneficial. Literary pleasures have sometimes been accused of teaching people the wrong things.

This still widespread notion of literary pleasures as basically persuasive in function underestimates, it seems to me, the intellectual and moral independence of those who enjoy them. Obviously, though, readers are much more likely to carry on reading a text which is pleasing than one which is not. And texts that are accorded the status of literature, whatever their precise nature, and whatever else they may do as well, certainly do please. To my way of thinking, their pleasurability is one of the main reasons why they achieve literary status in the first place and maintain it over time.³

No, pleasure is not the be-all-and-end-all of literary activity. At the very least, literary writers do encourage respondents to think, even if they do not tell them exactly *what* to think as often as neo-Horatians have tended to imply. Nor is every feature that is pleasurable to one respondent necessarily pleasurable to some other respondent, or pleasurable in exactly the same way. Even so, pleasure is, I think, a literary *sine qua non*. Although, legitimately, and illuminatingly, literary scholars discuss a great many other things, a paradigm of literary studies which ignores hedonic considerations has in my view lost touch with reality. From the 1970s to the 1990s there were some striking examples of this, and indeed of positively *anti*-hedonistic attitudes, as when Terry Eagleton complained that the criticism of John Bayley was merely literary appreciation, and not the postmodern kind of historicist and ideological dissection that was Eagleton's own forte.⁴

During the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth, literary commentators' take on pleasure had been rather one-track-minded, tending to find in every worthwhile text just some single, superordinate source of enjoyment, often strongly tinged with idealism or aestheticism. To the extent that postmodern commentators like Eagleton were critiquing the historical and ideological contexts of such holistic interpretations, they were helping their own readers relate to an important dimension of the literary past. In doing so, however, they sometimes undertook overarching intellectualizations of their own very different sort. Bayley, for his part, voiced reservations which in principle could apply to holistic interpretations of

3. See Roger D. Sell, "Political and hedonic re-contextualizations: Prince Charles's Spanish journey in Beaumont, Jonson, and Middleton", *Ben Jonson Journal* 22 (2015): 163–187 [= item 13 in the present selection].

4. Terry Eagleton, "Liberality and order: The criticism of John Bayley", in his *Against the grain: Essays 1975–1985* (London: Verso, 1986), 33–47, esp. 39.

any kind at all. His worry, as we shall see, was that a commentary which claimed to find an all-embracing structure, rationale or synthesis in a text was likely to be the product of a mental exercise performed too long after the experiential event. Holistic interpretations ran the risk, that is to say, of being rather distant from the constant flow of manifold, distinguishable pleasures that arose during an actual process of reading.

Now blankly to refuse the intelligence, sensitivity, imaginativeness, and sheer energy of many of the holistic interpretations proposed by nineteenth-century critics and their descendants would be absurdly self-denying. There are literary works for which a holistic reading is definitely suitable. When the interpreter thinks about them hard enough, the pleasures they offer come to seem integrated into a powerful and often exciting unity. I personally, for instance, find G. Wilson Knight's essay "*King Lear and the Comedy of the Grotesque*" (1930) just as lively and suggestive today as when it first astonished me fifty-seven years ago.⁵ Another, more historicizing example would be Anthony W. Johnson's account of Ben Jonson's *Masque of Augurs* as reflecting, in its every detail of word, music, and spectacle, the eirenic thinking of James I.⁶ Thoughtful contemplation or careful contextualizations can take a very long time to develop, but are most certainly among the modes of response by which major works of literature have been enjoyed.

All the same, to revisit literary appreciation à la John Bayley or, to go some generations further back, à la George Saintsbury is to remind ourselves that, at first, a literary text occasions many different kinds of pleasure, in a rapid stream which does *not* immediately merge them all into one. Here Bayley and Saintsbury were actually in descent from eighteenth-century critics. Think only of Addison's listing of a plurality of beauties in *Paradise Lost*, or of almost any literary commentary by Samuel Johnson, who, having submitted a text to a range of different criteria, would then come up with whatever descriptors he found most suitable under each criterion.

From Samuel Johnson's kind of examination one and the same poem, for instance, could emerge as in some ways good or even very good and in some ways less good or even bad or actually very bad. In Johnson's examiner's report, the hedonic pluses and minuses of the poem's various features would be clearly registered. As an Aristotelian neo-classical critic he did think that mimetic considerations were especially important, accordingly praising Shakespeare because

5. Reprinted in G. Wilson Knight, *The wheel of fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1960), 160–176.

6. Anthony W. Johnson, "Jonson's eirenic community: The case of *The Masque of Augures* (1622)," in Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (eds), *Writing and religion in England, 1558–1668: Studies in community-making and cultural memory* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 169–193.

he “holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and life”.⁷ But his idea of literature also included texts to which the mimetic criterion was less obviously applicable, and the range of pleasures he noticed was in any case broad. Crucial, too, to the many-faceted judgements he delivered was his own characteristic manner of written expression. As he admitted, in conversation he often talked for victory.⁸ But with a pen in his hand, he was a different animal. Hazlitt spoke of his written style’s “periodical revolution”,⁹ W. K. Wimsatt of its antithetical “habit of meaning.”¹⁰ As a writer, he was for ever playing off one thing against another. His literary-critical writings, then, were never entirely straightforward, but always to a greater or lesser extent complicated.

Yes, “complicated”. Not “complex”, because “complex” was later to become one of the epithets reserved for powerful imaginative syntheses as described in Chapter 14 of Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, and also for critical commentaries which sought to detect and analyse them. Samuel Johnson, whose theoretical framework did not lead him to expect such holisms, did not find them even in places where post-Coleridgeans were to think them perfectly obvious. Whereas T. S. Eliot was to describe seventeenth-century Metaphysical poetry as “always forming new wholes”, Johnson famously damned it for a *discordia concors* by which “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together.”¹¹ Writers who sought to blur what he saw as necessary distinctions did not win praise for doing so, and as a critic his own focus was typically on different things in separation from each other.

Consider his reaction to Pope’s *Essay on Man*. He took a very dim view of its philosophical argument, explaining in some detail why he found Pope naive and commonplace as both a metaphysician and moralist here. Nor would he have chosen this particular poem to open the ears of “a rigid critic” to Pope’s “felicity of composition”,

7. Samuel Johnson, “Preface to Shakespeare”, extract in *The Norton anthology of theory and criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), 468–480, esp. 469.

8. James Boswell, *The life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Claude Rawson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 469.

9. William Hazlitt, *The complete works of William Hazlitt*, 21 vols, ed. P. P. Howe (London: Dent, 1930–1934), vol. IV, 177.

10. W. K. Wimsatt, *The prose style of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941), 49. Cf. Roger D. Sell, “Pope’s three modes of address”, in his *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011), 83–150, esp. 126.

11. T. S. Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets”, in his *Selected essays* (London: Faber, 1951), 281–291, esp. 287; Samuel Johnson, “Abraham Cowley”, in his *Lives of the English poets*, ed. by L. Archer Hind, vol. I (London: Dent, 1925), 1–45, esp. 11.

for it contains more lines unsuccessfully laboured, more harshness of diction, more thoughts imperfectly expressed, more levity without elegance, and more heaviness without strength, than will easily be found in all his other works.¹²

Yet at the same time, certain other things in the poem left him dizzy with delight.

[Granted,] a man of no very comprehensive search may venture to say that he has heard all this before; but it was never till now recommended by such a blaze of embellishments, or such sweetness of melody. The vigorous contraction of some thoughts, the luxuriant amplification of others, the incidental illustrations, and sometimes the dignity, sometimes the softness of the verses, enchain philosophy, suspend criticism, and oppress judgment by overpowering pleasure.¹³

Johnson's procedure, systematic, carefully discriminating, strongly responsive, was ultimately underwritten by the ancient world's rhetorical treatises, where categorizations by genre or style and discussions of affect were both important. So Longinus had still given plenty of space to the already traditional rules of formal workmanship, even though his main purpose was to identify a kind of sublimity in writing that outweighed all other qualities and made rules redundant. Similarly, after Longinus had been brought to the attention of modern Europe by Boileau's French translation of 1674, Pope found in sublimity an explanation for the greatness which otherwise puzzled him in the rule-breaking Shakespeare, yet still without seeing Shakespeare as sublime through and through, noting, rather, a range of additional features which he praised or blamed in varying degrees.

With the decline of neo-classical Aristotelian criticism, and especially with the decline of its account of the many different genres as both formally and hierarchically differentiated from each other, for many critics sublimity in a literary work became an all-sufficient quality; a brief lyric could be no less sublime than a twelve-book epic; and the sublimity of Shakespeare quite overshadowed any other features of his work. Before long literary commentators developed other exclusive preoccupations as well, which re-interpreted or simply replaced the concern with sublimity. Wordsworth and Coleridge, in their own literary-theoretical and critical thinking, still had something of Johnson's complicatedness and eighteenth-century breadth. In one of his notebooks Wordsworth, having warmly agreed with Johnson that the writers of blank verse always run the risk of distorting the language in order to stop it falling into prose, then added that any such wrenchings make the lines "cold and insipid, how sublime soever the ideas and the images may be which they

12. Samuel Johnson, "Alexander Pope", in his *Lives of English poets*, ed. by L. Archer Hind, vol. I (London: Dent, 1925), 143–243, esp. 227.

13. Johnson, *Lives of English poets*, 227.

express.”¹⁴ Here, though more uncomfortably than Pope, Wordsworth was still managing to keep sublimity in play with other factors. But in later literary commentators, his and Coleridge’s ideas about expressivity and creative imagination were often taken as the only pertinent terms of reference.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the expressivity of literary texts was found to offer the pleasures of communion with authors’ personal views, experiences and emotions, and creative imagination was said to involve a delightful gusto, sometimes in idiosyncratic self-expression, sometimes in the empathetic portrayal of idiosyncratic characters in a play, novel or narrative poem. In other cases imagination was found to result in a wonderfully higher, ideal kind of truth or beauty, whose complexity reconciled otherwise “opposite or discordant qualities”, as Coleridge had put it,¹⁵ reconciliations which postmodern historicist and ideological critics would subsequently probe. Then, with the Aesthetes, the Modernists, and the American New Critics helping to turn the nineteenth century into the twentieth, autobiographical expressiveness was allowed to drop right out of the picture, for instance on the Eliotian grounds that “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates”.¹⁶ The ideal kind of beauty became boldly depersonalized and dehistoricized, its imaginative specialness increasingly admired in terms of timeless heterocosms and organic wholes, within whose lofty constructions the everyday and sometimes ugly realities of history were often said to be magically transformed, or according to the later postmodern commentators were simply swept under the carpet.

The belief in pleasurable organic wholes brought about by imagination – the belief that, in Coleridge’s words, a true poem proposes to itself “such delight from the whole as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part”¹⁷ – led to an assumption that, because every aspect of such a poem belonged as an integrated element of its artistic unity, the poem also *succeeded* in all its aspects, and, conversely, that if there were aspects which patently did not live up to expectations, then the poem as a whole was *not* a case of true poetry – which is what Wordsworth had come close to thinking about poems with sublime ideas and images but wrenched language. T. S. Eliot admitted that

14. William Wordsworth, quoted in Ernest de Selincourt (ed., corrected by Stephen Gill), *Wordsworth: The Prelude or Growth of a Poet’s Mind (Text of 1805)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), xv, fn. 2.

15. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. George Watson (London: Dent, 1956), 174.

16. T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the individual talent”, in his *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1951), 13–34, esp. 18.

17. Coleridge, *Biographica Literaria*, 172.

some of Shelley's views I positively dislike, and that hampers my enjoyment of the poems in which they occur; and others seem to me so puerile that I cannot enjoy the poems in which they occur. And I do not find it possible to skip these passages and satisfy myself with the poetry in which no proposition pushes itself forward to claim assent.¹⁸

Even if this was an honest and reasonable enough thing to say, when compared with Johnson's account of Pope's *Essay on Man* it perhaps seems rather narrow and ungenerous, an impression which can only be strengthened by Eliot's single-minded conclusion here: "And the bad part of a poem can contaminate the whole." Yet the hunt for organic unity was long-lived and wide-spread, also affecting criticism in the Cambridge line from I. A. Richards through F. R. Leavis and William Empson. For them, a significant work of literature reconciled different impulses, values, or meanings, whether in overarching psychological, moral, or cultural structures, or in pregnant ambiguities. And although, as I say, all-integrating readings can indeed be most rewarding, there was a clear risk that critics on the look-out for a principle of integration would find one where there was none, and undervalue satisfactions of other, more immediate kinds.

In an overview like this my brushstrokes have to be broad, but I hasten to lodge a general caveat. Even though the mono-ideational tendency was very deep-seated, there was also that line from Addison and Johnson to Saintsbury and Bayley, plus other exceptions as well. To mention just one of them, in 1975 the poet-critic Donald Davie published a book on Ezra Pound.¹⁹ Whereas some other critics saw Pound's anti-Semitism as totally disqualifying his poetry for any kind of praise, whereas Helen Vendler told John Ashbery that "only Fascists like Pound";²⁰ there was nothing the least bit Fascistic about Davie's chapter on the pleasures of rhythm in *The Cantos*, pleasures which are there for all who have ears to hear, neither cancelling, nor cancelled by, Pound's hideous opinions. It is easy to agree that the *Cantos* as Pound has written them are less valuable than a version we can only wish he had written, in which the formal virtuosity would have been more consistently matched by riches of thought and feeling. But we ourselves are the poorer if we fail to recognize and enjoy the beauties of his writing as it stands, beauties which, despite neo-Horatian ideas about pleasurable persuasion, have no irresistible power to trick us into swallowing all the hatred, bigotry, and malice. To come back to my earlier point, when reading poetry we retain just as much intellectual and moral independence as in other kinds

18. T. S. Eliot, *The use of poetry and the use of criticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), 82–83 (my italics).

19. Donald Davie, *Ezra Pound* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).

20. John Ashbery, Interview, *Oxford Poetry* 6 (2) (1992): 61.

of situation. Davie was very clear about this, his opening pages not only discussing Pound's anti-Semitism head-on but also asking what was to be made of his late recantation of "that stupid, suburban prejudice", as he had then called it.²¹ Davie's commentary was not a desertion of human responsibility but a clarification of it, and precisely because he was prepared to think about literature non-synthetically, from two different points of view which he kept separate from each other.

That said, the fact remains: when Vendler totally dismissed Pound for his anti-Semitism, and when Eliot found that some of Shelley's stated views could contaminate a poem's whole, these mono-ideational reactions were continuous with fifteen decades of earlier literary criticism. In the case of Eliot on Shelley, the reaction was not even the result of carelessness, or of a straightforward refusal to understand Shelley's otherness. Eliot was conscientious enough as a critic to try to empathize with the authors he was examining – to grant them what he called "poetic *assent*". Realistically, he did not expect such heuristic empathy always to develop into a more long-standing and deeper sympathy – into "philosophic *belief*", as he called it.²² But he was perfectly aware that critics write under an obligation to respect the human autonomy of those they are writing about. Neither can he be blamed for so strongly disliking and refusing to endorse some of what he found in Shelley as a thinker. Yet even so, what we see here is the thin end of a wedge. True, other readers have shared Eliot's dislike of certain Shelleyan opinions. But if you allow your dislike of one author's opinions to bar some of that author's work from your personal literary canon, you can treat, and in all justice you ought to treat, texts by other authors in the same way. The question which then arises is: where do you draw the line? Or *can* you draw a line here? Exactly how much ideological unacceptability are you prepared to – er – accept?

Then again, given that no two human beings are in every way exactly alike, and given that such differences are all the greater between one historical period or socio-cultural zone and another, can Eliotian critics be absolutely sure that none of their most admired authors is not in fact more ideologically different from themselves, and thereby on their reasoning more unacceptable, than they have hitherto recognized? Also, is it not perfectly possible that, following Eliot's line of response, you might elevate to your top-ten list some writer for views with which you do agree, even when the writer arguably leaves a lot to be desired in terms of, say, literary self-consciousness and style? Not to put too fine a point on it, might you not end up saying that you wholly admire a writer who, to an ominously large number of other readers, seems mediocre?

21. Quoted in Davie, *Pound*, 4.

22. T. S. Eliot, "Dante" [1929], in his *Selected essays* (London: Faber, 1951), 237–277, esp. 257 (his italics).

The inflexibility of all such literary-critical single-mindedness was exacerbated by the mid-twentieth-century professionalization of literary studies within anglophone universities. Professionalization hugely improved scholarly standards, but also had its downsides,²³ one of which was that young people learning to write within a professionalist ambience were often drilled to present their views with unflinching coherence. The end result was countless books, articles, and conference papers characterized by a sharply specialized focus and an unrelenting persuasiveness, which was sometimes less than judicious, and sometimes downright tactless. More affable gestures could merely be the cloak for an intentionality that was closer to that of a polemic than that of, say, a warm-hearted invitation to *symposion*.²⁴ Here was a discourse style entirely uncondusive to exploring a range of contrasting pleasures. Rather than encouraging complicated assessments which invoked, like Johnson's written account of Pope, criteria 1, 2, 3 ... quite separately from each other, it was more like Johnson at his most bellicose conversational, arriving at rigidly single verdicts that were often either totally laudatory or totally dismissive, verdicts from which every reservation, doubt or contradiction had been steamrollered out at an early stage.

An opening for more complicated approaches to literature and its pleasures was provided by *Essays in Criticism*, the journal launched by F. W. Bateson in 1951. Bateson was an Oxford English don, who hoped that *Essays in Criticism* would foster a breed of "scholar-critics" just as intelligently critical as Leavis in Cambridge, from where he edited the already established rival journal *Scrutiny*. But although Bateson was just as keen as Leavis on the Arnoldian task of discriminating between literary works which were major and those which were minor,²⁵ he also hoped that his scholar-critics would have nothing of Leavis's compulsion to tidy things up by imposing his own values on past and present alike. Instead, they would rely more heavily on historical scholarship. Bateson clearly understood that the sharp distinction so often drawn in Anglo-Saxon cultures between literary scholarship and literary criticism had made it all too easy for literary scholarship to be dehumanized and for literary criticism to become arrogantly presentist in its orientation, often under the guise of pronouncements claiming to be universal in scope. So despite his admiration for Matthew Arnold, Bateson felt that nineteenth-century literary

23. Cf. Roger D. Sell, *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001), 1–29, and "Decency at a discount? English studies, communication, mediation," *The European English Messenger* 13 (2004): 23–34.

24. See Maria Isaksson-Wikberg, *Negotiated and committed argumentation: A cross-cultural study of American and Finland-Swedish student writing* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 1999).

25. Cf. F. W. Bateson, *The scholar-critic: An introduction to literary research* (London: Routledge, 1972).

commentary as a whole had gone too far in the direction of philosophical idealism and art for art's sake. He was one of the first people to suggest that approaches more solidly grounded in history should replace the hunt for timeless organic wholes.

Because *Essays in Criticism* encouraged both historical and evaluative considerations, it really did attract contributors who were sensitive to literature's complicatedness, critics such as John Bayley, another Oxford English don, whose historical interests, though certainly not Eagletonian, were hardly as superficial as Eagleton alleged,²⁶ and whose own book, *The uses of division: Unity and disharmony in literature*, was perhaps the most suggestive challenge to the unswerving pursuit of organic unity in some of the mid-century professionals:

The clue that has come up constantly during my study and enjoyment of the writers who figure in this book is that of the involuntary divisions, amounting to a total disunity, which seems to characterize the reality of their art, and to make them what they are.

