

Introduction: the problem of literary value

Not so long ago – and to the surprised consternation of many outside the field of literary studies – literary value was a topic rarely broached in the most prestigious literary critical journals and, in many departments of literature, was a concern that stigmatised its holder as old-fashioned or naïve. In many if not all quarters today, however, this attitude itself now appears old-fashioned, as over the last couple of decades literary value has become the focus of considerable and increasing critical energy. This book contributes to this trend but not in one of the fashions that most other contributions typically assume. In particular, the book neither presents an argument for what specifically constitutes the most important or defining values of literature nor conversely provides a historical account of how certain values have come to be identified with literature. The book is neither a celebration of literary value nor a critique of its fabrication and ideological complicity. Instead, the book seeks to come to grips, pragmatically, with what it understands to be for the field of literary studies the inevitable and inevitably problematic concept of literary value and, more crucially, the practice of literary valuing. Towards this end, the book develops a preliminary theory of literary valuing and explores the nature and consequences of these problematic inevitabilities for three of the field's most basic aspects.

In these explorations, the principal intent is to be practical and diagnostic, to provide a better understanding of the problem of literary value as it affects our everyday activities of scholarship and teaching. My most basic hope is that these diagnoses may be of some use in my readers' unavoidable grappling with the problem of literary value. Because I do not believe that the problem is one that lends itself to a resolution – at least not to a generally

applicable one – readers will not find in this book long, prescriptive exhortations. Instead, towards the end of most of the subsequent chapters I provide some suggestions for or examples of possible responses to the problem, ones that aim to harness that problem as a source of critical energy rather than allowing it to produce within our practices unhelpful, sometimes damaging incoherencies, of which we are in some cases only minimally aware. Most of these responses will be variations on the recommendation to incorporate reflexivity into one's scholarly and pedagogical praxis – a recommendation that is, obviously, scarcely novel. My hope is that the specificities of this recommendation's formulations in the terms of this book will make it more practicable than it often is, as I suspect that reflexivity has been much easier to espouse than actually to realise. Here and there in the book I go beyond such practical responses and offer suggestions for how the framework that I develop might help to address one or more of the many ills of the field of literary studies, the continuing existence of which plainly constitutes one of this book's principal prompts. I list of few these ills below; here perhaps they may be collectively signalled by the results of a survey conducted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences that Judith Butler discusses in a recent *MLA Newsletter*. As Butler observes, while the results show encouragingly that '84% of Americans ... have a positive view of literature', they also attest, discouragingly, to the view of many 'that the teaching of literature at the college or university level is a "waste of time" or cost[s] too much'.¹ This discrepancy exemplifies the sort of incoherence, or gap, that has motivated this book.

While I will consider value in a number of ways in the pages that follow, by the phrase 'literary value' I mean, most often and most basically, the value of the literary as a category or, to adapt denotations from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'The relative worth, usefulness, or importance of [the category of the literary], the estimation in which [that category] is held according to its real or supposed desirability or utility'; 'the quality of [the category] considered in respect of its ability to serve a specified purpose or cause a particular effect'.² I take this as my basic topic rather than the category of the literary itself for reasons that will become evident by [Chapter 2](#) but most simply because literary value is the more historically persistent troublemaker, despite the seeming logical

priority of the adjective in its label. While the distinctive concept of and associated terminology for literary value appear to have been products of the rise of aesthetic discourse in the eighteenth century, ‘the emergence of a named concept in historical time’, as Maura Nolan reminds us, ‘does not necessarily indicate a point of origin’.³ And in this instance the historical record plainly shows that a concern with a phenomenon recognisable as literary value in the sense above goes back at least as far as Plato’s negative judgement of it.

