

# Michael Wood

## *A world without literature?*

Just over ten years ago, the mood of a large section of the North American academic world was caught in the title of a volume published by Princeton University Press with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The volume asked, *What's Happened to the Humanities?* – not, what are the humanities doing these days? or even, what are they doing to themselves? Instead, the pure passive dilemma: what has happened to them?<sup>1</sup> The volume contains wonderful essays full of intelligent commentary and ideas, but the effect of the work as a whole is a scent of sophisticated disarray. Prestige, centrality, tradition, students, a public, and financial support: all gone. And for no reason that we could see – except for a more than slight tendency to blame a few of our own colleagues and their

softness on “postmodernism” for doing us in. But even this sort of supposed appeasement couldn’t single-handedly have caused such a collapse: history, or something, had happened to us, the humanities, with the study of English literature often at our stated or implied core. After all, literary study is where “elaborate exercises in various kinds of reading and writing” have long been most immediately visible, according to the volume’s editor, Alvin Kernan.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, all had not gone, and has not gone yet. But the bewilderment of the profession was real, only partly reduced by a series of very good books that set out to explore the logic, history, and sociology of our condition. I am thinking especially of John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital* (1993), David Simpson’s *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature* (1995), and Marjorie Garber’s *Academic Instincts* (2001), among quite a few others. There was a real crisis, and even those of us who believed the crisis might be an opportunity rather than a doom had to do some hard thinking. It wasn’t a matter

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1 Alvin Kernan, ed., *What's Happened to the Humanities?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

2 *Ibid.*, 9.

merely of offering sunniness instead of sorrow, for as Simpson bitingly puts it, we cannot “afford the mere celebrations of the literary as a new lease of cultural political hope.”<sup>3</sup>

We have, in the last ten years or so, entered a phase of self-exploration and self-explanation based mainly on the assumption that others – our university colleagues in other disciplines, politicians, journalists, the public – do not understand what we do or why it matters, although they would like to. There is every reason to revoke the old paradigm (one of the old paradigms), by which all we do is doubt, seek to unravel, and destroy every piece of apparent knowledge that comes our way – as if literary criticism is a paradise for skeptics and no one else. Literary study produces various kinds of knowledge, as Guillory suggests, and the Humanities Indicators Prototype of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences eloquently names “the great and varied archive of the human record” as the database of the humanities in general.<sup>4</sup> How to study, use, and add to this archive is a grand exercise in knowing; and the beauty of exercise, the grandness of it, is that the smallest addition counts, just as every beach is made of grains of sand.

This knowledge includes all of the gains of literary history and formalism, easily construed according to cumulative models of knowledge. But literary criticism is rather different, and we may wonder whether we wish to claim knowledge as its chief result. Since crit-

icism always involves rereading, returning to old knowledge rather than encountering new, literary criticism often (significantly) rearranges understanding rather than increases it. Guillory says we should nevertheless see this understanding, in its developed and skillfully practiced form, as a strong contribution to knowledge, and asserts that in recent times we have failed “to define and defend the knowledge claims of criticism.”<sup>5</sup>

In this context, we need to explain our ways of reading to those who have not been trained in them, to delineate the modern equivalent of what Nietzsche called the unnatural sciences: the exploration, in many cases, of what is familiar, and therefore in some senses the most difficult to grasp. In Nietzsche’s intricate and only roughly translatable play on words – “*Das Bekannte . . . ist am schwersten zu ‘erkennen’*” – the known is what is hardest to know. Nietzsche writes:

The familiar is what we are used to, and what we are used to is the most difficult to “know” – that is, to view as a problem, to see as strange, as distant, as “outside us.” . . . The great certainty of the natural sciences in comparison with psychology and the critique of the elements of consciousness – with the *unnatural* sciences, one might almost say – rests precisely on the fact that they take the *strange* as their object, while it is nearly contradictory and absurd even to want to take the not-strange as one’s object.<sup>6</sup>

3 David Simpson, *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 180.

4 From a draft version of the Humanities Indicators Prototype, “Defining the Humanities”; on file with author.

5 John Guillory, “The Sokal Affair and the History of Criticism,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2) (Winter 2002): 507.

6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 215.