This is an obvious point, which is none the less often ignored. The usual critical instinct is to show that the work under discussion is as coherent, as aware, as totally organized, as the critic desires his own representation of it to be.²⁷

By contrast, in Eagleton's postmodern camp the historicization of literary studies sometimes ran amok. As we have partly seen in Eagleton himself, late-twentieth-century exponents of postmodern historicism and sociocultural critique gave few signs of enjoying their object of study, tending to see literary pleasures, whether the pleasures reported by Victorian or Modernist idealists and aesthetes, or the more immediate and varied pleasures discussed by Saintsbury and Bayley, as a kind of ideological subterfuge, somewhat on a par with religion in the eyes of Karl Marx. All too often, their paradigm was a dreary new *idée fixe* which regarded literature as basically nothing more than the product and endorsement of prevailing socio-cultural and political values, and as having just a single, basically persuasive kind of effect, whose ideological bearings they methodically challenged by reading, not for pleasure, but against the grain – *Against the grain* being the title of the book containing Eagleton's piece on Bayley. This, then, is where Eagleton and his colleagues represented one kind of neo-Horatianism. In their view, literary pleasures tended to cushion unsuspecting respondents in a false set of values. Respondents were not to be credited with much in the way of independent judgement.

Particularly for critics older than Eagleton, the postmodern indifference or even resistance to literature's hedonic dimensions could be very disturbing. When, in 2001, Frank Kermode delivered the F. W. Bateson Memorial Lecture to mark

26. Eagleton, "Liberalism and Order", 38.

27. John Bayley, *The uses of division: Unity and disharmony in literature* (Viking: New York, 1976), 11.

the fiftieth anniversary of *Essays in Criticism*, he expressed no nostalgia for all the organic wholes that had been perceived within the now defunct paradigm of New Criticism, but what he described as the arid riot of postmodern historicism and ideological critique left him utterly dismayed. Having weighed up the "onslaught" of such approaches, he concluded that "literature itself, let alone literary criticism, may not easily survive."²⁸

At that late stage in his long and hitherto inspirational career, Kermode seemed suddenly exhausted and intimidated, suddenly reduced to wittily parodying post-modern methods rather than replacing them with something better. In fact he came very close to conceding – he certainly did not refute – one of the central postmodern claims: that literary pleasure, literary value judgements, and literary canons were not a matter of texts having real qualities which critics could identify and discuss, but belonged instead to the illusionistic cultural weaponry of yesterday's elites, establishments, and empires.

Nearly two decades further on, it would be unfair to blame Kermode for not putting up a better fight. There would in any case have been no point in roundly denying the political, sociocultural and ideological aspects of literary writings and their impact. On the contrary, the late-twentieth-century emphasis on such matters, especially in the more judicious forms associated with *Essays in Criticism*, has fundamentally affected the way literary scholars and critics go about their business. Yet we do now have some wisdom of hindsight. With the postmoderns' most gloomily monotonous kind of determinism no longer quite so dominant, we find ourselves increasingly buoyed up by literary discussions that are enjoyably complicated, discussions of the kind pre-eminently undertaken by the polymathic second Johnson lauded in this volume [i.e. *Renaissance Man*], to whose friendly encouragement my own thoughts on literary pleasures have been much indebted.²⁹

In 2019, then, it is easy enough to articulate the things which Kermode's lecture of 2001 left unsaid. One way to put this is that Kermode seemed to have forgotten his own book *The Classic*, which had shown that there can be *democratic* canons, canons, that is to say, which reflect the communal preferences quite naturally arising when social change, plurality, and secularization make available a far wider range of pleasures than any individual can ever relish to the full.³⁰ As non-immortals surrounded by such hedonic abundance, we do have to choose our pleasures, so that evaluation is always taking place in any case. Literary canons, just like communal

28. Frank Kermode, "F. W. Bateson Memorial Lecture: Literary criticism: Old and new Styles," *Essays in Criticism* 51 (2001): 191–207, esp. 206.

29. E.g. Roger D. Sell, "Pope's three modes of address", and "Political and hedonic re-contextualizations."

30. Frank Kermode, *The classic: Literary images of permanence and change* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

preferences in any other field, inevitably arise, based on perceived qualities and experienced pleasures of many historically different kinds, and it is both feasible and worthwhile to put such perceptions and experiences into words so as to make them a topic of discussion. Any particular kind of experience or pleasure is so far from ruling out experiences or pleasures of other kinds that one and the same canonical literary text can usually be enjoyed for many different reasons.

2.

As Kermode's late sadness and the situation which triggered it fade into the past, I believe that, proceeding from a renewed openness to literature's countless immediate pleasures, scholarship and criticism can become more like a genuine invitation to *symposion* – which for the ancient Greeks was a get-together for friendly discussion under the stimulus of wine, with wine itself as a possible main theme. We are reaching the stage, it seems to me, at which literary appreciation can be unashamedly reinstated, and can once again be seen as “tasting” literary works as if they were bottles of wine, in order to compare notes about their many different aspects.

Signs of the development I am endorsing were already to be seen by 2010, when *Essays in Criticism* published Michael D. Hurley's very positive take on the impressionistic approach to English verse prosody mapped out by George Saintsbury in 1906.³¹ Saintsbury, a tireless reviewer, not only of literary works and literary scholarship, but of many other kinds of book as well, was from 1895 to 1915 a most industrious Regius Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at Edinburgh University. He was widely rumoured to have read absolutely everything there ever was to read, and as John Gross noted, “[s]ooner or later everyone who has written about ... [Saintsbury] is moved to draw an analogy between his attitude to literature and his vast knowledge of wine. The connoisseur sips, savours, pronounces judgement.”³²

Somebody may object here that connoisseurs of wine are such pampered and over-privileged beings that any comparison between wine-tasting and reading literature will have undemocratic connotations to literature's disadvantage. Such connotations are certainly assumed by Eagleton's description of a Cambridge English don he remembers from his own undergraduate days:

31. Michael D. Hurley, “George Saintsbury's *History of English prosody*”, *Essays in Criticism* 60 (2010): 336–360.

32. John Gross, *The rise and fall of the man of letters: English literary life since 1800* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 162.

[I]t was really as wine merchant that he approached literature, rolling a little Tennyson on his tongue, shipping in great crates of minor seventeenth century verse, finding George Orwell distinctly unpalatable and D. H. Lawrence rather too heady. He was occasionally a little unsteady on his feet after a prolonged bout of Ovid.³³

Any such don, however, was antediluvian from the start, and the assumptions underlying Eagleton's snide mockery (one kind of pleasure he does allow himself) are themselves decidedly retro. In the twenty-first century, a knowledge of wine is not the prerogative of an epicurean elite, and many a wine bar does a much better trade than many a pub. Both wine and literature are nowadays simply *there* for anyone who chooses them. Anyone at all can become accustomed to well-informed discussions about them, just as with any other field of interest – be it films, computer games, popular music, or fashion. And although one thing is in the end never truly identical with another, so that all similes and metaphors finally break down, the parallel between wine-tasting and literary criticism of the kind I have in mind is close and thought-provoking.

A palatal education has to cover the appropriateness to wines originating from different grapes and regions of more than a thousand different epithets, each of them a descriptor which can be used while assessing a vintage according to some dozen or so different criteria. If you take the criterion of colour, for instance, a white wine can be colourless, green tinged, greeny straw, straw, straw yellow, yellow, yellow gold, gold, old gold, amber, or even brown. A huge number of different flavours can be pinpointed through comparisons with whole ranges of different herbs, vegetables, flowers, fruits, berries, spices, woods, soils, chemicals, savouries, and nuts. And so on, and so on. A wine-taster registers judgements made from many different points of view, and very few bottles are likely to score either top marks or bottom marks on every criterion. The perceived reality of wine is unstraightforward, in other words, and if we were to eavesdrop on a convention of vintners, we should hear their expert language being used to channel complicated evaluations of the various vintages for each other's consideration. Over and above the pursuit of their business concerns, their reason for attending the convention and behaving in this way would be the double pleasure of tasting wines and of then re-relishing that experience through civilized dialogue with their peers. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same could apply to gatherings of literary scholars, critics, and ordinary readers.

During the Victorian and Edwardian periods, the tasting-criticizing comparison was fairly common. That was a time when both wine and literature certainly were regarded as more upstairs than downstairs kinds of interest (not counting

33. Terry Eagleton, *The gatekeeper: A memoir* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 170.

butlers' occupational interest in wine). But even for our somewhat more egalitarian age, Victorian and Edwardian cases are still suggestive, and the case of Saintsbury especially so.

Gross was quick to point out that, as a matter of fact, Saintsbury himself "disliked the narrower implications of connoisseurship, and often said so," even though he did approach books "in a frankly hedonistic spirit, determined as far as possible not to let anything interfere with his enjoyment."³⁴ Perhaps he felt that generalized talk of literary arbiters as sipping, savouring, and pronouncing could glibly underestimate his own extraordinarily detailed knowledge of wine and literature alike. Being a very solid and reactionary *Saturday-Review*-style Tory, he might also have resented any implication that he was a dilettante aesthete – the details in which he delighted were hardly butterflies breakable upon a wheel. Above all, though, it seems to me, he was a genuine educator, who hoped that his reviews, books, and teaching would widen the appeal of literature among members of several different audiences, some of them including first-generation readers. So his aim, I think, was to counteract, not only the time's assumption that literature was the pastime of a refined upper class, but also any suggestion that, on human beings in general, its impact could be other than salubrious.

If I am right about this, the task Saintsbury was setting himself was not without its challenge. Given the larger cultural background, the tasting-criticizing comparison might well have seemed to hint that literature was, in a potentially harmful way, addictive. From ancient times onwards, one line of discussion had involved a resilient prejudice against literature as not the sort of thing that a serious individual should take up with. In *The Republic* Plato, that model for so many subsequent philosophers' total preoccupation with truth, blamed poets for dangerously emotive imitations that were at two whole removes from truth's lofty essence. Wordsworth and Coleridge evidently concluded that the best line of defence was neo-Horatian. On the one hand, their pronouncements did anticipate my own stress on literature's hedonic immediacies; "[t]he Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, that of the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being" (Wordsworth's phrasing);³⁵ and "[a] poem is that species of composition which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth" (Coleridge, and Coleridge's italics).³⁶ But on the other hand, they also represented poetry as "the most philosophic of all writing; ... its object is truth, not individual and local,

34. Gross, *Rise and fall*, 162.

35. William Wordsworth, "Preface", in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, eds. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1968), 241–272, esp. 257.

36. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 172.

but general, and operative" (Wordsworth's formulation),³⁷ a type of writing in which "truth, either moral or intellectual, ought to be the ultimate end" (Coleridge again).³⁸ Admittedly, in *Ion* Plato's views could be read as somewhat more sympathetic to literature. There he said that poetic rhapsodies were to be valued as divinely inspired. But then he strongly denigrated human rhapsodists' own role, as entirely passive, as a total abandonment of their own creative powers, and as a most signal relaxation of their reason, an analysis he repeated in *Phaedrus*, and one to which he also attached a hint, however delicate, that the rhapsodic lack of self-control correlated with a prior intake of wine:

lyric poets are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains: but when falling under the power of music and metre they are inspired and possessed; like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus, but not when they are in their right mind.³⁹

Later on, many poets, not only Western European poets, and perhaps most remarkably of all Omar Khayyam (well known to late nineteenth-century British readers through Edward Fitzgerald's translation), were to invoke wine itself as their muse, sometimes even as a life-force, not a few of them downing bottle after bottle in the hope of inspiration, sometimes to the detriment of their liver. According to many latter-day Platonists, puritans and ascetics, moreover, literary works so mentally uninhibited in their genesis could be equally wayward in their effect, which is why Wordsworth, in defending his claim for poetry's philosophical seriousness, made a point of saying that literary taste is not nearly as indifferent a thing as "a taste for Rope-dancing, or Frontiniac or Sherry."⁴⁰ As for Saintsbury himself, he was remembered by the poet Andrew Young, who had been his pupil at Edinburgh, not only for his voluminous writings on the history of English prosody, the history of literary criticism, and the history of the French novel, but for one final glimpse of him after his retirement to Bath:

The last time I saw him was in Bath; passing a house I caught sight of him through a window; his hand was stretched towards a bookcase.⁴¹

37. Wordsworth, "Preface", 257.

38. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 171.

39. Quoted from David Daiches, *Critical approaches to literature* (London: Longman, 1956), 7.

40. Wordsworth, "Preface", 257.

41. Andrew Young, *The new Poly-Olbion: Topographical excursions* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1967), 22.

As Young describes this epiphanic moment, the hand's behaviour does seem, or almost seem, compulsive. We may even find ourselves wondering whether it is not a little shaky as well – a case of bibliophilia D. T.'s.

On balance, however, Saintsbury more than retained his self-command, and without letting his personal dogmas become a carapace to protect him from true dialogue. After all, the tasting-reading comparison was, as it still can be, underwritten by another, wholly favourable view of wine, a view which, going back no less unmistakably to Plato, in classical times was ramified in the social institution of *symposion*, the Greek symposium or drinking party,⁴² taken over by the Romans as the *convivium*, by Renaissance humanists as what Kermode called “[t]he pagan shadow of the Eucharist,”⁴³ by admirers of Saintsbury himself in the literary wining and dining club named after him, and now by Anthony W. Johnson of Åbo Akademi University in the congenial form of his Premis Seminars on literature, with their accompanying buffet of cakes, cheeses and, of course, red wine. In its country and time of origin, the symposium was seen as a gathering ideally suited not only to honest discussion of important matters – “*In vino veritas*” being a line of thought traceable back to Alcaeus,⁴⁴ still found in Horace,⁴⁵ and noted as proverbial wisdom by Pliny the Elder⁴⁶ – but also to the shared enjoyment of erotic, musical, and literary entertainments. Literary works describing, and/or staged as being read during, a symposium included Plato's own Socratic dialogue, *The Symposium*, Xenophon's *Symposium*, and elegies by Theogonis of Megara.

True, the symposia of the ancient world could certainly involve an element of elitist non-transparency. Often the main point was that the very particular set of men should come together, drink wine and allow it to take effect, but without risk to their reputation or safety. The party was held in the shelter of the *andron* – the men's quarters – in the host's private family home, from which there could be no leakage of secrets, and the job of the symposiarch was to stop the conversation getting out of hand, no doubt partly by curbing any proto-(Samuel)-Johnsonian

42. For a fuller account, see Peter Garnsey, *Food and society in classical antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

43. Frank Kermode, “The banquet of sense”, in his *Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne* (London: Routledge, 1971), 84–115, esp. 86.

44. Alcaeus, F 366, in *Greek Lyric, Volume I: Sappho and Alcaeus*, ed. and trans. David A. Campbell, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982 [Loeb Classical Library 142], 396–397.

45. Horace, *Sermones* I iv 89, in *Horace: Satires. Epistles. The Art of Poetry*, 54–55.

46. Pliny the Elder, *Natural history* XIV 141, in *Pliny the Elder: Natural history, Volume IV: Books 12–16*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1945) [Loeb Classical Library 370], 278–279.

pursuit of victory while under the influence. In Eubulus's play *Semele or Dionysus* from c. 375 BC Dionysus says:

Three kraters do I mix for the temperate;
 One for health, which they empty first,
 The second for love and pleasure,
 The third for sleep.
 When this krater has been drained, wise guests go home.⁴⁷

On the other hand, and perhaps especially in Roman examples, the emphasis could be less on secrecy and social exclusivity than on warm companionship. Martial, in one of three friendly invitations versified as epigrams, said he would even lie about the menu – would boast of fish, oysters, sow's udders, plump birds from both the yard and the marsh – if that would only secure his invitee's attendance.⁴⁸ Sometimes, too, the wine on offer was confessedly rather ordinary. Horace, perhaps thinking about the simple hospitality he himself offered friends on his Sabine farm, commended his old neighbour's opinion that a drinkable mead could be made from honey that did not come from Hymettus and wine that did not come from Falernum.⁴⁹ Still more to the point, Martial, in one of the other two epigrams, tells his friend "*vinum tu facies bonum bibendo*": "you make the wine good by drinking it".⁵⁰ A host's offer of wine to a guest, we may reflect, can be as dialogical in spirit as a writer's offer of a text to a reader. Both the guest and the reader are invited to respond in a way that will complete a human relationship.

Much in the manner of companionable, free-speaking and moderately self-indulgent men taking part in a symposium, Saintsbury made theoreticians and system-builders in literary discussion the butt of some scathing protests:

The Rule in Criticism brings Hell and Death; the readiness to accept the illimitable idiosyncrasy of the work for what it is in itself worth (as the advertisements say) to YOU, brings Heaven and Life.⁵¹

47. Quoted from John Varriano, *Wine: A cultural history* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 44.

48. Martial, Epigram XI lii, l. 13, in *Martial: Epigrams, Volume III: Books 11–14*, ed. and trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (London: William Heinemann), 1993, 45–47.

49. Horace, Satire II ii, ll. 15–16, in *Horace: Satires. Epistles and Ars Poetica*, 136–137.

50. Martial, Epigram V lxxviii, l. 16, in *Martial: Epigrams, Volume I: Spectacles, Books 1–5*, ed. and trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) [Loeb Classical Library 94], 388–389. Martial's remaining Epigram inviting a guest is X xlvi, in *Martial: Epigrams, Volume II: Books 6–10*, ed. and trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) [Loeb Classical Library 95], 360–361.

51. Quoted from Gross, *Rise and fall*, 162.

Like Longinus, Saintsbury did think that rules and reason could go too far and miss the point. And his solicitude for the illimitable idiosyncrasy of the work shows him prepared to embrace his time's valorization of imaginative gusto. This, though, was by no means the only type of pleasure he enjoyed, and he was never one to let his acceptance of somebody else's idiosyncrasy put the damper on his own reactions and opinions. His case is ample proof that wine-tasting and literary taste really can be each other's types, both of them complicatedly discriminating, highly pleasurable, and inviting wider, continuingly pleasurable discussion within society at large. Even today, although Gross understandably deplored his political diatribes against "virtually every enlightened measure ... taken since 1832,"⁵² and although his ramblings and in-jokes are as tiresome as garrulous cliquishness always has been, admittedly casting a shadow on what I see as his basically democratic credentials, his knowledgeable and delighted enthusiasm for literature is often irresistible, and not least in cases where he disapproves of a writer's ideology. He made his critical debut by praising Baudelaire as a superlative verbal craftsman, while at the same time, in brusquely conservative fashion, rejecting Baudelaire's obsession with evil as a mere pose.⁵³ Here he was immediately announcing himself as a literary critic with a neo-classicist's, an Addisonian, a Johnsonian, a wine-taster's facility in keeping different aspects of a specimen, different sources of pleasure, different kinds of fault, all separate from each other.

3.

What I am underlining, then, is that, although some very rewarding and long-drawn-out pleasures are to be had from a search for holistic unity in literary works, there are also other kinds of pleasure to which literature gives rise more immediately. To illustrate this point I now turn to Jonson's "Inviting a Friend to Supper,"⁵⁴ a poem whose most distinctive qualities a holistic interpretation of the kind that works for the same author's *Masque of Augurs* could easily overlook, and a poem, too, which itself takes up that connection between literature and *symposion* so close to the heart of our redoubtable Jonsonian, Anthony W. Johnson.