I suspect that what constitutes the nature of the category of the literary, either in the abstract or in respect to the practices of a specific place or time, will remain a thorny question, one that – however fruitful the many answers it has elicited have been – is likely permanently intractable. Yet this difficulty has never prevented considerations of its value, which have been both socially more pervasive and rhetorically more urgent in their articulations. In this respect, it is simply like any other value-laden category, which easily beckons judgement regardless of how much the judging individual understands the nature of the category. Indeed, in the history of literary theory it has been defences of literary value, triggered by attacks upon it (such as Sir Philip Sidney’s response to Stephen Gosson), that have very often served as the impetus behind the most searching and innovative attempts to define the nature of the literary. This book takes as its informing rationale this continuous – if not of course unchanging – concern with the value of the literary, in whatever more-or-less culturally distinct form the latter category of writing has taken. It does not attempt to trace the waxing and waning of historically specific features of the discourse of literary value, such as those crucial ones that arose in concert with the discourse of economic value in the writings of, say, Adam Smith and Karl Marx, which have been treated extensively by others.⁴ It also does not primarily consider literary value in the sense of the comparative merit of specific works, although it will explore, especially in [Chapters 1](#) and [4](#), some of the practical and conceptual ramifications of the fact that that sense is a necessary corollary of the one above, and so the problem of literary value encompasses both.

This book’s point of departure is the observation that literary value has been a problem, in the sense of a prominent and current area of investigation and debate, from no later than Plato’s impugning of it. But just as importantly it recognises, as I have

suggested, that literary value has been at various times, and is at present very much so, a problem in the more ordinary sense of a perplexity causing distress. The rather stark reemergence of this latter kind of problem over the last third of the twentieth century, indeed, has likely prompted the recent renewed attention given to the former kind. As we are all acutely aware, the field of literary studies, still in the process of setting its new bearings and centres of gravity following the late twentieth-century self-questioning of its basic aims and objects of study, finds itself confronting declining undergraduate majors, vanishing tenure-track lines, open hostility from the administrative and legislative bodies that control much of its funding, and so on.⁵ In this dispiriting context, the value of literature as the field's legitimating principle no longer appears to possess an institutional and public relations efficacy as potent as it once held (witness the aforementioned survey results). Hence, confronting these practical problems, many literary scholars have not coincidentally returned with vigour to the more academic question of what the value of literature is, how it has historically evolved and how it has functioned within and without the field, in the past and present, and how it might so function in the future.

Most simplistically, some commentators have placed the blame for the practical problems on the field's putative abandonment of literary value – because of theory, historicism, cultural studies, politically activist approaches and whatever other bogeymen might be the culprits.⁶ This book wholly rejects this view as a fruitlessly nostalgic one that misconceives as a fall from grace what was instead a pivotal and necessary, if turbulent, moment in which the field recognised and sought to ameliorate many of its conceptual and institutional blind spots. And I suspect, too, that the practical problems that the field faces ultimately have less to do with anything internal to the field itself as much as with the large-scale transformation of the scope and thus also the actual and perceived functions of the institutions of higher education that have, for well over a century, been the field's principal domicile.⁷ The latter topic, however, is for a very different book from this one. Here I address not the reasons for the transformation of higher education, whatever they may be, but how in this context literary value operates and some of the implications of that operation.

In the remainder of this introduction, I locate in a little more detail the academic problem of literary value amid the anxieties rife within the field of literary studies. Looking back to work that emerged in response to this problem over the last few decades, I characterise two of the prominent and rather antithetical critical trends in this response (the ones already hinted at above). Against that backdrop I then provide a fuller explanation of the project of this book.

In the Anglo-American academy since about the mid-1990s, theoretical considerations of literary value have steadily become more common and are now perhaps more widespread than they ever have been, and in retrospect this reemergence should come as no surprise. As Gerald Graff and others have described, since the modern institutionalisation of literary studies in the nineteenth century the academy has never been entirely comfortable with value, which – as transmitted by canonical authors such as Chaucer and Shakespeare – at once both justified the study of literature (for various and competing humanistic and philological reasons) and threatened to exile it, by reducing it to a matter of taste rather than reason.⁸ If value was therefore not very often directly theorised, it was scarcely ever questioned. New Criticism, more alert to the issue than its methodological predecessors, proved particularly adept at negotiating the dilemma of value, establishing a balancing act between judgement and interpretation, in which a reasoned determination of the principles of relative artistic unity at the same time implicitly determined relative literary merit.