By “psychology and the critique of the elements of consciousness” (*Psychologie und Kritik der Bewußtseins-Elemente*) Nietzsche doesn’t mean what we now call the humanities, but he doesn’t mean just what we now call psychology either. He means what philosophy so often was in the later nineteenth century when it wasn’t idealism: namely, a combination of philosophy of mind and experimental science. And while “critique of the elements of consciousness” doesn’t sound much like what Dickens and Balzac were after, it comes a little closer to George Eliot and Henry James. By the time we get to Joyce and Woolf we may start to wonder whether novelists do anything else.

We are trying to explain our unnatural science to the natural scientists and to all of those who take the natural sciences as their model for the production of knowledge. We are getting better at this, but there is a long way to go; much work is needed.<sup>7</sup> And we must do this work in a world of shifting priorities and predispositions. Everything I have said so far assumes goodwill on the part of those who don’t understand us (yet) – no hostility or real intellectual difficulty, no major resistance attitude to our enterprise. I am no longer sure this assumption is sound. My sense is that we now live, at least partly, in a world generally so devoted to information and narrow ideas of (political) usefulness that it has to be hostile to the humanities whether it wants to be or not, because it can’t get a feeling of triviality or unnecessariness out of its mind when it thinks of them, if it thinks of them at

<sup>7</sup> My book, *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), is a preliminary attempt at such work, a defense and an illustration of criticism as I understand it.

all. The arts often escape this worldview because they are a practice. It’s the practice of studying a practice, as the humanist critic does, that seems marginal, if not wasteful.

My response to the assumption of triviality is to suggest, not that we cannot live without literature and the humanities – we can, alas, as far too many people know, live without almost everything – but that we can perhaps get closest to what literature and the humanities mean if we go as far as we can toward imagining a world without them.

A child stands in a weed-filled field, “aimless and alone.” He is the inheritor, we are told, of a world marked by boots, barbed wire, speeches, marches, war, executions: somewhere, we are inclined to believe, in the European twentieth century. The child expects violence, and maybe nothing but violence – large-scale, persistent violence. Even his throwing a stone at a bird, unkind in its small way, evokes the gentler place and time he does not know, because it seems so youthful and ordinary an act. This impression deepens when we learn that the rape of a girl and the knifing of a boy are “axioms” to this child: not only actual and perhaps frequent, but something like a set of rules. For an axiom, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us, is “a proposition that commends itself to general acceptance; a well-established or universally-conceded principle; a maxim, rule, law.”

This child is poor – “ragged” is the word we are offered – and inured to violence, but there is worse to come, in one very special sense. He has

never heard

Of any world where promises were kept,  
Or one could weep because another wept.

The precision of the language is important, as are the deeply desolate implications: “never,” “any.” We need to register how far this place is from the forms of life even the most cynical among us may think we know. We have inhabited worlds where promises were not often kept, perhaps even where they were never kept; we can easily imagine the death of all human sympathy. But we can scarcely imagine *never having heard of* such sympathy or of promises that were kept. And one of the reasons for this impossibility is what used to be called poetry and is now usually called literature: the representation of imagined lives and minds, often modeled closely on existing exemplars but also always potentially retaining important instances of which no contemporary or recent case can be found. Literature is full of portraits of reality’s victims, from Antigone to Anna Karenina. But literature also remembers what reality forgets.

I’m not going to linger over the ragged child, except to say that you can find him in W. H. Auden’s poem “The Shield of Achilles,” and that the modern equipment – the boots, the barbed wire, and the twentieth-century political scene – appears to Thetis, Achilles’s surprised Greek mother, as the array of images the god Hephaestus is placing on the shield he is making for the hero: not vines and olive trees as in Homer, but a bare plain crowded with waiting people; not “ritual pieties” but official murder; not games and dancing but the “weed-choked field” where the child stands. It’s an intricate and subtle poem, and it can be read many ways: as against war, against modernity; as seeing the present in the past or the past in the present; as a reminder that heroes like “the strong / Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles” will always have

their part in the creation of every post-war wasteland.<sup>8</sup> My interest is in what the child doesn’t know, and how he could have known it.