52. Gross, *Rise and fall*, 166.

53. George Saintsbury, "Charles Baudelaire," *Fortnightly Review* 18 ns (1st October, 1875): 500–518.

54. David Bevington *et al.* (eds), *The Cambridge edition of the works of Ben Jonson, Volume 5* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2012), 101–198, esp. 166–168. The editor of Jonson's *Epigrams* in this volume is Colin Burrow, to whose introduction and notes some parts of the following discussion are indebted for information.

A fruitful way to discuss literary pleasure here is in terms of communication. Instead of emphasizing, like the neo-Horatians, a persuasive function in literary pleasure, this approach sees it as communicational in the word's etymological sense: literary pleasure helps to make or consolidate a community. My suggestion will be that many different kinds of formal pleasure, often less than fully conscious, can be described and appreciated this way, and that there are also richly communicational pleasures which arise more overtly, from the dialogical relationship between writers and those responding to them. One of the main advantages of the communicational approach is that, just as (Samuel) Johnson did not restrict himself to the neo-classical mimetic criterion, so here, too, the sheer complicatedness of literary works and their pleasures can be well accommodated.⁵⁵

To begin with pleasures of literary form, these involve questions of genre, of prosody, and of language and style. They have nothing to do with the timeless fusions of individualistic imagination once praised by those so-called literary formalists, the American New Critics, but are always datably communal. They come about as an enjoyable co-adaptation between literary writing and prevalent socio-cultural norms, by which the challengingly new is brought into symbiosis with the reassuringly old, the new never being unadulteratedly new – which would be impossible – but always building on the old. This means that writers and those who respond to them are for ever meeting each other half-way. Writers have no choice

55. For discussions and applications of the literary-communicational paradigm, see Roger D. Sell, *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000); Roger D. Sell, *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001); Roger D. Sell (ed.) *Children's literature as communication* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002); Roger D. Sell (ed.) *Literature as communication: Guest-edited Special Issue*, *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 7 (2007): 1–172; Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (eds), *Religion and writing in England, 1558–1689: Studies in community-making and cultural memory* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Roger D. Sell, *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011); Roger D. Sell (ed.) *Literary community-making: The dialogicality of English texts from the seventeenth century to the present* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2012); Roger D. Sell, Adam Borch and Inna Lindgren (eds), *The ethics of literary communication: Genuineness, directness, indirectness* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2013); Roger D. Sell (ed.), *Literature as dialogue: Invitations offered and negotiated* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2014); Roger D. Sell, Anthony W. Johnson and Helen Wilcox (eds), *Community-making in early Stuart theatres: Stage and audience* (London: Routledge, 2017). For appraisals of the literary-communicational approach, see the review of *Literature as communication* by Evan Willner (*Essays in Criticism*, 52 (2002): 155–161), the reviews of *Communicational criticism* by Jonathan Baldo (*Modern Language Review*, 109 (2014): 1062–1064) and David Stromberg (*Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 11 (2013): 337–339), and Anthony W. Johnson's introduction to Jason Finch et al. (eds), *Humane readings: Essays on literary mediation and communication in honour of Roger D. Sell* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2009), 1–15.

but to adapt to pre-existent formal expectations, but are often far from slavish, and can always hope that the community will reciprocally adapt to their own projects, some of which may entail formal innovations. For a writer, the pleasure is in fulfilling, exceeding, or breaking with expectations. For a respondent, it is in grasping, however subliminally, what is going on here, and in acquiring an extended sense of the textually possible, which from then on can be enjoyably shared with others, albeit often tacitly.

A key element is the satisfaction respondents can have in coming to feel ever more at home with the particular culture and its formal heritage, a satisfaction spiced with an inkling that the culture is not fossilized in just some single set of formal norms, but is indeed open to co-adaptational dynamism. A respondent who, whether by sheer exposure or through some scheme of education, is reasonably *au fait* with the cultural dynamics within which a text has been written can readily start to experience the pleasures derivable from its formal features. For such a respondent, this kind of pleasure will seem to be *there in the text*, merely waiting to be found, as it were, and all similarly acculturated respondents will react to it in the same way. By corollary, to respondents whose cultural initiation has not yet started or is still in its early stages, formal pleasure will be less self-evident, a circumstance providing no target for elitist scorn or one-up-man-ship, however, since their capacities may be just as good as anyone else's, and just as highly developed, even though not yet in this particular direction.

So what can we say about Ben Jonson's handling of the epigram as a genre? When his own epigrams were published in his folio *Works* in 1616, there was already beginning to be something of an English tradition: Timothy Kendall's *Flowers of epigrams* (1577), Sir John Davies and Christopher Marlowe's *Epigrammes and Elegies* (1599), John Weever's *Epigrammes in the oldest cut, and newest fashion* (1599), Thomas Freeman's first book of *Rub and a great cast: Epigrams* (1614), plus epigrams by Sir John Harrington which circulated widely in manuscript and were printed for the first time in 1615. But in June 1599, Archbishop John Whitgift and Bishop Richard Bancroft had tried to clamp down on the popular fashion for boldly satirical and salacious writing in general, with the result that Davies and Marlowe's book was officially burned. Jonson was aware that risks might still attach to publishing epigrams, and would also have borne in mind that his first readers, as their main way of cottoning on to pleasures of form, would place any new instantiation of a genre in relation to its predecessors, a mode of reading which, even if obviously still applicable to the genres typical of our new millennium, no longer works quite so smoothly for classical and neo-classical genres, whose cultural contexts may have to be re-created with help from, say, Alastair Fowler's historical survey of genres in general or, to take two genres in particular, Anthony W. Johnson's elucidation of the

Palladian aesthetic underlying Jonson's masques and encomiastic poems.⁵⁶ Having made his own assessment of the literary past, at any rate, Ben Jonson evidently decided that his epigrams' co-adaptation with precedent would need to win praise for two features above all others: for purity of spirit, and for learnedness. This was to be his distinctive edge here.

Taking a cue from Kendall's translations of Martial, he claimed to be making the genre much more chaste than it had been in the past. His self-presentation was as a poet bringing a licentious heritage into coadaptation with a drive towards higher civility. And sure enough, although the last line of "Inviting a Friend to Supper" promises "a liberty that we'll enjoy tonight" (l. 42), and although the food and wine on offer could have fuelled a heady enough debauch, from the first line onwards we know that the invitee himself is a "grave sir", a man of letters, we soon gather (commentators have suggested Camden, Cotton, Selden, and Sir Henry Savile), who would enjoy the readings from "Virgil, Tacitus, / Livy, or of some better book" to be provided by Jonson's "man" (ll. 20–22). As is true of Jonson's epigrams as an entire collection, part of the pleasure here actually comes from a titillating tension. On the one hand, there are these testimonies to the centred or gathered self of an individual who is politely civilized, the kind of character formation Jonson most fully celebrated in "An Epistle to Master John Selden" (published elsewhere). On the other hand, there is an altogether more primitive potentiality for wildness, loss of control, disruption, and danger. As we shall see, Epigram 101 communicates a control that would impress and satisfy far less if the same poem did not also communicate a sense of something subversive, something *in need of* control.

As for learnedness, Jonson emphasizes his collection's Latinity as a marked advance on Davies, Weever, and Harrington, and as something which a "Mere English Censurer" would fail to appreciate.⁵⁷ Not wishing to be mistaken for an ignorant vernacular writer with a penchant for lurid gossip, he projects himself as a rounded humanist, among other things a true descendent of Martial, from whom he has inherited a principle of order for the arrangement of his epigrams as an entire book, together with an understanding of satire, not as a scourge with which to whip known individuals, but as a more philosophically oriented study of

56. Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of literature: An introduction to the theory of genres and modes* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1982); Anthony W. Johnson, *Ben Jonson: Poetry and architecture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

57. Epigram 18, "To My Mere English Censurer", in Bevington, *Cambridge Jonson V*, 121. For a discussion of Jonson's imitations of classical authors in Epigram 101, see Thomas M. Greene, *Anti-hermeneutics: The case of Shakespeare's Sonnet 129* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 278–286.

human types. Especially in “Inviting a Friend to Supper”, for a learned reader such as the grave sir Martial would have been a real presence. In some of its phrasing, those three epigrams in which Martial invites friends to dinner are either closely imitated, as when Jonson promises not to regale his invitee with recitations from his own poems, or beautifully modified, as when Martial’s “*vinum tu facies bonum bibendo*” is expanded in scope to become

It is the fair acceptance, sir, creates
The entertainment perfect, not the cates. (ll. 7–8)

To turn now from genre to versification, here, too, there is scholarship which can help present-day readers with their cultural initiation into the formal pleasures concerned. What, at different historical stages, has constituted well managed prosodic co-adaptation has been studied by Derek Attridge and John Creaser, for instance, who themselves bear witness to resultant communal pleasures, as when Creaser notes that Milton’s interaction with verse tradition was in certain places such as actually “to excel Jonson in Jonsonian modes of writing”.⁵⁸ As for formal pleasures arising from Jonson’s own pentameter couplets in the epigram collection, they have been succinctly captured by Colin Burrow. What was new, says Burrow, was

the compression of his syntax, and the way his poems reverberate in the mind after their endings because of their compression His voice is sharper than that of any of his predecessors: he can set a variety of lengths of clause against varied positions of caesura in order to create poems which speak with a variety of tonalities By comparison with Jonson, . . . [Harrington’s epigrams] can seem simply to jog along, filling lines with metre rather than charging them with colloquial energy.⁵⁹

Burrow’s formulation exactly applies to lines such as those just quoted from “Inviting a Friend to Supper”:

It is the fair acceptance, sir, creates
The entertainment perfect, not the cates.

As soon as our ear has grasped that what we are reading or hearing is a poem in couplets, the first line of any particular couplet always raises questions as to how the second line will sound. Jonson knows this very well, and is a past-master at

58. Derek Attridge, *Well-weighed syllables: Elizabethan verse in classical metres* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), *The rhythms of English poetry* (Longman: London, 1982), and *Poetic rhythm: An introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); John Creaser, “Milton: The truest of the sons of Ben,” in Margo Swiss and David A. Kent (eds), *Heirs of fame: Milton and writers of the English Renaissance* (London: Bucknell University Press, 1995), 158–183, esp. 181.

59. Colin Burrow, “Introduction,” in Bevington, *Cambridge Jonson V*, 103–108, esp. 105–106.

gratifying the expectations likely to occur, but with tiny, piquant surprises. The first line here is regularly iambic, but despite the comma after "acceptance" does not have its main caesura, the one between "sir" and "creates", until just before the final iamb, and the line does not have end-stopping either. Up until the end of the word "perfect", the second line meets the expectation that its prosody will be an exact copy of the first line's, but then it turns out to have only a single, very strong caesura, which is brought a syllable further forward to the middle of the fourth iamb, and it also has the most resounding sort of end-stopping on the masculine rhyme-ending – the effect is even stronger, it seems to me, than that of the wonderful original in Martial. The pleasure arising from Jonson's subtle power in all such aural playfulness is very real indeed, even though our experience of versification's effects may not be conscious, a point shrewdly noted by Coleridge, and not without an analogy to the benefits of wine:

As far as metre acts in and for itself, it tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention. This effect it produces by the continued excitement of surprize, and by the quick reciprocations of curiosity still gratified and still re-excited, which are too slight indeed to be at any one moment objects of distinct consciousness, yet become considerable in their aggregate influence. ... [A]s wine during animated conversation, they act powerfully, though themselves unnoticed.⁶⁰

When Burrow rightly ascribes something colloquial to this prosodaic energy in Jonson's epigrams, we can add that the colloquial is a pleasant aspect of the Jonsonian epigram's language overall. And what is even more pleasurable is the way the colloquial language enters into stylistic tension with the more learned language of humanism. In "Inviting a Friend to Supper" there are lots of words like "company", "dignify", "grace", "esteem", "acceptance", "entertainment". But there are plenty of Anglo-Saxon words as well, not least for species of bird and other comestibles, plus a twist given to the ancient English proverb "If the sky falls, we shall have larks", folk wisdom amusingly mangled here by would-be-authoritative "clerks":

And, though fowl now be scarce, yet there are clerks,
The sky not falling, think we may have larks. (ll. 15–16)

Although the poem so suggestively brings in the world of the ancient Roman *convivium*, similarly, this is counterweighted with references to Jonson's own London and to recent English history. He will buy the evening's wine from the Mermaid Tavern, and the jolly gathering will not be infiltrated by government spies like Robert Poley or Henry Parrot.

60. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 207.

While on the subject of language, I may be able to release slightly more pleasure from one three-line passage than is immediately derivable from its text as given in the Cambridge edition. What Colin Burrow, the editor, prints is:

And I'll profess no verses to repeat.
 To this, if aught appear which I know not of
 That will the pastry, not my paper show of. (ll. 24–26)

In a note Burrow remarks, “‘Show of’ is not a usage recorded by *OED*, and it is impossible to be certain of Jonson’s meaning here.” What strikes me is that one of the manuscript versions of the poem which, though not holograph, is accepted as containing Jonsonian readings gives the end of line 25 as “I not know”.⁶¹ So my own suggestion is that the passage should read:

And I'll profess no verses to repeat.
 To this, if aught appear which I not know
 That will the pastry, not my paper show.

First, Jonson makes the promise not to recite his own verses at the party, but a promise which his amused invitee will probably not believe, knowing him as he presumably does. On top of which, Jonson then says, if anything turns up which he himself does not know about, it will be something made manifest in the form of pastry, and not something he has written. We can guess that the possibility of a spectacular and tasty surprise sprung by an ambitious pastry-cook could well tickle the grave sir’s imagination.

If my emendation is right here, then this passage has not only the more Jonsonian masculine rhymes, but also the additional merit of not forcing language any more than does any other wording in the same poem. On the contrary, through steering clear of neologisms which might turn out to be mere nonce usages the emended passage is in keeping with Jonson’s stylistic aspiration, throughout the epigrams, to dignity and permanence. In its own way, the passage as I have rendered it is no less linguistically conservative than *Poetaster*’s staging of Crispinus vomiting up words like *retrograde*, *reciprocal*, *incubus*, *inflate*, *defunct*, *spurious*, *damp*, *clumsy*, *chilblained*, *clutched*, *strenuous*, *puffy* and *conscious*, all of them words which, despite Jonson’s suspicion of them, went on to become part of standard English.

At which point it is also worth noting that literature’s formal pleasures of language and style will soon be a lot easier to discuss, and present-day readers’ cultural initiation into those pleasures correspondingly easier as well. One of the first scholars to pore over the contents of Crispinus’s verbal vomit was George Gordon

61. BM Harleian MS 6917, f. 84 r-v. See Colin Burrow, “Introduction” in Bevington, *Cambridge Jonson V*, 103–108, esp. 108.

in 1928, and a hard time he had of it!⁶² Ninety years later, we can look forward to a scholarly aid being developed by Anthony W. Johnson and his colleagues, which will immediately reveal how, at any given period, any given stretch of English would have come across, thanks to software which will colour-code words as either neologisms, long-standing presences, or anachronisms.⁶³ Such computer-assisted enquiry will almost certainly confirm that Ben Jonson's linguistic instinct was often, if not always, to play safe and command respect. An expression such as "show of" seems likely to register as even more way-out than ever.

Moving on now from formal pleasures, we come to the other main category under which I am grouping literary pleasures here: pleasures which are overtly dialogical. As we have seen, the pleasures of literary form are dialogical, too. Processes of formal co-adaptation are nothing if not a dialogical give-and-take, between writers' own contribution and the tradition to which that contribution is being made. But what Coleridge said about metre can apply to formal co-adaptations of every kind. Although they are all "considerable in their aggregate influence", that "continued excitement of surprise" which they entail, together with the "quick reciprocations of curiosity still gratified and still re-excited", may well be "too slight ... to be at any one moment objects of distinct consciousness." Overtly dialogical pleasures, by contrast, involve fuller consciousness on the part of respondents. Such pleasures have to do with the writer's handling of whatever the text deals with or contains, and are a matter of the interactionally human relationship which that handling makes possible between writer and respondents.

So I am *not* distinguishing, in addition to formal pleasures and overtly dialogical pleasures, an independent third category of literary pleasure deriving from content, story, theme, or ideas. At first, a third such category may well seem necessary, because we often do think of ourselves as very much enjoying these matters. For one thing, however, they are to some extent genre-specific, contributing to the formal pleasure we take in registering, consciously or unconsciously, a writer's conformity with, and/or further development of, cultural precedents. For another thing, and as Henry James pointed out, the secret of a work's appeal lies, less in its subject-matter, than in what I have just called the writer's handling of the subject-matter.⁶⁴ We do not take delight in content, story, theme, or ideas in some impersonally abstract

62. George Gordon, *Shakespeare's English* (Oxford: S. P. E. Tracts, 1928).

63. For a foretaste, see Anthony W. Johnson, Ilkka Juuso, Marc Alexander, Tapio Seppänen and †Lisa Lena Opas-Hänninen, *Time and text: Cultural imagology, 'big' data and the Scottish historical novel* (Eyecorner Press: Roskilde, forthcoming).

64. For a discussion of James's thoughts on this see Roger D. Sell, "Introduction", in Sell, *Literature as dialogue*, 1–20, esp. 1–2.

mode, but only as they are mediated to us by the work's writer. The writer shapes the text as an invitation to compare notes about them, so providing pleasures which would never arise at all if, as neo-Horatians tend to suggest, authors were purely and simply sending instructional content, stories, themes, or ideas as messages from their *A* to our *B* within a singular context also decided at the authorial end of things. On the contrary, our pleasure is in exercising our freedom to respond to a writer's handling of them in our own way, from within our own life-world, a process which amounts to a pleasurable interesting consideration of pleasurable presented topics, between parties whose relationship to each other is, albeit at their ontologically different junctures of time and space, one of pleasurable heightened excitement.

That is why, unlike pleasures of form, overtly dialogical pleasures will to a greater or lesser degree always differ from respondent to respondent. Although the writer of a text will always be coming from within the same life-world, all new respondents, while ethically bound to try and understand the writer's life-world and intentions, are also ethically entitled to respond in their own way, and in fact cannot do otherwise. This means that each writer-respondent relationship is unique, such that the pleasures arising from it are at least partly peculiar to it, thus helping to explain the phenomenon I noted earlier on: the many differences of thought and emphasis to be found in the reception history of any significant literary work.

So although in the first instance I shall now try to empathize with the life-world and likely responses of the grave sir who was Epigram 101's original addressee, in considering the pleasures likely to have arisen between him and Jonson I shall also not repress, though I shall not greatly emphasize, my own distinctive enjoyment. My own readers, too, may find those original pleasures attractive, and for equally personal reasons of their own, which I shall not pre-empt, but which from now on may even include a pleasure *they* take in the pleasure *I* take in the pleasure taken by *Jonson* and *his invitee*. This may sound very convoluted. But that is exactly how literature's openly dialogical pleasures work. Individuals, each in their own way, can enjoy the peculiarity of both *their own* and *other people's* dialogical enjoyments. It is precisely by way of such constant variations and re-voicings that pleasure *spreads*, cementing a community that can be indefinitely pluralistic.

Now when I wrote that, during our response to a writer, there are multiple pleurabilities which come into play, I did not mean that literature's overtly dialogical pleasures are actually anodyne. Often they include the paradoxical pleasures of *unpleasure*: the vibrations of pity and fear in tragedy;⁶⁵ the awesome terrors of the sublime; the bracing difficulties and shockingness of many Modernist texts; the abrasions of pain which Lionel Trilling said he and his contemporaries needed so

65. Cf. A. D. Nuttall, *Why does tragedy give pleasure?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

as to be sure they were still alive;⁶⁶ the sheer anguish of the *jouissance* described by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* and *Le plaisir du text* – of readerly ecstasies made quite unbearable by an awareness of their impending cessation.