This balancing act, of course, turned out to be rather fragile. The critiques of the literary canon that shook the academy in the 1970s (especially in the US) disclosed this harmony of interpretation and judgement to be propped up by a canon whose assumed value justified a practice of criticism that – aside from local areas of contestation, especially around the canonical margins – merely and predictably confirmed canonical value. Revealed to be conceptually aporetic, ideologically freighted (usually more-or-less covertly) and historically and culturally relative, literary value, unprecedentedly, appeared no longer able to function as a half-concealed underpinning of the discipline. David F. Bell, recalling this viewpoint in his contribution to *PMLA*'s 2002 series of essays on the question 'Why

Major in Literature – What Do We Tell Our Students’, distils it to the query ‘What group has the right to decide the value of a literary text? Is this decision not always an oppressive move to control what is permitted in discourse?’ In response, the field’s ‘best solution’ was, he notes, ‘to forgo the question of value and to broaden the spectrum of the literary as much as possible’.⁹ And to different degrees and in different ways, certain kinds of cultural studies, historicism and book history or manuscript studies (to name a few of the pertinent approaches) emerged as shrewd recalibrations of the field’s object of study, ones for which value is (putatively) incidental rather than defining, or at most an object of sociohistorical inquiry. In short, the field recovered its rationale by pushing value aside.¹⁰

These shifts in the object of study became prevalent enough that they provoked an identity crisis for a field that still (at least in most institutional instances) featured the term *literature* in its denomination. As then PMLA editor Carlos J. Alonso remarked in respect to the aforementioned series on ‘Why Major in Literature’, ‘[T]here is no longer a consensus on the object of literary studies or on the justifications for pursuing this field as an intellectual project ... we are confronted with the weakness that arises from our dismantling of our own house.’¹¹ Alonso is recognising that by the mid-1990s, these shifts – coinciding with perceived declines in research funding, student enrolments and public prestige – seemed to many to have constituted a grave, ill-conceived error. Backward-looking apologists, such as Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon*, issued elegiac accounts of value that had wide dissemination, although little impact in the academy.¹² More accurate barometers of the field’s tipping point were the anguished voices of critics such as George Levine, who by and large accepted the terms of the critique of the canon but nonetheless called for a restoration of the centrality of literature and its value in the discipline.

Levine’s succinct and candid expression of these views in a 1993 *Profession* essay may stand for the sentiments of many others in the same period. The founding director of the Center for the Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture at Rutgers, Levine first describes the field’s shift in its object of study that the name of his own centre appears to consolidate:

Nominally, we teach in English departments or literature departments. But many of the best-known in our field are professionally interested

in things that are only marginally related to English or literature ... in much of the best-known criticism in recent years, the first objective, however mediated by a study of texts, is social or political change; literature ... is often regarded as a kind of enemy of change and serves primarily to be demystified, denaturalized, and shown to be complicit with dominant ideologies whose traces it seeks invariably to efface.

Yet, however much he accepts the rationale for this shift and appreciates its energies, he goes on to characterise it as a dire threat, even if just for largely practical reasons:

by carrying out these multiple and often conflicting activities under the protection of English departments, we have left the profession particularly vulnerable to popular chastising and threatening. Moreover, I believe that we need to consider some of these anomalies in the discipline now, in practical institutional terms. We must examine the value of the literary and the aesthetic ... if English, as a profession sustained by publicly and privately endowed institutions, is to survive.¹³

Levine's repeated references to the 'best-known' critics and criticism as evidence of the shift in the field's object, however, suggest that this shift was never as hegemonic as it may have felt from within the enclaves of Research I English departments. Out of the spotlight but nonetheless residing within very influential locales – such as in the headnotes in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* – the field's traditional commitment to value persisted throughout the period, even if the canon itself underwent transformation, reconception and a degree of abandonment.¹⁴ As Steven Connor perspicaciously remarked in 1992, 'value and evaluation have not so much been exiled as driven into the critical unconscious, where they continue to exercise force but without being available for analytic scrutiny'.¹⁵ From this perspective, our current critical climate, with its variety of (to name just a few trends) new formalisms, new aestheticisms, ethical criticisms, reparative readings, and so on, represents the inevitable return of the repressed, either as laudable kind of disciplinary talking cure or as a regressive neurosis, depending on where one's critical sympathies lie.¹⁶

Yet there is more operative in this perhaps inevitable critical rebound than just field-internal psychodynamics. For, as most of us are painfully aware, the now decades-long external sources of Levine's anxiety have not abated but in fact have intensified. As Rita