Storytelling would have done as well as novels; plays and movies as well as poems. For the moment I’m taking literature to mean the whole realm of shaped, fictive stories, whatever their means of incarnation. And to seek to imagine a world without literature in this sense – without myth or legend or fairy tale; without dreams or fables or old jokes or any form of cherished untruth – is to begin to understand what literature is for, and what extreme imaginative poverty might look like. Think of a world that is not only without hope but has never heard of hope.

I’m not suggesting that we live in such a world, or even that we are in immediate danger of arriving there. I believe in optimism of the intellect as well as optimism of the will. But such a world is possible, even if we can’t quite see it yet, and I call up the picture as the centerpiece of my case for the urgency of an attention to literature, an attention that is not a part-time frill, or a mode of self-improvement, or an acquisition of cultural capital; not the ordinary working of the culture industry or the academic economy; not the training of taste or

8 See Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 18, in *Chapman’s Homer: The Iliad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 384–388, and W. H. Auden, “The Shield of Achilles,” in *Collected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1976), 454–455. Here is the full stanza about the boy:

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,  
Loitered about that vacancy; a bird  
Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:  
That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,  
Were axioms to him, who’d never heard  
Of any world where promises were kept,  
Or one could weep because another wept.

the education of the spirit; not a replacement for religion or an escape from history. Literature can play any and all of these roles, of course, and does so very usefully at various times. But none of them belongs to literature alone, which can easily be replaced in every case; and none of them constitutes an adequate defense in stormy weather – or, worse, in a climate of bland indifference and swift dismissal. I want to try and say why literature is more than an attractive cultural ornament or option, and more than a delightful mystery to which many of us are devoted.

Three provisos or precisions are necessary at this point. First, the moral world of the child in the poem would not be remedied by the mere mention, even an infinitely repeated mention, of the possibility of kept promises or live sympathy. Literature is not a matter of naming things; it does not deal in information or announcement. Literature is embodiment, a mode of action; it works over time on the hearts and minds of its readers or hearers. Its result in us, when we are receptive or lucky, is the activation of personal knowledge: knowledge of others and ourselves; knowledge of stubborn, slippery, or forgotten facts; knowledge of old and new possibilities – a knowledge that is often so intimate and so immediate that it scarcely feels like knowledge at all because it feels like something we have always known.

Second, neither literature nor any other instance of the humanities can make us better people, or even tell us unequivocally what a good person is. There is danger of a too-easy piety lurking in the word *human* at the heart of the humanities, as if to be human is always to be moral, or “we’d all be human if we could,” as a crooked character in Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* sings

with manifest insincerity. The Humanities Indicators Prototype speaks firmly of asking “not just about what it means to be human, but what it means to be a good human being; not just about behavior but about ethical behavior; not just about life but about meaningful life.”<sup>9</sup> It is important to remember that these are in fact questions and not answers, that our attention to them needs to be critical and demanding, thoughtful and open. Auden’s poem doesn’t tell us to keep our promises, or that we shall be saved if we do; there are indeed promises that no one should ever keep. The poem invites us to reflect on promises and their consequences, to picture them as a possibility and a value, even a danger; to wonder exactly what would be wrong with a world where no promises were kept, and what we are to do if we are afraid we live in such a world already. If we speak, as I have, about imaginative poverty, just what are we talking about? This is a question for the imagination itself, not for the preacher lurking in us.

Third, it is important to be both precise and flexible about the various media (print, spoken word, theater, cinema, comic books, cartoons, among others) in which work in the humanities (or work the humanities choose to study) comes to us. The Humanities Indicators Prototype refers broadly and generously to “the ways in which we invest social actions with meaning and create artifacts – be they a textile or a song or a story or a philosophical treatise.”<sup>10</sup> This range is important, and even the most literary among us need to remember that books are not everything, that the imagination lives in many other places.

9 “Defining the Humanities.”