In and of itself, the subject-matter of "Inviting a Friend to Supper" hardly looks so disconcerting. But to repeat, what really counts is not the subject-matter but the way subject-matter is handled. Jonson's poem is "about" friendship, than which, at first sight, few things can seem more pleasant. But when Wordsworth speaks of "an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure",⁶⁷ he reminds us that Barthes' perception was basically not new, and so does Keats, for whom Joy's hand is "ever at his lips / Bidding adieu".⁶⁸ Jonson sees in friendship, similarly, a permanent potentiality for estrangement. A friendship is exposed to threats which will either end up giving it a whole new lease of life, or simply destroy it. Indeed, this binarism is what makes friendship such typical matter for a Jonsonian epigram, a type of poem in which, as I say, authorial self-assurance is staged as keeping control only in the face of considerable resistance.

Much turns on what kind of a speech act the invitation to supper really is. Whatever the rank and true identity of the grave sir, Jonson treats him as a fellow-denizen of the world of letters – to all intents and purposes as an equal. Between equals, an invitation might seem to make for pleasure all round, since, on the one hand, the inviter is offering to provide the invitee with pleasures while, on the other hand, the inviter is trying to persuade the invitee to do something which will bring pleasure to the inviter. And admittedly, if the invitee accepts, both parties will in fact be gratified. But if the invitee declines, the inviter will not be gratified at all. The inviter is not only promising hospitality, but is also granting the power of decision to the invitee. Whereas somebody *commanding* somebody else to do something lays claim, truthfully or untruthfully, tacitly or explicitly, to a power of authority which would leave the person commanded no opportunity to refuse, an invitation from one of two equals to the other normally vests all the power in the invitee. Even if the invitee accepts, this is still not a transfer of power to the inviter. The inviter, even if pleased by the invitee's company at supper, will still be under an obligation to keep things up to scratch. Given which considerations, somebody writing an invitation to a friend might well be expected to be rather deferential.

66. Lionel Trilling, "The fate of pleasure," in his *Beyond culture: Essays on literature and learning* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 62–86. Cf. Roger D. Sell, "Watership Down and the rehabilitation of pleasure" [1981], in Lawrence J. Trudeau (ed.), *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 357 (Farmington Hills: Gale, 2014), 5–10.

67. Wordsworth, "Preface", 258.

68. John Keats, "On Melancholy", ll. 22–23, in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Ernest Rhys (London: Dent, 1906), 61–62.

Nothing could be more enjoyable than Jonson's discreet but sustained hints that the comfortably normal state of affairs can indeed be subverted, and by him personally. Granted, to start with he is very self-deprecating. So much so, however, that one senses him going slightly over the top. "Tonight, grave sir, both my poor house and I / Do equally desire your company" (ll. 1–2), the poem opens, so animating bricks and mortar with all the vibrant yearnings of a humble sensibility. On this showing, later occupants of the same house could well include Uriah Heep, an inviter who

reminded ... [David] of the promise ... [he] had made to have tea with himself and his mother: adding, with a writhe, "But I didn't expect you to keep it, Master Copperfield, we're so very umble."⁶⁹

Jonson then continues with modesty tropes borrowed or imitated from invitations to, or descriptions of, meals in Martial, Horace, and Juvenal, all of them underlining the frugality of the fare to be provided, soon followed, however, by a steadily lengthening list of delicacies, during which the modesty rather goes into abeyance. Jonson, like Martial admitting a willingness to tell lies if they will only get the invitee to come, thereby explicitly raises a doubt as to whether the menu's offerings will really be as exclusive as he is now promising, but only to reject this scruple by affirming that even some of the rarest items mentioned "may yet be there" (l. 19). After which, the next promise is of the readings from the invitee's favourite texts by serious classical authors, but immediately followed by Jonson's surely tongue-in-cheek promise not to read from his own poems, a promise which is ostensibly deferential, yet also implies the possibility that, once the invitee is pinioned at his table, Jonson might take things into his own hands. In fact, I suppose, his poems might be read from the "better book" – perhaps a manuscript collection – which he is already hypothesizing as an alternative preferable to Virgil, Tacitus, and Livy.

Then comes, as I see it, the teasing as to the possibility of amazing pastry, only slightly, it at all, counteracted by "[d]igestive cheeses and fruits" (l. 27), which lead straight in to the penultimate interactive tension, with Jonson recommending the wine as one taster to another:

But that which most doth take my muse and me
Is a pure cup of rich Canary wine,
Which is the Mermaid's now, but shall be mine
Of which had Horace or Anacreon tasted,
Their lives, as do their lines, till now had lasted.
Tobacco, nectar, or the Thespian spring,
Are all but Luther's beer to this I sing.
Of this we will sup free, but moderately

(ll. 28–35)

69. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* [1850] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 311.

Although he has just promised not to read his own poems, here he boldly brings to the fore his muse! – whose “taking” by the wine may remind the grave sir of the divinely inspired rhapsodists mentioned in *Ion*. Nor is Jonson any more self-subdued in claiming, though with some elegant indirectness, that his purchase of the Canary will put eternal life within his gift as host. How could the invitee possibly resist? Such a wine is infinitely superior to the entertainments as promised at the outset. This is a wine in need of no condescension by the invitee to make it good (in Martial's phrase), a wine describable only through comparisons and contrasts intelligible to the fashionable, the privileged, and the learned. If Jonson's supper party will provide a suitable setting for readings of high literature, here the wine, the menu's supreme adornment, irresistibly appeals to the literary imagination, activated through a creative mastery on Jonson's part which could leave the grave sir dumbstruck and jocularly forced into tasting the Canary for himself, while Jonson, by being able to offer him that opportunity, has the upper hand. Against all the odds of a friendly invitation's normal procedure, it is almost as if the invitee is being put at the mercy of the inviter.

After which the poem rounds things off by promising that once the invitee has, as now seems certain, yielded to the wine's challenge through free but moderate drinking, Jonson can guarantee him the necessary safety. The imitation of Martial is fairly close at this point, as the learned addressee would naturally recognize. But this would not have meant that, for a seventeenth-century guest encouraged to speak truth in wine, worries about possible spies or blackmailers would be any less real. Although Jonson is apparently stooping to beg his grave friend to come, in offering this kind of security he is actually putting on a show of strength. Nor will his playful see-saw between humility and self-aggrandisement have been lost on his addressee. The grave sir will have sensed that the ostensibly deferential invitation has been gently taunting him throughout, even if, in the event, the friendship withstood the strain and grew still stronger.

4.

I hope to have given at least some reminder of the sheer variety of literary pleasures that can arise immediately, whether pleasures of form, which are the same for all relevantly acculturated respondents, or overtly dialogical pleasures, which inevitably vary from respondent to respondent.

I would specially stress that different pleasures of both these immediate kinds are all independent of each other. That is why much of my commentary on Jonson's poem has in effect been an unranked list of assessments by various different criteria, just like the list of observations you would expect from a wine-taster, for whom

every bottle is complicated. By returning to some such mode of literary appreciation, by further extending the line of criticism from Addison, Samuel Johnson, Saintsbury and Bayley, scholarly commentary can once again come close to our enjoyment of literature as it unfolds word by word.

The variety and independence of all the pleasures immediately arising help to explain how a text can be enjoyed and admired even by members of the contemporary readership who are unsympathetic to its author. Jonson was not without enemies; there were Poleys and Parrots, so to speak, who might have looked askance at some of the company he kept; and “Inviting a Friend to Supper”, without naming the very latest embodiments of such hostility, explicitly takes his invitee’s side against them. On the other hand, Jonson did cleave, as we have noted, to the central ground, and did not generally express his personal opinions anyway.⁷⁰ His epigrams in particular, vaunting as they did their own chastity and Latinity, seldom cued in contemporary religious or political controversies. And even if, despite this cautiousness, his adversaries managed to read Epigram 101 as an invitation to seditious conspiracy, they, too, to the extent that they shared his and his invitee’s cultural background, could have enjoyed the handling of genre, of prosody, and of language and style, just as, despite strong ideological disagreements, Donald Davie enjoyed the beauties of rhythm in Pound, and George Saintsbury the verbal mastery of Baudelaire.

Such complicated, non-holistic assessments are not necessarily peculiar to individual commentators but can also be underwritten by wider social praxis. In early modern England there was a huge body of writings which were greatly enjoyed by large numbers of both Protestants and Catholics and, as time moved on, by large numbers of both Parliamentarians and Royalists. As I started to suggest earlier, a culture is not at all the same thing as a consensus, and neither is a community.⁷¹ Both cultures and communities can be defined at least as much by internal disagreements and debates as by internal harmonies and certainties. At the same time, there obviously will be commonalities, not least the commonalities of literary tradition.⁷² And having already twice suggested that people enjoying the pleasures of literary texts can retain their own intellectual and moral independence, I can now add that a culture or community’s bringing together of *ideological differences* with *literary commonalities* provides conditions favourable to the pleasant exercise of that freedom.

70. Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A life* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2011), 254.

71. Cf. Roger D. Sell, “Cultural memory and the communicational criticism of literature”, *ESSACHESS: Journal for Communication Studies* 5 (2012): 201–25 [= item 8 in the present selection].

72. Cf. Roger D. Sell, “Honour dishonoured: The communicational workings of early Stuart tragedy and tragicomedy”, in Sell, Johnson and Wilcox, *Community-making in early Stuart theatres*, 173–198 [= item 15 in the present selection].

Not that differences within a community or culture are set in stone. After all, there is a sense in which you cannot disagree with something without first having agreed with it, without first having tried it on for size. You need to know, you need to have made real for yourself, whatever it is you are critiquing. This can lead to a typically human type of parallel processing, whereby responses to, for instance, Pound's anti-Semitism, Baudelaire's obsession with evil, and Ben Jonson's humanist conviviality are simultaneously approving and disapproving. Within the mind of respondents, the two sides of a difference can very naturally enter into dialogue with each other, even when respondents are eventually going to come down firmly on just the one side or the other. Similarly, some of a poem's overtly dialogical pleasures can both work, and not work, for one and the same reader. The Poles or Parrots might have been perfectly capable of relishing the way Jonson's poem teased the grave sir, and at the same time equally capable of blaming its aura of high-minded learning as a dishonest pretence to political neutrality. Yes, simultaneous relish and blame: in point of fact, human beings are not nearly as one-track-minded as literary scholarship and criticism have often implied.⁷³

Often a difference is the result of changed circumstances of reading. Jonson's poem has been read by respondents far beyond its original audience. Granted, to make an absolute division between the poem's original readers and its non-original readers is not really possible – where, exactly, would the dividing line run? The only viable distinctions are scalar. Yet even scalar gradations have real enough hermeneutic consequences. As far as pleasures of form are concerned, readers' need of scholarly assistance in accustoming themselves to that earlier phase of cultural history has steadily increased over the years. As for overtly dialogical pleasures, especially during the past hundred years or so many readers will have found it hard to gauge the precise temper of the dialogicality between the poem's writer and addressee. Like Jonson's imagined "Mere English Censurer", they will have been simply unable to grasp how all the allusions to the world of ancient Greece and Rome actually work. Even some classicist readers may have had a sense of being excluded, a sense that something of the Greek symposium's privacy still survives here. Indeed, the poem's circulation and printing at first may seem to have made the non-transparency all the more glaring. Apart from what can be gleaned from a supper menu, and a somewhat dubious supper menu at that, the poem might appear to have told a great many people of widely different times and places really very little indeed, about a small intellectual elite into which they can acquire few other insights either.

But to believe such appearances would be to underestimate, not only the communicational workings of manuscripts and books but, by the same token, human

73. Cf. Sell, *Literature as communication*, 13–14.

powers of imaginative empathy. Everywhere and always, for readers who are prepared to try on Jonson's lines for size, prepared to grant them poetic assent (to use Eliot's term), and prepared, when necessary, to draw help from historical scholarship, his words can indeed conjure up the ethos of that intimate circle. Just as we heuristically latch on to the addressivity of any other text not addressed to us personally when we want to understand it, any readership whatever can, in the way I have tried to illustrate, imagine themselves back into the position of Jonson's grave sir, thereby vicariously entering into dialogue with Jonson himself. In addition, and again in accordance with the standard pragmatics of reading, present-day readers can find a new addressivity in the poem's wording, such that Jonson now invites them to compare notes with him about that original interchange of his with their learned forebear.

In these intertwined modes of response, immediate pleasures of both the main kinds I have discussed continue to arise for any reader of Jonson's poem who makes the imaginative effort. No matter how distant in time and place our position may happen to be from that of the first addressee, quite regardless, for instance, of whether or not we ourselves belong to an anglophone culture, a chief reward for our empathetic endeavour will be that, in tasting the poem's many immediate pleasures, we have that joyful sense of tapping into a cultural tradition that is still ongoing but open to change. Such pleasures, far from seducing us into thinking some particular thought, or into behaving in some particular way, will undermine social, cultural, temporal, and geographical boundaries which otherwise might hedge us in. Rather than coercing us into a consensus, they will consolidate a historical community which, with its own past, present and future, is indefinitely large but, in its heterogeneity, non-hegemonic.

Literature, human commonalities, and cultural differences

Stability and change¹

1. Universality

Literature is written by, for, and mainly about human beings. And human beings are anything but immutable. They constantly undergo or bring about changes, not only as grouped together into their societies and cultures or subcultures, but also as individuals travelling from cradle to grave. We might expect, then, to find plenty of mutability in literature as well.

Vast amounts of literary criticism have seemed oblivious to this likelihood, even when laying claim to historical concerns. In 1720, Giles Jacob published *An historical account of the lives and writings of our most considerable ENGLISH poets*, in which he stated, among other things, that Sir John Beaumont was “an excellent Poet who liv’d during the reign of King *Richard* the Third.”² Richard III was of course the king who died at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, vanquished by Henry Earl of Richmond, who thereby became Henry VII, the first king of the Tudor dynasty. Beaumont, however, was born roughly a hundred years after the death of Richard; he lived from c. 1582 to 1627. Jacob allowed himself to be confused by the fact that Beaumont’s most famous poem is an epyllion entitled “Bosworth Field,” whose blow by blow account of the battle did not begin to circulate in manuscript until the early 1620s. Not knowing its time of composition, Jacob, and readers influenced by him, would have missed the poem’s tribute to James I, whose controversial legitimation by descent from Henry it strongly bolstered. And this same weakness of historical grasp let Jacob describe Beaumont as a poet “fill’d with *Phoebean* fire”; he was “one of the Chief of the great Souls of Poetical Numbers.”³ True enough, as an anticipation of Denham, Waller, Dryden, and Pope the heroic couplets Jacob

1. [Revised version of a lecture delivered at the 2017 Conference of the Finnish Society for the Study of English. Not previously published.]

2. Giles Jacob, *An historical account of the lives and writings of our most considerable ENGLISH poets, whether epick, lyrick, elegiack, epigrammatists, &c* (London: E. Curll, 1720), 4.

3. Jacob, *ENGLISH poets*, 4.

quoted from “Bosworth Field” are remarkable enough even for the 1620s. For the late fifteenth century, they would have been nothing short of miraculous.

Underlying Jacob’s entire book, and the work of other critics in the classicist tradition, was the assumption that, always and everywhere, human beings and human life could basically be the same. Moderns, it was therefore thought, could be unproblematically encouraged to emulate the art and behaviour of the ancients. As it happened, the humanist ideal involved a bowdlerization of Greek and Roman realities in which its most learned advocates were fully complicit. Yet the classicist message was unequivocal. The ancients had been almost superhuman, and the moderns were potentially their glorious continuation.

Then during the Romantic period, this same basic assumption had a new lease of life, as literature in particular came to be seen as unifying the human race in a comprehensive fellowship. Wordsworth’s eloquence on the subject is unforgettable:

In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed, the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time.⁴

And the mood in which Goethe, reacting to all the conflict and chaos of the Napoleonic wars, developed his notion of *Weltliteratur* was similarly utopian:

It is to be hoped that people will soon be convinced that there is no such thing as patriotic art or patriotic science. Both belong, like all good things, to the whole world, and can be fostered only by untrammelled intercourse among all contemporaries, continually bearing in mind what we have inherited from the past.⁵

For us now, both Wordsworth’s talk of literature’s bringing about a single “vast empire of human society” and Goethe’s consignment of patriotism to the unenlightened and divided world of the past can seem delusional, given that, in the end, national literature after national literature became ideological weapons in that mighty contest of several competing empires which culminated in the First World War.⁶ At which point, there appeared *The Spirit of Man: An anthology in English & French from the philosophers & poets made in 1915 by the Poet Laureate* [Robert Bridges] & dedicated by gracious permission to his majesty *The King* [George V],

4. William Wordsworth, “Preface” (to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1802), in *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1968), 259.

5. Quoted from Fritz Strich, *Goethe and world literature* [1945], trans. C. A. M. Sym (London: Routledge, 1949), 35.

6. For further discussion of this development, see Roger D. Sell, “Where do literary authors belong? A post-postmodern answer,” *Rocznik Komparatystyczny: Comparative Yearbook* 6 (2015): 47–68 [= item 14 in the present selection].

a project squarely grounded on the kind of literary universalism found in both Wordsworth and Goethe, yet now firmly excluding philosophers and poets who wrote in German.⁷

During the Second World War, *The Spirit of Man* was republished, again as propaganda.⁸ But its underlying ideology was perhaps no longer embraced quite so widely and uncritically. C. S. Lewis, for instance, spent a whole chapter of his *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942) refuting what he called “the doctrine of the unchanging human heart.”⁹ More recently, historical novelists have sometimes lampooned the British Raj’s assumption that, if Indians were introduced to the universality of Shakespeare, they would refrain from inconveniences such as the Indian Mutiny.¹⁰ The imperialist politics with which universalist notions of literature so often intertwined has also been a topic for postmodern literary critics, who have charted associated economic and gender politics as well.

Such lines of analysis are very familiar, having been deservedly persuasive. There is some risk, however, of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. In the main forms in which it has commonly been held, the idea of literary universality was indeed misleading and ideologically loaded. But certain kinds of universality really are intrinsic to literature, and ultimately account for its human value.

It is worth remembering, for a start, that some very large anthropological generalizations can be made. All human beings are brought into the world through sexual reproduction. All human beings have needs and drives, both primary and secondary. All human beings have relationships with other human beings, within one or more groupings. All human beings know the difference between pleasure and pain, and prefer the former, even if one person’s pleasure is sometimes another person’s pain. All human beings have some sort of life-world within which their experiences and thoughts are brought together for processing. And all human beings die. Granted, within different societies and their cultures and subcultures the anthropological commonalities are negotiated in widely different ways. In some contexts, the birth of a human being is normally preceded by a marriage between the child’s parents, and the marriage by a process or event described as “falling in

7. Robert Bridges (ed.), *The Spirit of Man: An anthology in English & French from the philosophers & poets made in 1915 by the Poet Laureate & dedicated by gracious permission to his majesty the King* (London: Longmans, Green, 1916).

8. Robert Bridges, (ed.), *The Spirit of Man: An anthology in English & French from the philosophers & poets made by Robert Bridges, O. M., Poet Laureate & dedicated by gracious permission to his majesty The King George V* (London: Readers’ Union and Longmans Green, 1940).

9. C. S. Lewis, *A preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), 62–65.

10. E.g. J. G. Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 335. For a discussion of this example, see Roger D. Sell, *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011), 10–12.

love,” while in other contexts children are born into communes, or parents have come together for socioeconomic reasons. The Victorian way of death, similarly, at home in bed and surrounded by loved-ones, was not the twentieth century way of death, in a hospital or some other institution. Yet no matter how the anthropological facts are culturally accommodated and shaped, everybody is indeed born, and everybody does die.

In turn, the anthropological universals underwrite an existential universality in literature. When Othello, believing his wife to have been unfaithful, reluctantly commits an honour killing, we third-millennials may imagine that we could never have ended up in such a predicament ourselves. But Othello’s dilemma embodies a kind of tension between the individual and a current form of socialization that occurs the world over and throughout all time. Nowadays, too, we could equally well find ourselves painfully reluctant to follow a social norm – reluctant to do the thing which, given our culturally endorsed identity script, we expect of ourselves. Today, the oppressive identity script will probably not encourage the same life-threatening levels of sexual jealousy as did the Renaissance code of honour. It will have some other form, and different detailed consequences. But the underlying tension between the individual and society will be identical, and this anthropologically common potential is no sooner grasped than it prompts empathetic understanding from audiences watching *Othello* in any place and time whatever. The more differences spectators see between themselves and Othello, and between their own society and Othello’s society as Shakespeare represents it, the more they will be struck, consciously or unconsciously, by the existential identity, and by the basic anthropological structure of their own greatest problems.

Another anthropologically rooted universal in literature is a certain ethical dimension. In the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, there were many people, both writers, literary scholars or critics, and ordinary readers, who thought of poems, plays, and novels as impersonal *objets d’art*, instantiating a timeless aesthetic heterocosm of the imagination, and having no bearing on the real world as we know it, or on interaction between real human beings – a way of thinking that went hand in glove with the anti-historical universalism of Wordsworth and Goethe. During the past fifty or sixty years this type of thinking has given way to the more historical approaches to literature, and much of my own work has been on literature as one among other forms of communication, between real writers and those real people who respond to them.¹¹ The fact that there is usually no feedback channel from

11. In addition to articles, I have published three books on this topic: *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins 2000); *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2001); and *Communicational criticism*. For collections of papers by various hands, see *Literary pragmatics*, ed. Roger D. Sell (London: Routledge 1991, rep. 2016); *Literature and the new interdisciplinarity: Poetics, linguistics, history*,

respondents to writers does not make literature any less communicational than many other kinds of language use which lack the same characteristic. Indeed, the absence of a feedback channel actually heightens the onus on both writers and respondents to do each other justice. Some respondents will always undermine writers' human autonomy through solipsistic misinterpretation. Some writers will always undermine their addressees' human autonomy by trying to twist their arm. And some sets of social circumstances will always be hierarchically structured in ways that encourage such ethically dubious behaviour. But given the anthropologically unavoidable need in human groupings for functioning relationships and collaboration, people have often been capable of what I call "communicational genuineness,"¹² a term which is both positively evaluative and accurately descriptive, referring to any instance of communication, be it literary or otherwise, where a communicant's mode of address really does respect the human autonomy of other communicants.

As will perhaps be obvious, I have been influenced here by that Kantian take on ethics which has been so seminal for notions of justice for nearly two and a half centuries.¹³ I have also taken note of Emmanuel Levinas's more recent account of how we *recognize* the human other,¹⁴ and of Jürgen Habermas's study of the ethical protocols obtaining for communicative interaction of any kind at all.¹⁵ But just as oxygen had existed long before it was isolated by Sendivogius or named by

eds Roger D. Sell and Peter Verdonk (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994); *Literature throughout foreign language education: The implications of pragmatics*, ed. Roger D. Sell (London: Modern English Language Publications in Association with the British Council, 1995); *Children's literature as communication: The ChilPA project*, ed. Roger D. Sell (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002); Roger D. Sell (ed.), *Literature as communication: Guest-edited Special Issue: Nordic Journal of English Studies* 7 (2006): 1–172; and *Religion and writing in England, 1558–1689: Studies in community-making and cultural memory*, eds Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); *Literary community-making: The dialogicality of English texts from the seventeenth century to the present*, ed. Roger D. Sell (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2012); *The ethics of literary communication: Genuineness, directness, indirectness*, eds Roger D. Sell, Adam Borch, and Inna Lindgren (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2013); *Literature as dialogue: Invitations offered and negotiated*, ed. Roger D. Sell (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2014); and *Community-making in early Stuart theatres: Stage and audience*, eds Roger D. Sell, Anthony W. Johnson, and Helen Wilcox (London: Routledge, 2017).

12. See e.g. Roger D. Sell, "Wordsworth's genuineness," in Sell, *Communicational Criticism*, 151–194.

13. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* [1785] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

14. Donald R. Wehrs and David P. Haney (eds), *Levinas and nineteenth-century literature: Ethics and otherness from Romanticism through Realism* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009).

15. Jürgen Habermas, *The theory of communicative action*, 2 vols [1981] (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 & 1987); *Justification and application: Remarks on discourse ethics* [1993] (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998); and *On the pragmatics of communication*, ed. Maeve Cooke (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).

Lavoisier, so genuine communication, though by no means the only communicational possibility, has in practice always been operative, usually, though by no means always, between people on an equal social footing, and has always been instinctively, if not explicitly, welcomed as anthropologically desirable. To the extent that egalitarian political systems have ever existed at all, they were pre-dated by egalitarian practice. As zoologists have been saying for some time now, treating other people decently comes much more naturally to our genetic programming than both scholars and lay-folk once believed.¹⁶

As for the more particular importance of genuine communication to literature, I have frequently suggested that the point was best made by Keats in his praise of Shakespeare's "negative capability": Shakespeare's capability of being "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."¹⁷ This is the quality in Shakespeare's writing which heightens the theatrical intensity of Othello's existential dilemma by making it so difficult for an audience, despite their grief and outrage at the fate of Desdemona, to take sides against him, and which makes even Iago partly understandable.¹⁸ Also, and as with other great works of literature, negative capability's sheer unassertiveness can promote a human relationship between writer and respondents that is simply much better than the relationships between people in the writer's story. Universally, and to whatever comic, tragic, sublime, or absurd effect, literature can be genuine communication "about" non-genuine communication. And a text that is *not* itself genuinely communicational will not be granted literary status in the first place – will not be long and widely admired. For that kind of recognition, communicational genuineness is a necessary condition.¹⁹

Or more precisely, it is a necessary, but not sufficient condition. Not sufficient, partly because every period of literary history has its own more particular criteria for what counts as a literary work, and partly because there is one other anthropologically grounded universal to be noted in literature: a hedonic universal. Literature appeals to the human preference for pleasure over pain.

16. Matt Ridley, *The origins of virtue: Human instincts and the evolution of cooperation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997).

17. John Keats, *Selected letters of John Keats*, ed. Frederick Page (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 53.

18. Shakespeare's negatively capable treatment of the honour code was not exceptional, though it was clearly influential; see Roger D. Sell "Honour dishonoured: The communicational workings of early Stuart tragedy and tragicomedy," in Sell, Johnson, and Wilcox, *Community-making*, 173–98 (= item 15 in the present selection).

19. An argument developed in several of the studies in Sell, *Communicational criticism* and in Sell, Borch, and Lindgren, *The ethics of literary communication*.

So the second necessary but non-sufficient condition for the award of literary status is that a text be enjoyable. Ever since Horace's famous remarks on the subject in his *Ars Poetica*, there have been commentators who thought that literary pleasures were basically persuasive in function, deployed in order to woo readers into acting or thinking in some particular way. Especially for allegorical texts, such an account often works well enough. Yet those great allegorical texts, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, have the negative capability to dialogize the *dulce* and the *utile*, so that the Bower of Bliss can prove no less tempting than instructional, and Milton be seen as, in Blake's words, "a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it."²⁰ The general rule is that literary pleasures occur because readers frankly want them to, and because many writers, for no deeper an ulterior motive than to earn a living, want to be friendly entertainers.

The two main kinds of literary pleasure I have distinguished are communicational pleasures and formal pleasures.²¹ Communicational pleasures are pleasures directly arising from the communicational relationship between writer and respondents. Although this is a matter of friendliness, writers cannot afford to ingratiate themselves, and are sometimes decidedly challenging, indirect, or difficult.²² The main thing is that their communication be genuine in the sense explained, which will be pleasurable for respondents in and of itself. Being treated humanely is a profoundly enjoyable experience, and the chance to reciprocate with a fair interpretation is just as enriching. This enjoyable bonding can arise from many different aspects of a text, sometimes including a pervasive tone of voice, a tone of ironic mockery, say, or of friendly bonhomie or playful deference. All such features, though initially addressed to respondents of the writer's own time and place, can be re-experienced and enjoyed afresh by empathetic respondents living later and/or elsewhere. And similar temporal and locational transfers can apply to formal pleasures, the many different pleasures which arise from formal similarities and differences between the particular text in hand and other texts instantiating the same genre within the same cultural tradition.

20. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* [1790], in *Blake: Complete writings*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 148–60, esp. 150.

21. Roger D. Sell, "Political and hedonic re-contextualizations: Prince Charles's Spanish journey in Beaumont, Jonson, and Middleton," *Ben Jonson Journal* 22 (2015): 163–87 (= item 13 in the present selection), and "Ben Jonson's Epigram 101, 'Inviting a Friend to Supper': Literary pleasures immediately tasted," in Tommi Alho, Jason Finch, and Roger D. Sell (eds), *Renaissance Man: Essays on Literature and Culture for Anthony W. Johnson* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2019), 25–57 (= item 17 in the present selection).

22. See Sell, Borch, and Lindgren, eds, *The ethics of literary communication*.

Although both classicists and Romantics went much too far in their separation of literature from history, then, literature is nevertheless profoundly universal. Its existential, ethical, and hedonic dimensions, precisely the qualities which make it most valuable and interesting, are immutably grounded in human nature and the human condition. This is a crucial point to bear in mind, and one to which I shall return in my conclusion here, after discussing literature's historical dimension, which is much more open to change.

2. Literary-historical periods

The fact is that, in literature as in life, mutabilities are always and everywhere apparent. The existential crisis of Othello will not be perceived at all, unless initially in terms of the Renaissance honour code through which it is realized. Communicational genuineness is always appreciated, but under historical conditions of oppressive hierarchy it is even more commendable than ever. And if readers in later times and/or different places are to enjoy a text's communicational and formal pleasures, they will need to know something about its context in the larger sweep of literary history. One cannot appreciate Shakespeare's tone *vis à vis* the only begetter of his sonnets without some understanding of early modern patronage. No less inevitably, a Shakespearean sonnet's beauty of formal artistry will be quite lost on somebody with no idea of what a sonnet is. The universally human craving for pleasure is satisfied in different ways in different times and places.

One of the first pieces of English literary criticism to question classicist universalism was Thomas Warton's *Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser* (1762). What Warton stressed was the importance of considering "the customs and genius of ... [the writer's] age." With this in mind, he "searched ... [Spenser's] contemporary writers, and examined the books on which the peculiarities of his style, taste, and composition, are confessedly founded."²³ He was quite prepared to say that Spenser, and Ariosto before him, did not completely raise themselves above "Gothic ignorance and barbarity"; that Spenser reflected the "romantic manner of poetical composition introduced and established by the Provincial bards"; and that he accordingly recounted "unnatural events, the machinations of imaginary beings, and adventures entertaining only as they were improbable."²⁴ These were objections which Warton, as a child of his own time, could only endorse. More

23. Thomas Warton, *Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser: The second edition: Corrected and enlarged*, 2 vols (London: R. & J. Dodsley and J. Fletcher, 1762), II: 263–64.

24. Warton, *Observations*, II: 263–64.

unusually, he also had the flexibility of mind to see that a classicist taste drawing its legitimation from Homer and Aristotle – from the “example and precept of antiquity” – represented only one set of possible criteria.²⁵ By reading Spenser with an empathetic understanding of his historical otherness, Warton was able to open up what, for his own contemporaries, was an unexpected and delightful range of creative imagination. Even if this failed to please some of the strictest classicists, its effect on many more ordinary readers was utterly transporting.

In the subsequent development of English criticism, the Wartonian line was curiously bifurcated. On the one hand it contributed to the rapidly growing tendency of critics to serve as mediators between literary writers and readers by providing commentaries whose slant was strongly philological-cum-historical. On the other hand, Warton’s celebration of Spenser’s overwhelming imaginativeness fed in to what is often labelled as a pre-Romantic and Romantic preoccupation with the sublime, a trend which went back to Boileau’s French translation of Longinus in 1635, and which had already led Pope to say that a genius like Shakespeare could not be contained in neoclassical rules of composition. As time went on, the emphasis on imaginative genius was reinforced by ideas coming in from philosophical idealism, and later still from the various aestheticist movements. This entire way of thinking, though a very natural development from Warton’s delight in the imaginative riches of *The Fairy Queen*, was in principle quite counter to his own historicist methodology. The sublime, poetic genius, creative imagination, and aesthetic heterocosms: all this was beyond history. It chimed with the Wordsworthian and Goethean form of literary universalism.

The Wartonian tradition of praise for imagination came to a head, one might say, in the literary criticism of John Bayley, who, appropriately enough, from 1974 to 1992 was Thomas Warton Professor of English Literature at Oxford University. Not only did Bayley want literary writers to be seen as imaginatively free from history. He also wanted to liberate the reading public from literary critics’ reductions of imagination itself. Mainly in his sights here were clunky systematizations of *Biographia Literaria*’s fourteenth chapter, as undertaken in New Critical searches for organic wholes and artistic unities. But he also had reservations about psychological, ethical, and verbal syntheses arising from Ricardian, Leavisian, and Empsonian expositions of different impulses, values, or meanings. His most important book was perhaps *The Uses of Division: Unity and Disharmony in Literature* (1976), which he introduced as follows:

25. Warton, *Observations*, I: 1–2.

The clue that has come up constantly during my study and enjoyment of the writers who figure in this book is that of the involuntary divisions, amounting to a total disunity, which seems to characterize the reality of their art, and to make them what they are.

This is an obvious point, which is none the less often ignored. The usual critical instinct is to show that the work under discussion is as coherent, as aware, as totally organized, as the critic desires his own representation of it to be.²⁶

The contrast with Terry Eagleton could hardly be greater. Eagleton, often described as a post-Marxist critic, was in one sense the culmination of that other, historicist line of criticism from Warton, so that his appointment to the Thomas Warton Chair was in its own very different way no less appropriate than Bayley's. He was in fact Bayley's immediate successor, and accused him of "an unflinching suppression of the fact that literary texts are produced from particular historical conditions. . . . [H]e remains for the most part serenely unhampered by the demands of historical specificity."²⁷ In Eagleton's own way of discussing literary texts, there is often an element of determinism. He sees them less as the achievement of particular individuals than as the product and endorsement of prevailing socio-cultural and political values, and as having just a single, basically persuasive kind of effect, whose ideological bearings he challenges by reading, not for pleasure, but against the grain, tending to see literary pleasures as a kind of ideological subterfuge, somewhat on a par with religion in the eyes of Karl Marx. In other words, he arrogates to himself a far higher level of intellectual and ethical independence than he is prepared to grant most unassisted ordinary readers and, indeed, most literary writers.

For the sake of clarity and brevity, my presentation here is very schematic, which may mean that my comments on Eagleton seem unfairly brusque. I hasten to suggest, however, that Bayley, too, is not beyond reproach. In seeking to release both writers and readers from history or anything else that might tie them down, he fails to respect an important aspect of their otherness.

To put my own cards on the table, writers and those who respond to them are not automatons entirely ruled by society or culture, but neither are they sublimely disembodied spirits of no historical character at all. Human beings, it seems to me, are *social* animals, indelibly affected by their social formation, and they are also *individuals*, capable of enough empathy, intellectual understanding, and will-power to stand back from their society, as it were, and even work to change it.²⁸

26. John Bayley, *The uses of division: Unity and disharmony in literature* (New York: Viking, 1976), 11.

27. Terry Eagleton, "Liberality and order: The criticism of John Bayley," in Eagleton, *Against the grain: Essays 1975-1985* (London: Verso, 1986), 33-47, esp. 38.

28. See Sell, *Literature as communication*, 145-58.

Historical change in societies and their cultures and subcultures is, it seems to me, a process in which the individual and the social come into co-adaptation, the individual adapting to the social, in the hope that the social will reciprocally adapt to the individual's own project. The new, in other words, is always new, but builds on the old. Put another way, both sides of the Warntonian heritage are necessary to an adequate understanding of how one literary-historical period succeeds another.

Sometimes a literary historian's periodization can seem straightforward, stable, and readily applicable to particular literary texts. We can easily support a periodization of the Restoration and eighteenth century as the age of reason, for instance, by pointing to Dryden's mock-heroic satire *Absalom and Achitophel*:

Of these the false Achitophel was first,
A name to all succeeding Ages curst.
For close designs, and crooked counsels fit;
Sagacious, bold, and turbulent of wit;
Restless, unfixed in principles and place,
In pow'r unpleas'd, impatient of disgrace;
A fiery soul, which working out its way,
Fretted the pigmy-body to decay,
And o'er-informed the tenement of clay.
...
Great wits are sure to madness near allied,
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.²⁹

Writing like this not only makes irrationality its main butt. Dryden's intellectual criterion is also beautifully endorsed by his formal co-adaptation with the heroic couplet, the verse form culturally pre-existent in, for instance, Beaumont's "Bosworth Field." Not least in momentarily swelling from couplet to triplet, Dryden's versification intimates Shaftesbury-Achitophel's sheer unruliness, his uncontainability.

But other texts from the same period throw doubt on the rule of reason, even if not rejecting it out of hand. John Carey, remembering the reading he did as an undergraduate student of English, says, "I had been told that the eighteenth century was the age of reason. But it seemed to me to be the age of fury, madness and terror."³⁰ Here the young Carey was in danger of replacing one oversimplification with another, perhaps by failing to distinguish between the mentality of Restoration and eighteenth century writers themselves (the mentality of Dryden, for instance) and that of the people they were writing about (the mentality of Lord Shaftesbury, for

29. John Dryden, "Absalom and Achitophel," in *Dryden: A selection*, edited by John Conaghan (London: Methuen, 1978), 91–123, esp. 98, ll. 150–58, 163–64.

30. John Carey, *The unexpected professor: An Oxford life in books* (London: Faber, 2014), 113.

instance). Closer to the mark is, I think, Claude Rawson's wonderful book on Henry Fielding, with its finely balanced subtitle: "The Augustan ideal under stress."³¹

Even if it does at first seem possible to register a period identity's salient features, they will not be its *only* features, and the question arises: salient *to whom?* – salient as seen through whose eyes? Period identities can be frankly complicated, confused, provisional, speculative, often partly backward-looking, no less often partly forward-looking, and often undermined by self-doubt, as when Othello was so reluctant to follow the Renaissance honour script. During the eighteenth century, there were negatively capable texts which, without capitulating to fury, madness, and terror, captured just how difficult it could be to make sense of life on the period's ostensibly rational terms. In Pope's exquisite imitation of Horace's Ode IV i, sexual fantasy is a deranging, painful magic even for a reasonable fifty-year-old – one of the main signposts is the word "involuntary":

But why? ah tell me, ah too dear!
Steals down my cheek th' involuntary Tear?
Why words so flowing, thoughts so free,
Stop, or turn nonsense at one glance of Thee?
Thee, drest in fancy's airy beam,
Absent I follow thro' th' extended Dream,
Now, now I seize, I clasp thy charms,
And now you burst, (ah cruel!) from my arms,
And swiftly shoot along the Mall,
Or softly glide by the Canal,
Now shown by Cynthia's silver ray,
And now, on rolling Waters snatch'd away.³²

Elsewhere I have argued that, in lines like these, Pope, the last great English humanist poet, is also the first great English Romantic poet, without whom Byron could never have been.³³ Such an argument, itself made possible by clear period demarcations, shows just how instable and deceptive they can become, just how far from absolute immutability.