10 Ibid.

But books are a great deal, and we should not take with equanimity the fact that the reading of literature in the United States has declined by 18 percent over the last twenty years, most steeply among persons between eighteen and twenty-four years of age. There is also the sobering fact that we seem to read less, not more, as we grow older. In 2002, 57 percent of the inhabitants of the United States older than eighteen had read at least one book for pleasure in the previous twelve months; this percentage was down from 60.9 in 1992. It needs to be said, too, that the proportion of those who had read a work of literature was considerably smaller: 46.7 in 2002. Even so, and perhaps surprisingly, the United States does better in this rather unsophisticated competition than say France and Germany. The highest scorers are Sweden, Canada, and Finland. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the available figures is the fact that reading rates for literature went up from 1982 to 1992, at least among those aged forty-five to seventy-four, and then by 2002 fell in each case to well below their 1982 level. It would be easy to blame the Internet and a mistake to leave it out of the account. But there does seem to be some other, correctable story here, a question of wanting or needing (or not wanting or not needing) to know about other worlds.<sup>11</sup>

11 See especially Humanities Indicators Prototype, [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=V-3a.jpg&o=hrcoVA.aspx\\_\\_topV3](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=V-3a.jpg&o=hrcoVA.aspx__topV3): Part V. *Figure V-3a: Percentage of Americans 18 Years & Older Who Read a Book Other Than for Work or School during the Previous 12 Months, by Age, 1992 – 2002*; [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=V-3b.jpg&o=hrcoVA.aspx\\_\\_topV3](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=V-3b.jpg&o=hrcoVA.aspx__topV3): *Figure V-3b: Percentage of Adult Population Having Read a Book (Fiction or Nonfiction) Other Than for Work or School in the Previous 12 Months, U.S. & E.U.-15 Countries*,

Commenting on Zbigniew Herbert's poem "Why the Classics," J. M. Coetzee paraphrases what he takes to be the poet's answer to that question: "because they provide models of response to misfortune that . . . will outlast us."<sup>12</sup> The paraphrase is necessary because the poem finally offers only the negative image of an answer, suggesting that small sorrows and self-pity, if they are all we take as the subject of our art, will leave only small sad memories behind them,

like lovers weeping  
in a small dirty hotel  
when wall-paper dawns.

The response to misfortune needs not only to outlast us, but outlast us in a manner that will not seem shabby. In glossing Herbert's answer Coetzee is already reframing and broadening the question into one about acceptable endurance. Why the classics – the poem and the question – is "an appeal for a model of how to become a classic, that is, how to endure"; how to, as Coetzee puts it later in the same essay, "withstand the battering of time."<sup>13</sup> The important word here is the repeated *model*. Neither poet nor critic tells us at this point how the model works or how to find such a model for ourselves, only what the model is for: the classic's

2001/2002; and [http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=V-3d.jpg&o=hrcoVA.aspx\\_\\_topV3](http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoImageFrame.aspx?i=V-3d.jpg&o=hrcoVA.aspx__topV3): *Figure V-3d: Percentage of Americans 18 Years & Older Who Read a Novel, Short Story, Poem, or Play in the Last 12 Months, by Age, 1982 – 2002* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008).

12 J. M. Coetzee, "Zbigniew Herbert and the Figure of the Censor," in *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 151.

13 *Ibid.*, 151, 159.

job is to make classics possible, to picture and provoke enduring responses to misfortune. However, Coetzee does close by telling us, elliptically but powerfully, what a classic is:

Whatever popular opinion may say, whatever the classics themselves may claim, the classic does not belong to an ideal order, nor is it attained by adhering to one set of ideas or another. On the contrary, the classic is the human; or, at least, it is what survives of the human.<sup>14</sup>

What is a classic is a slightly different question from Herbert's, why the classics?, which is slightly different again from Italo Calvino's, why read the classics?; but it is among these questions that I find the urgency and the energy I am seeking in support of literature and the study of literature. Indeed I am close to wanting to reverse Coetzee's claim in regard to Herbert and say that if the notion of the human is under threat, then the argument should be perhaps not that a classic is what survives of the human, but that whatever survives will be some sort of classic for us, an indispensable relic, however impoverished. My further (triple) claim, which I am not going to lay out in detail but which does underlie a great deal of what I am trying to say, is that classics in this sense can belong as readily to new and so-called low culture as to old or high; that a literature without classics, whether in folklore or fancy print, is not a literature; and that we can't have classics at all without a whole rich accompaniment of non-classics, both of criticism and of literary art.

In 1981 Calvino wrote an essay he later called "Why read the classics?"