31. Claude Rawson, *Henry Fielding: The Augustan ideal under stress* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972). See Roger D. Sell, "Fielding's reluctant naturalism," in his *Mediating Criticism: Literary education humanized* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001), 291–352, esp. 323–324.

32. Alexander Pope, *Imitations of Horace*, Ode IV i, ll.37–48, in *The poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1963), 673–74, esp. 674.

33. "Pope's Three modes of address," in Sell, *Communicational criticism*, 83–150, esp. 106–107.

3. Shakespeare's co-adaptations

When literary historians try to illuminate their subject by defining some particular period, the period identity they construct is in effect a temporary or merely relative immutability. Sometimes its eventual proneness to change can be sensed from just a single short poem, as with Pope's translation of Horace. But mutability may also be traceable in a writer's development throughout an entire oeuvre. After at first adapting to features typical of the pre-existent period culture, a writer may gradually move towards features more original, in some cases ultimately changing the culture at large by, as it were, persuading it to adapt to the individual achievement.

An overall co-adaptational tension between cultural stasis and change is, I think, easy to see from a number of facts about the writings and context of Shakespeare. Although most of them are already too well known to require detailed documentation, perhaps they have not previously been deployed in quite the argument I now offer.

To begin with his use of language, during Shakespeare's lifetime English was going through a stage of extraordinarily rapid expansion. It had long included words of Germanic or Anglo-Saxon, Norman, and mediaeval Latin origin. But now hundreds of new words were coming in through contemporary Italian and French sources. Here, then, was a linguistic status quo that was already extremely volatile. Neither to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, nor to philologists of our own time, could it seem even remotely immutable. But Shakespeare rapidly adapted to the situation, capitalizing on it, indeed, by hugely accelerating the pace of change. He not only absorbed large numbers of new words from abroad, but also coined far more new words and phrases of his own than any other English writer.

If readers and theatre-goers today do not have an immediate sense of his amazing originality here, this is precisely because so many of his innovations have become part of the common language. Some of his initially most lively metaphorical expressions have deteriorated into the dead metaphors of everyday speech. By a process of assimilation, the extreme mutability, manifest both in early-modern English as a whole and in the usage of this particular individual, has come to seem unremarkably immutable.

This means that language and style are an area where coadaptation is sometimes difficult to prove. Take, for instance, Shakespeare's tendency to collocate words of contrasting provenance. When the Elizabethan translators introduced a new word from abroad, they often inserted familiar words of longer standing as a kind of gloss or explanation of the novel item. Many dramatists and poets did the same, including the ever-adaptive Shakespeare. But Shakespeare also juxtaposed the verbally old and new more widely, so that a passage from *Macbeth* such as "And when we have

our naked frailties hid / That suffer in exposure [...],”³⁴ where the Anglo-Saxon “naked” and “hid” are balanced against the French and Latinate “frailties,” “suffer,” and “exposure,” is characteristic of his writing as a whole. What I wish I could demonstrate is that his liveliness of vocabular eclecticism has lastingly affected the stylistic criteria for written English – that thanks to Shakespeare, we tend to think that a text drawing on words with different backgrounds is decidedly better than one that does not. This preference has certainly been endorsed by some influential critics and stylisticians. Pater, in his essay “Style”, said that

[r]acy Saxon monosyllables, close to us as touch and sight, he [the literary artist] will intermix readily with those long, savoursome, Latin words, rich in “second intention”. In this late day certainly, no critical process can be conducted reasonably without eclecticism. Of such eclecticism we have a justifying example in one of the first poets of our time. How illustrative of monosyllabic effect, of sonorous Latin, of the phraseology of science, of metaphyic, of colloquialism even, are the writings of Tennyson³⁵

But until I rediscover mentors who not only praise vocabular eclecticism in their own contemporaries but also trace it back to Shakespeare, the only argument I can offer for his influence here is that it is surely very likely. In the Shakespearean passages which generations of English speakers have learnt by heart, vocabular eclecticism is such a consistent feature that they might even have picked it up unawares.

But the short extract from *Macbeth* also illustrates something easier to discuss. The words are spoken by Banquo, when he is reacting to the murder of Duncan, whose killer is known only to the audience, Macbeth, and Lady Macbeth. Having first arranged that somebody look after the swooning, or apparently swooning Lady Macbeth, Banquo then recommends that everybody should go and put on some warmer clothes, so as to protect them against the castle’s nocturnal chill and draughtiness. This is a simple enough thing to say, except that his words of contrasting provenance bring with them contrasting ranges of connotation. His Anglo-Saxon “naked” and “hid” certainly do seem simple – plain, unresonant, straightforward, physical. But his French and Latinate “frailties,” “suffer,” and “exposure” are on a different wavelength, attuned not only to the physical, but also to moral issues, to overtones of human weakness, justice, cruelty, vulnerability, which he may be registering because, confronted with the regicide, he now finds Macbeth’s earlier reaction to the Witches’ prophecies more remarkable than ever. Not that

34. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1972), 67, II: iii ll. 124–25.

35. Walter Pater, “Style”, in his *Essays on literature and art*, ed. Jennifer Uglow (London: Dent, 1973), 61–78. esp. 67.

he voices any such suspicions openly. Even in the unscheming Banquo, the play is already dramatizing its structural contrast between characters' public personae and their inner selves. But for the audience at least, his choice of words here is something they could well process, consciously or unconsciously, as a tell-tale hint of a complex psychological reality.

This was something almost entirely new. Previously, the main function of theatrical blank verse had been a matter of stylistic decorum. Under the general influence of Renaissance humanism, and under the more particular influence of the Roman tragedian Seneca, the pioneer English dramatists of the mid-sixteenth century had wanted to make drama more secular and less didactic than the old miracle and morality plays in rhyming verse. For their lofty tragedies about the fall of great men, and about great men trying to avenge the murder of their kinsfolk, they needed a more dignified verse form, which they found in the Earl of Surrey's translation of the second book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, published in 1557 (several years after Surrey's execution). This translation, often said to be the first instance of English iambic pentameter blank verse, was Surrey's attempt to create a vernacular equivalent to the stately Latin hexameter of Virgil, the poet of imperial Rome. Another important landmark was Thomas Kyd's hugely popular revenge play *The Spanish Tragedy* of 1592. Here characters spoke a ranting style of blank verse, which in part reflected their greatness by allowing them to make a great deal of noise. But by common consent, the finest poet to write blank verse drama before Shakespeare was Christopher Marlowe, to whom Shakespeare himself perhaps referred when, in one of his sonnets, he mentioned a rival for the favours of his patron. His admiration for "the proud full sail of his [the rival poet's] great verse" was unstinting.³⁶ Such magnificence of style was just what an ambitious Renaissance dramatist would be looking out for.

Between these precedents and the blank verse of Shakespeare himself there was a kind of macro-functional continuity. From roughly 1590 to 1612 Shakespeare wrote thirty or so plays which have survived, all of them containing blank verse, but not throughout. In several of them there are magic spells in rhyming verse, and songs in lines shorter than pentameters, arranged by rhyme words into various stanza forms. Sometimes iambic pentameter blank verse gives way to iambic pentameters in rhyming couplets, for instance when a character is emphasizing something with epigrammatic point, or when Shakespeare is bringing an episode to a close and hinting that a new scene or part of the story is about to start. Then

36. William Shakespeare, Sonnet 86, l. 1, in *Shakespeare's sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1997), 283. If the rival poet was indeed Marlowe, then Sonnet 86, which speaks of the rival as still alive, must have been written by 1593 at the latest, when Marlowe died. Another candidate is George Chapman.

again, blank verse can also give way to long stretches, whole scenes even, in prose.³⁷ Some characters, typically lower class and comic characters, speak nothing but prose. But upper class characters can also speak it, and this sometimes marks the difference between more serious and tragic, or potentially tragic parts of a play and more comic parts. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, there are two love stories running parallel with each other: the story about Claudio and Hero, and the story about Beatrice and Benedick. All four of the lovers have more or less the same high social status. But whereas Claudio and Hero's story, which involves the jealous Claudio's publicly rejecting Hero for alleged infidelity, is in blank verse, the wonderfully witty Beatrice and Benedick, protesting a total lack of interest in love or in each other, fall resoundingly in love in highly amusing prose. In other cases when high-born characters speak prose, this seems to suggest that in some way or other they are not being most truly themselves – that for the moment they are not the noble, civilized, and often magnificently eloquent person they have been hitherto. In *King Lear*, Edgar starts speaking prose when, to save his life from the wrath of his deceived father the Earl of Gloucester, he disguises himself as a mad beggar. Lear himself speaks prose, or blank verse so loose that editors disagree on whether to print it as prose or verse, when he becomes mad in truth. And to come back to Othello, goaded on by Iago's defamation of Desdemona's character, he speaks prose when, totally losing control, he falls into an apoplectic fit. In a nutshell, then, throughout his career Shakespeare's iambic pentameter blank verse connoted that the characters speaking it belonged to the upper ranks of society, were being serious, and were keeping up the dignified appearances associated with their high status and breeding. In this respect, Shakespeare fully adapted to convention.

It was Marlowe who, more than any other dramatist before Shakespeare, entered into significant co-adaptation with this conventional functionality. He, too, introduced a certain psychological realism into his blank verse, which made it ideally suited to his main protagonists. Consider, for instance, the warrior-emperor Tamburlaine, with his overpowering ambitions, his preparedness to stretch humanity to the extreme limits of knowledge, power, cruelty, and evil. When Tamburlaine speaks, Marlowe's verse has a huge, sweeping, soaring movement:

Nature, that fram'd us of four elements
 Warring within our breasts for regiment,
 Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds:
 Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend
 The wondrous architecture of the world,

37. Roger D. Sell, "Two types of style contrast in *King Lear*: A literary-critical Appraisal," in *Style and text: Studies presented to Nils Erik Enkvist*, ed. Håkan Ringbom (Stockholm: Skriptor, 1975), 155–71, esp. 165–70.

And measure every wandering planet's course,
 Sill climbing after knowledge infinite,
 And always moving as the restless spheres,
 Will us to wear ourselves, and never rest,
 Until we reach the ripest fruit of all,
 That perfect bliss and sole felicity,
 The sweet fruition of an earthly crown.³⁸

The movement conveyed by both the rhythm and the diction here is so powerfully upwards that the last line's "earthly" can seem anticlimactic. We can hardly help guessing that what Tamburlaine really wants is nothing less than the supreme crown of heaven. The verse is helping to tell us that none of the earthly honours he so violently grabs will ever slake his thirst.

Shakespeare had no trouble adapting to the precedent of Marlowe's character-revealing hyperbole. In *Henry IV i*, the verse spoken by the ambitious young soldier aristocrat Hotspur soars infinitely high, and dives infinitely deep:

By heaven, methinks it were an easy leap,
 To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon,
 Or dive into the bottom of the deep,
 Where fathom-line could never touch the ground,
 And pluck up drowned honour by the locks,
 So he that doth redeem her thence might wear
 Without corival all her dignities.³⁹

But Shakespeare also ventured on something more unexpected. In a way that Marlowe never really attempted, Hotspur's blank verse contrasts with that of other characters in the same play, and the same kind of versificational contrast is to be seen in other plays as well, offering many examples of psychologically appropriate stylistic variation. Whereas some fellow-dramatists just carried on with Kyd-style ranting, in *King Lear*, for instance, a somewhat ranting manner of speech, strongly coloured by the use of imperatives and exclamations, alternated with a speech-style whose syntactical and rhetorical antitheses were altogether more balanced, and whose thought processes were more unrushed and reasonable.⁴⁰ The balanced, reasonable style tended to correlate with characters such as France, Kent and Cordelia,

38. Christopher Marlowe, *The First Part of Tamburlaine the Great*, II: vii, in *The plays of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Edward Thomas (London: Dent, 1909), 23–24.

39. William Shakespeare, *Henry IV i*, ed. A. R. Humphreys (London: Methuen, 1967), 31 (II: ii ll. 199–205).

40. Sell, "Two types of style contrast," esp. 159–65; see also Sell, *Communicational criticism*, 28–32.

calmly alert to the realities of past and present, un-self-centred, and prepared to weigh up different points of view. The imperative-exclamatory style was more likely to be used by characters who, ignoring or spurning the present moment, are hoping to force their own will upon the future. Above all, this is one of Lear's main styles. But as his sufferings lead to deeper understanding, there are moments when he, too, uses the more balanced and reasonable style. On the heath, he oscillates between the explosiveness of

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
 You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
 Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!⁴¹

and the empathetic thoughtfulness of

Poor naked wretches whereso'er you are,
 That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
 How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
 Your looped and window'd raggedness, defend you
 From seasons such as these?⁴²

This kind of versificational variation between different characters in one and the same play, and even within one and the same character, became more subtle as Shakespeare moved from early to late – *King Lear* was written round about 1605 or 1606. Judging from the way younger colleagues such as Thomas Middleton followed suit, by the end of Shakespeare's career audience expectations had been fundamentally affected. Ranting remained popular. But up-and-coming dramatists were clearly unwilling to appear wooden and old-fashioned. Partly thanks to Shakespeare's functional combination of stylistic decorum with a dynamically psychological realism, dramatic blank verse had shifted gear.

The gear change also had two other dimensions: prosody, and figures of thought and speech. Adapting in his early plays to prosodic convention, Shakespeare started out with little enjambement or caesural variation, few feminine line endings, few "extra" syllables, and few speeches that began or ended somewhere in the middle of a line. Over the years, he hugely increased the incidence of all these features, so that the verse of his late plays seems altogether freer and more "natural". As for figures of thought and speech, there was a parallel overall shift from similes to metaphors. Again adapting to convention, in his earlier plays he had characters expressing thoughts and emotions by means of similes that *compare* one thing

41. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1961), 106 (II: ii ll. 1–3).

42. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 115 (III: iv ll. 28–33).

with another, often at considerable length, and usually rather decoratively. In later plays, characters tend to say that one thing *is* another thing, and in doing so are using the metaphor, not with a particularly decorative intent, but rather as a way of exploring what they are actually experiencing, striking out, where necessary, on linguistic paths that were completely original.

So when, in *Henry VI ii*, dating from the early 1590s, Queen Margaret is complaining that her husband the King cannot see that people are trying to manipulate him, she says:

Henry my lord is cold in great affairs,
Too full of foolish pity; and Gloucester's show
Beguiles him as the mournful crocodile
With sorrow snares relenting passengers;
Or as the snake, roll'd in a flow'ring bank,
With shining checker'd slough, doth sting a child
That for the beauty thinks it excellent.⁴³

But in *Antony and Cleopatra*, dating from 1606 or 1607, when Antony feels sorry for himself because his men are deserting him and going over to Octavius Caesar, he says:

All come to this? The hearts
That spanieled me at heels, to whom I gave
Their wishes, do discandy, melt their sweets
On blossoming Caesar, and this pine is barked
That overtopped them all.⁴⁴

Margaret's speech, though it has three cases of enjambement, still has sharply end-stopped lines as well, whereas in Antony's lines the natural speech rhythms of the English he produces almost overwhelm the metrical framework. Enjambements have become the norm, and the caesuras are quite unpredictable. Also striking is that Margaret's two euphuistic, natural-historical similes provide lovely little vignettes, whose decorativeness does not primarily advance the meaning of what she is saying. Strictly speaking, neither of them is necessary, since her thought is in principle already complete with the words "beguiles him." In strong contrast to this, the proliferating metaphors in Antony's lines do not provide one-to-one figurative

43. William Shakespeare, *Henry VI ii*, ed. Andrew Cairncross (London: Methuen, 1969), 71–72 (III: i ll. 224–30). This play has often been thought to contain work by more than one dramatist. But the latest wisdom is that at least Act III is Shakespeare's (see Darren Freebury-Jones, "Exploring co-authorship in 2 *Henry VI*," *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 5 (2016): 201–16).

44. William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. John Wilders (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1995), 250 (IV: 12 ll. 20–24).

equivalents and repetitions of what he is saying, but actually *are* what he is saying. His men were hearts that spanieled him at heels, whose wishes he granted, but whose sweets now discandy, melting on the blossoming Caesar, while Antony himself, whose growth was most impressive of all, is now merely a barked pine – a pine barked at by the now disloyal spaniels, and/or a pine mortally stripped of its bark.

4. Cultural differences and human commonalities over time

“The hearts that spanieled me at heels” and “this pine is barked” are the kind of thing T. S. Eliot praised as a “perpetual slight alteration of language, words perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations, ... [demonstrating that] [e]very vital development of language is a development in feelings as well.” Eliot complimented both Shakespeare and Middleton on this achievement.⁴⁵ But as in the matters of vocabular eclecticism, verse function, and prosody, so in the matter of new and sudden verbal combinations, Shakespeare was the main trend-setter. His oeuvre was crucial to a whole new set of norms, and indeed to a whole new period, as we could say, of early Stuart literature (as opposed to Elizabethan).

As with every earlier period, however, the new period’s immutability was only relative and temporary. Before the elapse of many decades, there would be a widespread feeling among the cultivated classes that a rationalistic reining-in would be in order. In Hobbesian terms, fancy now had to submit to the discipline of judgement. “Fancy, without the help of Judgement, is not commended as a Vertue”, whereas “Judgement, and Discretion, is commended for it selfe, without the help of Fancy.”⁴⁶ By the same token, the trend from simile to metaphor needed to be reversed in favour of logically one-to-one comparisons that would please Thomas Sprat and his sober-minded colleagues in the Royal Academy. “Of all the Studies of Men, nothing may be sooner obtain’d, than this vicious Abundance of *Phrase*, this Trick of *Metaphors*, this Volubility of *Tongue*, which makes so great a Noise in the World.”⁴⁷ And as part and parcel of the same cultural shift, the burgeoning English language was to be pruned right back; the only function of blank verse

45. T. S. Eliot, “Philip Massinger,” in Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on poetry and criticism* (London: Methuen, 1964), 123–43, esp. 128–29. On the same grounds, Eliot also gives credit to Cyril Tourneur, quoting a passage from *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. That play is now thought to have been written by Middleton, however.

46. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. W. G. Pogson Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 53.

47. Thomas Sprat, *The history of the Royal Society of London, for the Improving of Natural Knowledge*, fourth edition (London: J. Knapton [et al.], 1734), 112.

was once more to be stylistically dignified; psychologically realistic verse was ruled indecorous; and prosodic freedom, too, was abhorred as a distasteful sloppiness. All of which only made Dryden's triplet about Shaftesbury seem all the more abnormal and striking, and his *All For Love* (1677) a very different kind of theatrical experience from *Antony and Cleopatra*. The rage now was for theatrical verse which made any expression of emotion seem above all refined and elegant, and just like the expression of any other emotion by any other character. Even a simple piece of information could sound emotional, refined, and elegant as well.