14 Ibid., 162.

In its initial newspaper form it was rather more mockingly called "Italians, I exhort you to read the classics."<sup>15</sup> This earlier title picks up the conclusion of the essay, where Calvino notes he has mentioned only one Italian name (Leopardi) among all of the many works he has so far named. He says, "Now I ought to rewrite the whole article making it clear that the classics help us understand who we are and where we have got to, and that consequently Italian classics are indispensable to us Italians in order to compare them with foreign classics, and foreign classics are equally indispensable so that we can measure them against Italian classics."<sup>16</sup> We could of course in our context substitute "English and American classics" for "Italian classics" in that sentence.

But then Calvino goes on: "After that I should really rewrite it a third time, so that people do not believe that classics must be read because they serve some purpose. The only reason that can be adduced in their favour is that reading the classics is better than not reading the classics." Then he tells the story of Socrates, just before his death, learning a new melody on the flute. When asked what use that is going to be to him, Socrates says, "At least I will learn this melody before I die."<sup>17</sup>

Although Calvino claims to pinpoint only one "reason that can be adduced in their favour," he gives us fourteen different reasons for reading the classics – or at least fourteen different definitions of a classic. They are all relevant to my ar-

15 Italo Calvino, *Why Read the Classics?* trans. Martin McLaughlin (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 7. Originally published as *Perché leggere i classici?* (Milan: Mondadori, 1995).

16 Ibid., 9.

17 Ibid.

gument (even if my argument is not centrally about the classics), but one is especially important: “Your’ classic is a book to which you cannot remain indifferent, and which helps you to define yourself in relation or even in opposition to it.”<sup>18</sup> Just because your classic is not mine doesn’t mean you don’t have one, even if your classic is something to which I can’t conceive of lending the term. The form of poverty I am interested in is the one where neither of us has a classic of any kind – or has never heard of such a thing.

Calvino adds, along the lines of the literary catholicism I evoked a paragraph or two back, that for him the term *classic* is one “which makes no distinction in terms of antiquity, style or authority.” Furthermore, he names Rousseau as one of his classic authors precisely because, as he says, this writer’s “thoughts and actions . . . arouse in me an irrepressible urge to contradict, criticize and argue with him.”<sup>19</sup> There is all the difference in the world between saying we all need to read the same books and saying we should all, if we can, have books in our lives to which we cannot remain indifferent, especially, perhaps, if our non-indifference takes the form of disagreement. And although Coetzee and Calvino appear to define opposite poles of urgency, desperate and debonair – a classic is what remains of the human; a classic is to be read for no purpose – they are, I suggest, approaching precisely the same subject through very different tones: the work or the story through which we think our lives, and without which our lives are not quite thinkable. Both writers, notably, associate thought and endurance with criticism.

18 Ibid., 7.

19 Ibid.

Coetzee’s phrase “ideal order” glances at T. S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” and in 1991, the same year in which he published his Herbert essay, Coetzee gave close attention to another famous Eliot piece, a lecture called “What Is a Classic?” Coetzee’s essay, also originally a lecture and also titled “What Is a Classic?,” opens with a careful situating of Eliot’s talk: “In October of 1944, as Allied forces were battling on the European mainland and German rockets were falling on London, Thomas Stearns Eliot, aged fifty-six, gave his presidential address to the Virgil Society.”<sup>20</sup> This is the world, or about to be the world, of Auden’s poem, although this connection is mine rather than Coetzee’s. Coetzee offers two definitions of the classic as he thinks Eliot understands it: “a book that has lasted a long time” and “a book that will bear the weight of having read into it a meaning for Eliot’s own age.”<sup>21</sup> Correspondingly he gives us two interpretations of what Eliot is doing. In the view Coetzee describes as “broadly sympathetic,” Eliot is responding to Virgil as a voice from the long literary tradition he had evoked in the earlier essay. In the other, “broadly unsympathetic” view, Eliot is engaged in the “essentially magical enterprise of a man trying to redefine the world around himself.”<sup>22</sup> This second scheme is fraught with historical difficulty. Virgil has to be converted into the essential European; England has to acquire a European identity it didn’t want in 1944 and conceivably wants even less now; and the American Eliot had to have been

20 J. M. Coetzee, “What Is a Classic?” in *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays, 1986 – 1999* (New York: Viking, 2001), 1.

21 Ibid., 5.

22 Ibid., 7.



in some sense English all along. Coetzee clearly thinks the unsympathetic view is right, although he is himself rather sympathetic to it since he sees it as a colonial predicament.