But as hinted by Fielding's sparkling parody of this fashion in his *Tragedy of Tragedies, or the Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great* (1731), the new cultural norms were not immutable either. Granted, Pope still rejected Milton's view that blank verse is less trivial and distracting than rhyming verse and wrote his *Essay on Man* (1733–1734) in heroic couplets, rationalistically defending them for their epigrammatic punch and mnemonic usefulness. But only eighty years later Wordsworth, following what had already become a strong trend, frankly aimed to out-Milton Milton by writing *The Recluse* in blank verse.

And so I could continue. In a way, mutability is all there is in life, and all there is in literature. The literary taste of the present here and now always allows its devotees to believe it will be immutable. Yet writers, partly by conceding to it, always have a chance to change it, and in no very distant future. The co-adaptational alternation between the culturally old and new is so inevitable that, even in our age of rapid globalization, a return to humanistic and Romantic ideals of universality would hardly round off history in one last great period of all.

The fact remains, however: literature of countless different origins continues to draw around itself respondents of countless different positionalities, resulting in endlessly different assessments of each and every literary work. By way of explanation, I re-emphasize my earlier point. This non-consensual gathering together around literature can come to pass because, despite all the mutabilities, literary activity is firmly rooted in existential, ethical, and hedonic commonalities that are anthropologically universal. In these fundamental common denominators, immutabilities do reveal themselves, paradoxically making possible the whole mutable gamut of empathetic, egalitarian, and pleasurable responses to literature's own mutable variety.

Two opposed modes of communication between Dickens and his readers¹

From the point of view of a literary author, author-reader relationships are something of a gamble. Readers like to be well treated by an author. But they sometimes do not mind being badly treated either. So authors constantly find themselves making risk assessments. What will they be able to get away with?

This is not a closely guarded secret. But for many of us it may be something we know in our bones rather than in our conscious mind. I myself did not start to think about it until 1984, by which time I was already turning forty. Among other things, I was interested in the politeness or impoliteness of what literary authors write, and I soon managed to draw a distinction between what I called a politeness of selection and a politeness of presentation. Selectional politeness is a matter of an author's choosing stories, themes, and materials that will be acceptable to the reading public, and also of choosing equally acceptable language in which to embody them. It is more or less an anthropological concept, relating to what could be seen as taboos and fashions, for instance. Politeness of presentation, by contrast, is more of a psycholinguistic phenomenon, having to do with a writer's manner of setting forth the selected subject-matter. Is the writer being helpful? How easy is it for readers to see the point of what is happening in the text, and what its general bearings are? But then it suddenly dawned on me that readers can have too much of a good thing – that writers actually have to tread a tightrope between too much politeness and too little.² Too little selectional politeness will strike readers as distasteful or

1. [Revised version of a paper contributed to a symposium entitled “Addressing Readers” at Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3.]

2. For the interpersonal gambles taken by literary writers in the matter of politeness, see Roger D. Sell, “Politeness in Chaucer: Suggestions towards a methodology for pragmatic stylistics,” *Studia Neophilologica* 57 (1985): 175–185 (= item 2 in Roger D. Sell, *A humanizing literary pragmatics: Theory, criticism, education: Selected papers 1985–2002* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2019), 29–45); “Tellability and politeness in ‘The Miller’s Tale’: First steps in literary pragmatics,” *English Studies* 66 (1985): 496–512 (= item 1 in Sell, *Humanizing literary pragmatics*, 9–18); “The politeness of literary texts,” in *Literary pragmatics*, ed. Roger D. Sell (London: Routledge, 1991, rep. 2016), 208–224; “Literary texts and diachronic aspects of politeness,” in *Politeness in language: Studies in its history, theory and practice*, eds Richard J. Watts, Sachiko Ide, and Konrad Ehlich

even shocking, but too much of it may seem uncomfortably close to sycophancy. Too little presentational politeness will be baffling and offputting. Too much will be boring – readers will not have enough to do for themselves.

My interest in authors' interactive gambles has lived on into my current attempts at literary-communicational criticism. Here I am even more focused on the writing and reading of literature as those two processes conjoin to form one among other kinds of real communication between real human beings. I see literary writers as initiating real relationships and thereby promoting the growth of whole communities of real readers, who can in principle compare notes, as it were, both with writers and with each other. Especially interesting is the way any particular author addresses readers as human beings, and the extent to which the author's literary communication is indeed communicational in the term's etymological sense. Does the author's behaviour towards readers seem likely to *make or consolidate a community*?³

The way an author behaves towards readers and thereby shapes or fails to shape a community is of course intimately bound up with both selectional and presentational politeness. My perspective nowadays, however, extends beyond anthropological and psycholinguistic considerations to a more broadly ethical concern. As I practise it, communicational criticism mainly revolves around a distinction between behaviour which respects the human autonomy of other people and behaviour which does not do so. This is the distinction which for the past two and a half centuries has underwritten Western ideas of justice, the distinction spelt out in Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and still informing the postmodern and post-postmodern politics of recognition, with its insistence on a deference to be paid to human beings of every possible identity

(Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), 109–129; Roger D. Sell, *Literature as communication: The foundations of mediating criticism* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2000), 207–230; and “The impoliteness of *The Waste Land*,” in Roger D. Sell, *Mediating criticism: Literary education humanized* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2001), 107–138.

3. For further single-authored discussions and applications of the literary-communicational paradigm, see Roger D. Sell, *Literature as communication* (2000); *Mediating criticism* (2001); *Communicational criticism: Studies in literature as dialogue* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011); and *A humanizing literary pragmatics* (2019). Anthologies of communicational criticism by several hands include: Roger D. Sell (ed.), *Children's literature as communication: The ChiLPA project* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002); Roger D. Sell (ed.), *Literary community-making: The dialogicality of English texts from the seventeenth century to the present* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2012); Roger D. Sell (ed.), *Literature as dialogue: Invitations offered and negotiated* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2014); Roger D. Sell, Adam Borch, and Inna Lindgren (eds), *The ethics of literary communication: Genuineness, directness, indirectness* (Amsterdam: Benjamins 2013); Roger D. Sell and Anthony W. Johnson (eds), *Writing and religion in England, 1558–1689: Studies in community-making and cultural memory* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); and Roger D. Sell, Anthony W. Johnson and Helen Wilcox (eds), *Community-making in early Stuart theatres: Stage and audience* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

formation.⁴ In communicational criticism this distinction, which in principle can be used to assess human behaviour and communication of any kind at all, figures as a distinction between two different kinds of literary communication: between, on the one hand, literary communication that is genuinely dialogical in spirit, so that the human autonomy of all parties, both literary writers and their readers, is duly respected, and, on the other hand, literary communication which is not truly dialogical in spirit, because one or more of the parties withholds such respect, as when literary writers try to twist their readers' arm, or when readers silence writers by re-creating them in their own image.

The overtones of violence in these two examples are not accidental. Between writers and readers, literary communication that is not truly dialogical certainly can involve a kind of power struggle, a struggle for dominance, a use of psychological force. At times writers can even come across as openly assertive, egotistical, domineering. On the other hand, when writers are writing in the genuinely dialogical mode, such tension or aggression is much less likely because, far from insisting on their own authorial importance, they sometimes actually reduce their degree of agency, which correspondingly increases the scope for agency on the part of their readers. In the non-dialogical mode, by contrast, a writer's agency can be so overbearing that readers' room for manoeuvre is much more restricted.

In order to emphasize this agentic dimension to literary communication and author-reader relationships, I shall sometimes alternate, and sometimes supplement, the terms "dialogical" and "non-dialogical" with, respectively, the terms "intransitive" and "transitive", a word-pair which brings in an analogy to the everyday grammar of verbs. In the sentence

He communicates.

the verb "communicates" is working intransitively because it does not take a direct object, whereas in the sentence

He communicates his ideas.

the same verb is working transitively because it does take a direct object ("his ideas"). In the dialogical mode of literary communication, similarly, writers do not

4. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* [1785] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For postmodernity, see Sell, *Communicational criticism*, 20, 39, 350; K. Anthony Appiah, "Identity, authenticity, survival: Multicultural societies and social reproduction," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 149–163; Sell, *Literature as communication*, 8–12. For post-postmodernity, see Sell, *Communicational criticism*, 1–50, esp. 1–9; Roger D. Sell, "A communicational criticism for post-postmodern Times," in *Linguistics and literary studies: Interfaces, encounters, transfers*, eds Monika Fludernik and Daniel Jacob (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 127–46 [= item 11 in the present selection]; and Roger D. Sell, "Where do literary authors belong? A post-postmodern answer," *Rocznik Komparatystyczny: Comparative Yearbook* 6 (2015): 47–68 (= item 14 in the present selection).

so much communicate *something* as communicate in that etymological sense of the term. Their communication tends to make or consolidate a community, which is partly achieved by their sticking to a low degree of agency and clearly respecting the autonomy of their readers. In the non-dialogical mode, however, writers do tend to communicate *something*, and tend, as well, to reduce the opportunities for readers to think *something else* in response.

One aspect of the hold exercisable by authors writing in the mode of non-dialogical transitivity is that they not only communicate something to readers but also set the context of relevant facts, assumptions, and values within which the communicated something is to be pragmatically interpreted and understood. As a consequence, communication in this mode corresponds with what most twentieth-century linguists and literary scholars still took to be the model for *all* human intercourse: an *A* unidirectionally sends something, a something often thought of as a message, to a *B*, within a single context also specified or implied by the *A*. Much human communication certainly does take this form, and I hasten to add that it often has its value. In real life, transitive non-dialogicality can be beneficially quick and direct in situations where time is of the essence. Also, the thing communicated by the one party may actually be to the other party's advantage. Yet even at its most benevolent and welcome, this mode still carries that potential for a struggle or confrontation. To however small an extent, it tends to challenge the independence of the *B* on the receiving end. To receive a message is typically a more passive role than to send one, and at times non-dialogical transitivity correlates with downright passivization. It has been the preferred mode of many tyrants and dictators, and of quite a few other people who have wanted to enforce a consensus. And it is also what we find in Dickens at his liveliest and least deferential.

As for the mode of dialogical intransitivity, this, though in itself a very ancient phenomenon, has not attracted the attention of scholars until quite recently, when a new, "dialogical" paradigm in linguistic and literary studies got under way.⁵ To recapitulate, dialogical intransitivity is a type of communication which does *not*, as it were, involve a direct object. When *A* and *B* are communicating intransitively, neither of them unidirectionally sends the other something – a hard and

5. Linguists developing the new paradigm have been active within the International Association of Dialogue Analysis, one of the leading figures being Edda Weigand, who edits the journal *Language and Dialogue* and the book series *Dialogue Studies*. See also her *Language as dialogue: From rules to principles of probability* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2009). As for literary scholars interested in the new paradigm, many of them have belonged to international networks run by Åbo Akademi University's Literary Communication Project (1998–2012). For an article-length discussion, see Roger D. Sell, "Dialogue and literature," in *The Routledge handbook of language and dialogue*, ed. Edda Weigand (New York: Routledge, 2017), 127–142 (= item 16 in the present selection). For single-authored books and critical anthologies produced within this paradigm, see fn. 3 above.

fast message – to be understood and interpreted within just the sender’s context. Instead, there is a triangular set-up within which the two of them, *A* and *B*, are in dialogue about – are bi-directionally comparing notes about – a third entity, an entity *C*, which can be absolutely anything or anyone at all, real or fictional. The communicants discuss *C* as viewed from within their two different contexts, even if, for communication to happen at all, those two contexts must still partially overlap from the start, for one thing in the form of a shared language. And here they are communicating *with* each other, such that their dialogue becomes communicational in the word’s etymological sense. To spell this out: as *A* and *B* compare notes with each other about *C*, each of them gets a fuller idea of where the other is coming from, so that the area of overlap between their two contexts expands, in this way tending to make or consolidate a community. Within that community, there may remain differences of outlook and opinion – a community being a very different thing from a consensus – but discussion can carry on all the same. Needless to say, intransitive dialogicality can easily be mimicked for ulterior motives. In real life, to engage in ostensibly egalitarian dialogue is one of the basic ploys of spies, salespeople, and many other kinds of persuader, and it can also be very effective as a delaying tactic. Prototypically, however, intransitive dialogicality recognizes and enhances the human autonomy of both the main parties. In principle, this is very often what could be going on between Dickens and his readers.

Yes, Dickens’s risk assessments resulted in novels containing numerous passages which, despite a great many other things that they do, do not basically respect his readers’ human autonomy, plus numerous other passages which most certainly do respect it. So to speak of his having a communicational “mode” in the singular would be very misleading. He is constantly switching backwards and forwards between non-dialogical transitivity and dialogical intransitivity. As for readers, they could read and enjoy both kinds of passage, but enjoy them in totally different ways, so adapting to the fact that Dickens is communicating with them in the two modes that are entirely distinct and run in parallel. If readers were to notice what he is doing, they would of course appreciate his writing when it treats them as fully fledged fellow-human beings, as Kant might have put it – when it credits them with a mind of their own and encourages them to use it. In reality, however, Dickens’s liberal generosity towards readers has usually passed unnoticed, and they are actually very willing to license and enjoy writing whose extraordinary entertainment value is inseparable from that fundamental disregard for the human autonomy of each and every reader. Not to put too fine a point on it, readers have been prepared to let Dickens’s transitivity overcome or even enslave them.

Unless I am mistaken, Dickens is the English novelist whose switches between dialogical intransitivity and undialogical transitivity are the most frequent and extreme. The switches are themselves the most distinctive feature in the relationship

he offers. Both modes pop up all over the place in his novels, and both of them are utterly irreducible. Neither of them ever totally disappears; the one does not become the other; and the two of them, though Coleridge might well have said they represent opposite or discordant qualities, do not finally synthesize into an aesthetic *tertium quid* of the kind theorized in Chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria*. True, for many decades an enormous pressure of scholarly and critical tradition, not only Coleridgean but also literary formalist more generally, persuaded students of literature that some such aesthetic unity was indeed to be expected of any literary work. But even though many works clearly met this demand, there was always a strong likelihood that an interpreter on the look-out for aesthetic unity would find it even where there was none, or would find it in a form which the work's author would have disowned, and which was also very different from a whole range of other forms proposed by other commentators. On top of which, such a unified account could involve a rationalizing homogenization of the text in hand. In other words, it could simply overlook anything incommensurable with its particular Procrustean bed, including much that was of real interest and pleasure to most readers while actually reading.⁶ These holistic interpretations took place at so great a distance from the real experience of reading that, in the case of Dickens, they ignored the most fundamental of all the facts: that his novels involve the two quite distinct communicational modes, which could promote the two completely different kinds of reading and author-reader relations. And because they did not recognize this modal pluralism in the first place, they also missed the strong precedent for it in one of the greatest narrative works of all, by none other than Coleridge. The irony is that, though published in the same year as *Biographia Literaria*, the final revised version of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* completely contraverts the notions of aesthetic synthesis and organic unity, being nothing if not a forum for several different communicational modes in unsynthesizing juxtaposition.⁷ There may still be some people who feel that this kind of set-up makes for novels and poems which are so much the less artistic. But many others may already be prepared to see it as a huge boost in terms of human interest.

As an example of Dickens's countless switches from one of his modes to the other, we can take a sequence of two short paragraphs from *Dombey and Son*,

6. For closer scrutiny of the predilection for aesthetic wholes in the mid-twentieth century, see Roger D. Sell, "Ben Jonson's Epigram 101, 'Inviting a Friend to Supper': Literary pleasures immediately tasted," in Tommi Alho, Jason Finch, and Roger D. Sell (eds), *Renaissance Man: Essays on literature and culture for Anthony W. Johnson* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2019), 25–57 (= item 17 in the present selection).

7. Sell Roger D. Sell, "Dialogue versus silencing: Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," in Sell, *Literary Community-Making*, 91–129 (= item 7 in the present selection).

a passage where the switch is characteristically abrupt. At this point in the story a huge scandal is brewing. The patriarchal Mr Dombey, third-generation owner of the family firm, has driven his second wife Edith in her utter despair to leave him, and has struck his daughter Florence a blow which prompts her, too, to run away. So how, according to Dickens, does Dombey react to Florence's disappearance?

He goes on, without deviation, keeping his thoughts and feelings close within his own breast, and imparting them to no one. He makes no search for his daughter. He may think that she is with his sister, or that she is under his own roof. He may think of her constantly, or he may never think about her. It is all one for any sign he makes.

But this is sure; he does *not* think that he has lost her. He has no suspicion of the truth. He has lived too long shut up in his towering supremacy, seeing her, a patient gentle creature, in the path below it, to have any fear of that. Shaken as he is by his disgrace, he is not yet humbled to the level earth.⁸

To take the second paragraph first, here we have non-dialogical transitivity, with all its no-nonsense ultra-certainty: "this is sure"; "not" in italics; Dombey having absolutely no suspicion of a truth which we and Dickens absolutely know; and then that metaphor of Dombey's supremacy as a claustrophobic tower, of his gentle daughter Florence on the path below the man-tower, and of the eventual toppling down to earth with which the man-tower will have to reckon. Figurative language like this, though wonderfully imaginative and enjoyable, leaves readers with very little wriggle-room as to what to think. Or perhaps they are almost thinking something already, in a kind of stock response which the metaphor then roundly confirms, because the metaphor is actually an artistic variation on "Pride goes before a fall", an adage readily brought to mind by readers of any background. In short, the writing offers a powerful endorsement of the general public's habit of judgemental stereotyping. At least for the time being, Dickens is, as it were, a man of the people discouraging his fellows, discouraging his readers, that is to say, from breaking ranks. Unapologetically, he seems to be ganging them up to celebrate Dombey's imminent humiliation.

Communicationally speaking, the first paragraph could hardly be more different. Here we have dialogical intransitivity. Whereas in the second paragraph there is that finely imaginative but coercive metaphor of the man-tower, the first paragraph is stylistically less conspicuous, and completely unassertive. As a piece of English it is fairly plain, quite serviceable enough, but unembellished and wholly non-agonistic. Rather than authoritatively claiming to penetrate Dombey's solipsism and identify its precise nature, rather than coming down one way or the other as

8. Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* [1848], ed. Alan Horsman (Oxford, 1982), 600.

to whether Dombey might eventually have it in him to grieve and repent and ask forgiveness, Dickens leaves readers to weigh this up for themselves on the basis of their own life experience and of what they have seen of Dombey hitherto. There are no strongly evaluative expressions to push them towards any particular conclusion, and the verb *may*, the most non-committal modal verb of all, is used no fewer than three times in quick succession. In short, this first paragraph, though linguistically not particularly exciting or forceful, encourages readers to think, and without telling them *what* to think.

When discussed along these lines, the first, low-toned paragraph begins to reveal what has so often escaped notice: Dickens's sheer magnanimity when writing in the intransitive mode. To repeat, here he invites readers to have thoughts and ideas of their own. He also leaves them free to compare and contrast their thoughts and ideas with his, even if, as in the case of these two successive paragraphs, he can very rapidly switch from intransitive liberal-mindedness to transitive coerciveness. Despite his loud and ubiquitous command of non-dialogical transitivity, at some deep level he is always ready for the more truly dialogical kind of interaction, and is quick to capitalize on the ethical potential arising from two simple facts: that a novel is addressed from one real human being to other real human beings; and that its very topics of discussion are strongly human as well.⁹ Time and time again, when Dickens sets forth his representations of human beings and human life in his intransitive mode, he, the real author, is indeed inviting real readers to make their own assessment of that human content. He freely concedes that human beings and human life are matters on which other people are no less expert than he himself.

If readers were fully to appreciate this as the empowerment it in fact amounts to, they would soon realize that communicational ethics translates into communicational hedonics. In acknowledging and enhancing readers' autonomy, Dickens is offering them a mighty gratification. Conversely, Keats was surely right to say that we dislike poetry that has "a palpable design upon us"; and was also right, it seems to me, about the pleasures arising from Shakespeare's negative capability: the capability of being "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".¹⁰ Novelists, too, can be agreeably undesigning and negatively capable, and in his intransitive mode Dickens is one of the foremost. Readers who realized what he is doing here could not be other than thankfully delighted.

I am speaking as of a communicational potential that may still be unrealized. Yet this way of putting it does not fully reflect my line of thought. My belief is that Dickens's generosity towards his readers here has long been a main factor in the

9. See Roger D. Sell, "Literary pragmatics and the alternative *Great Expectations*," in his *A Humanizing Literary Pragmatics*, 179–194.

10. John Keats, *Selected letters of John Keats*, ed. Frederick Page (1954), 72, 53.

growth of the Dickens community – that the Dickens community has become ever more heterogeneous, and ever less hegemonic, partly because his intransitivity has always invited respondents of any time and place to relish the freedom it allows. I have so far hesitated to say this plainly because, even if I happened to be right, even if the communicational potential of the intransitivity had indeed already been realized, readers have paid it so little conscious attention. They have not thought about it off their own bat. Neither have they been prompted to think about it by scholars, critics, or teachers. So although in my view it is over a hundred and fifty years' old as a phenomenon, as a topic of discussion I have had to introduce it as new. I think of it as a major aspect of Dickens's writing which my own readers may not have noticed, even if, without their knowledge, it has already contributed to their enjoyment of his novels, and even if their enjoyment were now to become more self-aware.

Part of the explanation for this state of affairs is that, in his intransitive mode, Dickens's style and address are, as I am putting it, so inconspicuous and unassertive. In sharp distinction from his transitive mode, his intransitive mode does not force readers to be aware of his own presence and manner. So in what he actually writes here there can seem to be a relative lack of emphasis, as if what he is saying or narrating in the particular passage were not really important. That generations of readers have, at points like this, taken little conscious notice is hardly surprising.

Another reason why his intransitive invitation to discussion has itself remained undiscussed is that the dialogical paradigm of linguistic and literary study is still so new. The point here, though, is not that all earlier paradigms have obscured the uncertainties, mysteries, doubts which Dickens's intransitivity can encourage us to ponder. On the contrary, there have been:– critics working within a sociological paradigm whose handling of tensions between experienced free-will and structuralist determinism could not have been more suggestive;¹¹ psychoanalytical critics who have been just as revealing about the relationship between basic drives or archetypes and the projections of a socialized persona;¹² Lacanian deconstructionists who have skilfully charted a perplexing interplay of Imaginary and Symbolic;¹³ and so on, and so on. An abundance of serious riddles, paradoxes, and complexities has been identified by Dickens critics of many denominations. For much of the twentieth century, however, the literary formalist commentators, arguably the most

11. E.g. Lionel Trilling, "Manners, morals, and the novel," in his *The liberal imagination* (New York: Viking, 1950), 205–222, and Robin Gilmour, *The idea of the gentleman in the Victorian novel* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981).

12. E.g. Edmund Wilson, "Dickens: The two Scrooges," in his *The Wound and the bow* (Boston, 1941), 1–104. Wilson's kind of reading is discussed at some length in Roger D. Sell, "The pains and pleasures of *David Copperfield*," in his *Mediating criticism*, 265–290.

13. E.g. Steven Connor. *Charles Dickens* (Oxford, 1985), esp. 26–137.

dominant commentators of all, were seeing every such profoundly teasing puzzle as peculiarly intrinsic to the actual texts of the novels, and those texts themselves as autotelic aesthetic heterocosms: as uncreated by an author, so to speak, or as unactivated by readers, or as both uncreated and unactivated. In short, communication between the real Dickens and his real readers was conceptually short-circuited. For critics and teachers working along these formalist lines, and for the millions of ordinary readers and students persuaded by them, the non-self-assertive communication of Dickens in his intransitive mode would have been especially hard to pick up.

Not that the difficulty was to be swept away by a mere change of critical paradigm. For any reader at all, the voice of Dickens at his most genuinely dialogical and intransitive will be a still small voice that is often scarcely audible. Sometimes this voice is more in the nature of a pregnant silence, taking the form of pure narrative – of experiences and actions shaped with minimal stylistic embellishment into episodes of unglossed story. Yet as readers try to press ahead with that story, the still small voice is constantly seeking to slow them down, not by telling them what to think, but by encouraging them to question what they are most likely to be thinking already. With extreme gentleness, Dickens has tried to restrain them from irritably reaching after fact and reason. In particular, he has tactfully suggested caution as to any dogmatic categorizations they might be tempted to apply, any simplistic binarisms of good and bad or right and wrong, for example. Instead, he has hinted the possibility of states of mind that would be more negatively capable. And all this encouragement-gentleness-suggestion-hinting in no way infringes readers' liberty. They are absolutely free to make up their own minds, or to remain, if they prefer, uncertain, mystified, doubtful.

In *Great Expectations*, for instance, there are a number of occasions when Pip could lend other characters a helping hand, though this way of putting it is actually a huge understatement. In several cases, Pip is in a position to bestow a blessing beyond all price. But the still small voice of Dickens's dialogical intransitivity suggests that the motives for his decisions here may not have been straightforward. A binarism of good and bad or right and wrong would indeed be far too crude a measure of the ethical realities involved.

To take one example, when Pip has finally pieced together the story of Estella's parentage and adoption, and also knows, as neither Estella herself, nor Molly, nor Magwitch knows, that they are all alive, and all resident within a short distance of each other, he has the three of them in the palm of his hand. If he so chooses, he could bring about a family reunion through which the novel could achieve the kind of closure we expect from Smollett – one of Dickens's eighteenth century favourites. The almost incredible coincidence that Miss Havisham, Molly, and Magwitch all had the same lawyer has ultimately given Pip the opportunity to bestow or withhold

what many readers would see as the most important kind of blessing imaginable, the kind of blessing which, normally, only God can give. Yet after a certain amount of ratiocination, Pip decides not to bestow it. Why not? Because, having listened to the arguments of Jaggers's "wiser head",¹⁴ he judges that a family reunion would not be such an amazing benefaction after all. Magwitch would have no joy of Molly now. Molly herself is probably best off as she is, under the firm protection and control of Jaggers. And a reunion with these two particular parents would do nothing to help Estella in her already dreadful marriage with the snobbish Drummle. The greatest benefaction Pip decides he can give all three of them is through doing absolutely nothing. And certainly, the only possible benefit arising from a family reunion would have been that Magwitch would be very pleased to know that his daughter is still alive, and has become a lady. This scenario, however, is something Pip and Jaggers do not even discuss. Which is where Dickens's still small voice of dialogical intransitivity comes in. That voice reports Pip's reasoning in rather pedestrian prose, and without much gloss – in particular, with no indication that either the older, narrating Pip or Dickens the real author would in any way disagree with the younger Pip who took this decision. Yet even so, enough has been said for alert readers to notice the tacitly rejected possibility and, when the episode ostensibly tails off, to go on listening to the still small voice as a kind of pregnant silence. Reading between the lines: Should Pip have had second thoughts? Has he been too hasty? And if so, why, and what is to be thought of him?

As a matter of fact, in the end Pip does have second thoughts. His information about Estella's life and condition is what he uses when, having seized the role of *deus ex machina* in the life-story of the dying Magwitch, he regales him with a benefaction that is simply too good to be true.

"Dear Magwitch, I must tell you, now at last. You understand what I say?"

A gentle pressure on my hand.

"You had a child once, whom you loved and lost."

A stronger pressure on my hand.

"She lived and found powerful friends. She is living now. She is a lady and very beautiful..."

And just so that the story will have everything the dying man could wish for:

"... And I love her!" (342)

– as if she loved him and were free to love him, too, and as if the sound of wedding bells could be confidently expected. Despite the simple unglossed beauty of this

14. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Edgar Rosenberg (New York: Norton, 1999), 303. Subsequent reference to this edition is made within parentheses in the main text.

passage, the still small voice may leave some readers thinking that Pip's benefaction is somewhat tarnished by the element of deception, or by his characteristic zest in stage-managing another person's life – albeit as a *quid pro quo* for Magwitch's earlier stage-management of his. Other readers may conclude that he had a kindly end in view, and that this justified his smoke-and-mirrors means. Others may be disinclined or unable to come to a verdict. The still small voice forces nobody towards any particular conclusion. Instead, it discourages everybody from mental stagnation, or from any assumption that life is wonderfully simple.

In strongest possible contrast, there is also that extraordinarily forceful Dickensian voice, emanating from almost any page in his novels: the voice of his non-dialogical transitivity in all its loudness. In *Hard Times*, for instance, a striking example of his energetic rumbustiousness is the description of Mr Bounderby, not least because, although in one way the writing is all fun and games here, in another way it is not so innocent. Judged by the Kantian criterion, the passage is frankly irresponsible. It offers a highly disrespectful portrait of another, albeit fictional, human being, and it also makes things very difficult for any readers who would like to think about it for themselves.

He was a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not. A big, loud man, with a stare and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him. A man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins in his temples, and such a strained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open and lift his eyebrows up. A man with a pervading appearance on him of being inflated like a balloon, and ready to start. A man who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man. A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty. A man who was the Bully of humility.¹⁵

The extremely assertive judgementalism of Dickens at his most non-dialogical is partly realized in the unpleasantly evaluative descriptions of Bounderby's physical appearance, and in the figurative language which so exuberantly endows him with the properties of metals, coarse materials, and a bulging balloon. Notice, too, the complete absence of modal markers of the type *may be*, *perhaps is*, *sometimes is*. Everything stated is certain beyond all question. The entire 136-word passage has only one main verb (the first line's "was"), and hammers out everything else into a veritable battery of nominal phrases, each of which encapsulates one incontrovertible fact, so carrying Dickens's own heavy emphasis, but also parodying Bounderby's plodding positivism.

15. Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* [1854], eds George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York: Norton, 1996), 16–17.

The stylistic taunts feed in to the coercive social deixis through which Dickens portrays Bounderby as a parvenu bully, who is actually himself a prime target for bullying, most obviously from male members of the English upper class at their most conceitedly genteel and puerile, from somebody like Steerforth in *David Copperfield* or Drummle in *Great Expectations*, for instance, or from somebody like that bully of an old Bullingdonian Boris Johnson, when he compared women in Muslim dress to bank robbers and letter-boxes. Such is the tone of supercilious contempt adopted by Dickens himself here, who tacitly urges readers to follow suit. And although from the pen of a leading politician such jeering references to people's origins or personal appearance may no longer be *comme il faut*, at points like this Dickens has always been so powerfully imaginative that substantial pleasures have accrued to readers. Nor, if such pleasures do raise scruples today, does this mean that the writing's basic effrontery has in recent times been somehow ratcheted up. Ever since its day of first publication, Dickens's entertaining criticism of Bounderby has pressured readers to put their own critical faculties on hold.

This is characteristic. In the mode of non-dialogical transitivity Dickens is constantly reminding readers of who is in charge. And naturally, he has a point. Anything readers do as readers is wholly consequent upon his moves as author. Yet his authorial presence in the texts is formidable in the extreme. It is not just that we feel him manipulating the huge plots so as to hold us in suspense. That is something we expect and want him to do – a crucial part of the deal. But on his side, the expectation seems to be that we shall accept all his bouncy affirmations, his jovial claims to a monopoly of wisdom and sound thinking, his bull-at-a-gate certainty, and shall remember, too, that he not only controls the characters in his novels but has his eye on us as well. For instance, there must be no mistake as to the true character of somebody with the background and career path of a Bounderby. Here, there is no still small voice to hint that a “new man”, a “captain of industry,” can also be judged according to a very different scale of values – as by Dickens himself when he so favourably judges Mr Rouncewell in *Bleak House*.

And in one way, how odd! – that the still small voice of dialogical intransitivity, the quiet but potentially empowering voice of generous liberal-mindedness, has not been fully noticed for what it is and what it could do, while the loud, disempowering voice of non-dialogical transitivity has won so much explicit admiration. But then this latter voice, of course, is his entertainer's voice, the voice which establishes his sheer mastery over both his own works and his wide public. Voiced this way, his ebullient comedy of plot, characterization, and style gives free rein to his self-performativity at its most colourful, quite ruling out more seriously problematizing ways of seeing human life, now telling his readers exactly what to think, now unabashedly endorsing their own simplifying prejudices, and always winning

approval for sheer gusto. At times, the still small voice of dialogical intransitivity is indeed almost drowned out.

What has attracted readers to Dickens most strongly and immediately is certainly not dialogical reasonableness or friendly respect but something irrational and much more primitive: his extraordinary power of mythopoeia. Because it holds readers so firmly in its grip, I rank this as an aspect of his transitivity, my suggestion being that all readers of Dickens will know what I am talking about, and will have yielded up to it themselves. An instance often mentioned, not least for having created a whole new memory within the culture, is *Oliver Twist* asking for more. But think, too, of Pip and the escaped convict in that wind-swept marshland graveyard! Or think of Miss Havisham in her decaying bridal dress, or of that infested wedding cake!

Exactly what it is that makes such details so arresting and so haunting may never be explained. But to understand what they mean for the relationship between Dickens and his readers we need only return to Coleridge. “Kubla Khan” can be seen as, among other things, a successful power bid on Coleridge’s part – a poem which has achieved its goal of leaving readers dumb-struck.¹⁶ This achievement is all the more remarkable because, as the poet here, Coleridge did not believe it was possible. What the poem is mostly about is actually his sense of double failure. First, he has failed to revive within himself the vision of the Abyssinian maid. Secondly, and for that reason, he will also fail to mesmerize an audience. Nobody will weave a circle round him thrice. Nobody will close their eyes with holy dread. Yet the fact remains that, at least metaphorically speaking, readers always *have* closed their eyes, always *have* woven a circle. The poem’s reception history illustrates readers’ willingness to be silenced, disempowered, badly treated, just as clearly as the poem’s actual content illustrates this storyteller’s insatiable need to overwhelm and dominate. Then in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the same dynamic is dramatized again, as the Mariner tells his tale to the Wedding Guest.¹⁷ The Mariner has absolutely no choice but to tell it, and the Wedding Guest simply cannot but listen, utterly spell-bound. As for readers of the poem, although the additions Coleridge made in 1817 encourage them to think about both the main story and the frame story for themselves, and within the different perspectives entailed by the different communicational modes I mentioned earlier,¹⁸ everything still depends on readers’

16. See Sell, “Dialogue *versus* silencing”, 92–93.

17. Sell, “Dialogue *versus* silencing”, 98–103.

18. The most important of the 1817 editions were the marginal comments, the naming of Coleridge as the author, and the epigraph from Thomas Burnet. See Sell, “Dialogue *versus* silencing”, 115–124.

empathizing with both the mesmerizer and the mesmerized, and on their consequently becoming mesmerized in their own right. Ever since 1817, the poem has been triggering readers' intellect to contemplate, both in the fictional characters and in themselves, something over which intellect has no ultimate control.

The benefit of Coleridge's two poems to literary criticism lies in his honesty about storytelling's most fundamental universal: the fact that storytellers want to mesmerize, and that listeners or readers do not mind, or cannot help, surrendering to a mesmerizer, however terrifying. E. M. Forster may have poured Modernist contempt on a "gaping audience of cavemen" who only ask "And then?"¹⁹ But where shall we find a novel more irresistibly magnetic than *A Passage to India*? Similarly, most Modernist critics of Dickens sought to construct a "serious" Dickens who would be more than "just" an entertainer, more than a "mere" storyteller. But with readers, Dickens's mythopoeic triumphs have already outlived such earnest constructions by several decades.²⁰

Nor is there any denying that his non-dialogical passages can also be gloriously funny and, as I say, imaginative. We can enjoy them; we can be grateful for them; we can even love him for them. In their own way they draw him and us closer together, and to read a writer who so regally dispenses with Kantian notions of decent, fully fledged humanity is viscerally exciting. We would not dream of being censorious, because, frankly, we are not so much affronted as complicit. The pressure to take part in something like the mockery of Bounderby is very strong indeed. We are drawn to it as to a forbidden fruit. Or it is almost as if we believed that, by endorsing Dickens's disrespect towards somebody like Bounderby, by tagging along with his authorial bullying of the fictional character, we shall disarm the real disrespect which his non-dialogical transitivity constantly aims at us personally. Such is the mob psychology that could obtain within a community arising from novels written entirely in this mode.

No Dickens novel is written entirely in the non-dialogical mode. But at the same time, a communicational criticism which assigned praise only when a writer complied with Kant's ethical imperative would be a very dull sort of criticism, quite insensitive to much of the stimulus and challenge of literary writing. On the one hand, when a writer respects our human autonomy this is a wonderful empowerment, and the sane generosity of Dickens in his dialogically intransitive mode is of exemplary value for humankind at large. On the other hand, any status quo, any established idea about justice and human rights, for instance, invites opposition,

19. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel and related writings* [1927], ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Arnold, 1974), 60.

20. See Roger D. Sell, "Constructing Dickens's seriousness", forthcoming in *Essays in Criticism*, January 2021.

“lest one good custom should corrupt the world”.²¹ People are interested, quite blatantly and healthily interested, in alternative values and kinds of response. And this, too, gets catered for in literature, nowhere more significantly, it seems to me, than in modally plural texts like *The Ancient Mariner* and the novels of Dickens.

What such plurality can mean within sociocultural and political parameters has been partly shown in Bakhtin’s discussions of novels as carnival and heteroglossia. In the present essay, the parameters have been communication-ethical. As we read Dickens we experience, *in his own behaviour as author towards us as readers*, the Kantian imperative being sometimes scrupulously followed, sometimes boisterously overturned. There may even be temporary transvaluations, disrespect becoming respect, and treating badly becoming treating well, quite simply because Dickens, as an exponent of unethical behaviour, is so richly stimulating. As I noted at the outset, any writer treads a tightrope between too much and too little politeness, but there are also varying degrees of deference by which writers can relate to their readers’ autonomy more generally. Of anglophone novelists, it is surely only Dickens who is both so truly respectful and so boldly dominant. In his continuing popularity, the gamble of opposing the one mode against the other still yields its ample dividends.

21. Alfred Lord Tennyson, “The Passing of Arthur”, in *Poetical works of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Poet Laureate* (London: Macmillan, 1899), 473.

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As traced by Roger D. Sell, literary communication is a process of community-making. As long as literary authors and those responding to them respect each other's human autonomy, literature flourishes as an enjoyable, though often challenging mode of interaction that is truly dialogical in spirit. This gives rise to author-respondent communities whose members represent existential commonalities blended together with historical differences.

These heterogeneous literary communities have a larger social significance, in that they have long served as counterweights to the hegemonic tendencies of modernity, and more recently to postmodernity's well-intentioned but restrictive politics of identity. In post-postmodern times, their ethos is increasingly one of pleasurable egalitarianism. The despondent anti-hedonism of the twentieth century intelligentsia can now seem rather dated.

Some of the papers selected for this volume develop Sell's ideas in mainly theoretical terms. But most of them offer detailed criticism of particular anglophone writers, ranging from Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and other poets and dramatists of the early modern period, through Wordsworth and Coleridge, to Dickens, Pinter, and Rushdie.



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