Coetzee is too historically minded to have any truck with Eliot's ethereal tradition – that is just what his dismissive glance at the “ideal order” means – but he does want to ask a transhistorical question and find, if he can, a historical answer. “Is being spoken to across the ages a notion that we can entertain today only in bad faith?”<sup>23</sup> He answers first with another question: how does a literary (or musical) voice speak across the ages anyway? Bach is a classic, Coetzee suggests, not because the intrinsic qualities of his work are sufficient to guarantee immortality or because his reputation has never lapsed or because of a specific, finally enduring historical revival, but because “the musical profession has ways of keeping what it values alive that are qualitatively different from the ways in which the institutions of literature keep submerged but valued writers alive.”<sup>24</sup> It takes a series of committed performers to keep playing together or playing for each other, even if there is no “public awareness” of the work they care about, “even among educated people.”<sup>25</sup> But this playing, Coetzee says, returning to the question he had only apparently abandoned, is itself a form of testing, a continuing speech across the ages. The musical classic is what survives “minute listening and practical criticism” of the hardest and most informed kind. “The criterion of testing and survival,” Coetzee continues,

“is not just a minimal, pragmatic Horatian standard” (the standard of duration), but “a criterion that expresses a certain confidence in the tradition of testing, and a confidence that professionals will not devote labor and attention, generation after generation, to sustaining pieces of music whose life functions have terminated.”<sup>26</sup>

This is, of course, another way of saying, without “invoking any idealist justification of ‘value in itself,’”<sup>27</sup> that the classic is what survives, and at this point in his lecture Coetzee does indeed turn to Herbert and to a fiercer notion of survival than he describes in his essay on the Polish poet – or perhaps only a more specific version of the same notion, including the reversal of emphasis I suggested:

It is not the possession of some essential quality that, in Herbert's eyes, makes it possible for the classic to withstand the assault of barbarism. Rather, what survives the worst of barbarism, surviving because generations of people cannot afford to let go of it and therefore hold on to it at all costs – that is the classic.<sup>28</sup>

History, in other words, offers its own grim form of testing, a testing that in my interpretation of the world of “The Shield of Achilles” no work has managed to pass. But there are less drastic tests, and this is where our works of art and our works of criticism have their necessary meeting. “For as long as the classic needs to be protected from attack,” Coetzee writes, “it can never prove itself a classic.” We could even define the function of criticism

23 Ibid., 13.

24 Ibid., 14.

25 Ibid., 15.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 16.

in this way: “criticism is that which is duty-bound to interrogate the classic.”<sup>29</sup>

Criticism plays the role of history in dark times and of musical performance during the lulls in a great composer’s reputation. And we can criticize the critic, too, as the title of one of Eliot’s essays has it; my own skepticism, for example, about “the professionals” Coetzee seems to me too eager to rely on, can be a test, and can be tested. Literary criticism, often thought to be the battleground of masterful subjectivities – Dr. Johnson or Harold Bloom versus all-comers – is an open location for the practical discussion, evidence literally in hand, of all kinds of topics and modes of embodying them – and even more indispensably at this moment perhaps, for understanding just how the proposition that everyone has a right to be heard is different from the proposition that all opinions are of equal value. The right is ideally indisputable. The value is precisely what we need to talk about, and we can’t know in advance how any opinion will fare. Criticism, we could say, is duty-bound to interrogate opinions, and we may need to keep arguing even when an opinion has become classic. The point is not that an argument can (or can’t) be settled for good. The point is that it can be settled, or at least fully understood, only by hard critical work and large quantities of good faith and goodwill. There are, alas, children and adults who have never heard of such things, as well as many adults who pretend they never have.

Imagine a country, then, a time or a place, whose inhabitants have never heard of any world where promises are kept or human sympathy is active, where appropriate and enduring re-

sponses to misfortune are possible, and where such promises, sympathy, and responses are vividly alive in practical memory and constantly questioned for their value, because anything short of such remembrance and such testing is seen to be sheer barbarism. And imagine then, if you will, what could survive in such a mentally and morally attenuated world. Not nothing, certainly: there are disasters short of the supreme disaster. But how much, and what would it be?

29 Ibid.