Felski has queried, 'In such an austere and inauspicious climate, how do scholars of literature make a case for the value of what we do? How do we come up with rationales for reading and talking about books without reverting to the canon-worship of the past?'¹⁷ And even if we were able to evade such questions issuing from outside the academy, they are increasingly omnipresent within, most mundanely, perhaps, from the demands of quantitative programme assessment to produce straightforward answers to such questions and to develop mechanisms for measuring their success. Obviously, this institutional imperative, as well as the external demands for justification, may be more easily met if the field actually were to conceive of its nominal object of study as valuable. Hence not coincidentally over the last couple of decades there has been an ever-increasing proliferation of publications that take up exactly the project that Levine and others called for.

Such publications range in scope and audience from the MLA 'Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature', to special issues of journals somehow devoted to the topic (both generally and for subfields, as in issues of, respectively, *MLQ* and *ChR*), to a flurry of monographs that similarly treat the topic both broadly (such as Gregory Jusdanis's *Fiction Agonistes*) and for specific subfields (such as Peggy Knapp's *Chaucerian Aesthetics*).¹⁸ The bibliography, indeed, has grown to intimidating proportions in a relatively short time.¹⁹ Hence, in lieu of a survey, I will let the Teagle Report speak for the group, since, given its practical, programmatic aims, it conveys the basic sentiment (if not of course the specific rationales) of this trend of publications in a particularly unguarded manner. '[W]ithout literature,' the report asserts, 'there is no in-depth understanding of narratives that lead to the discovery of other cultures in their specificities and diversity and to the understanding of other human beings in their similarities and differences.' Therefore, '[w]hile we advocate incorporating into the major the study of a variety of texts, we insist that the most beneficial among these are literary works, which offer their readers a rich and challenging – and therefore rewarding – object of study.' While the canon and its supposed universal values are nowhere to be found in the report, literature and its universal value (for example, its ability to provide an 'imaginative context through which readers gain insight into politics, history, society, emotion, and the interior life') have

returned to centre stage.²⁰ A similarly motivated report from a group of Harvard humanities professors – including, from English, Homi Bhabha and James Simpson – more boldly recommends restoring a canon to the undergraduate curriculum, albeit one whose value is evident precisely in its ideological flexibility.²¹

These voices of advocacy, despite their current prominence and growing frequency, obviously do not constitute a consensus. As a casual glance at many publishers' 'new and forthcoming' lists makes evident, and as hallway conversations with one's colleagues may easily confirm, much scholarship and teaching continues to proceed within a cultural studies or historicist paradigm, in which literature serves as merely one form of evidence among others.²² Moreover, those who seek to revalorise literature must contend with the powerful critique of the discourse of literary value that emerged in the aftermath of the 1970s canon debates, and which possesses continuing influence and articulation. Like the voices of advocacy, these counter-voices recognise the centrality of literary value to the field and seek to account for it, but in contrast take a more neutral and sometimes even hostile approach. As exemplified by the seminal triumvirate of Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class* and Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Contingencies of Value*, these studies – as different in their focuses, methods and conclusions as they are – share an emphasis on the constructedness, relativity and instrumentality of literary value.²³ According to Eagleton, for example, 'There is no such thing as a literary work or tradition valuable *in itself*, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it. "Value" is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in light of given purposes.' For Eagleton these 'given purposes', as embodied in 'value-judgements', are most fundamentally ideological: 'They refer in the end not simply to private taste, but to the assumptions by which certain social groups exercise and maintain power over others.'²⁴ Critiques such as this one may be more-or-less accepting of value as an ineradicable aspect of the field, but they seek to disclose its mystifying seductions, which typically occur in the form of universalising and essentialising claims.²⁵

Subsequent critiques have put particular emphasis on the historical genesis and function of the discourse of literary value, being less

concerned about its relativity than about the nature and implications of its specific determinations. In remarkably intricate detail, these critiques have traced the emergence of this discourse in specific historical circumstances in relation to other discourses, and they have followed the transmutations of this discourse and its functions through subsequent periods, up to the present. For example, one of the first of such critiques – Ian Hunter’s Foucauldian study of the emergence of literary education – identifies the discourse of value as part of the moral disciplinary mechanisms of the state apparatus of public education.²⁶ Even more influentially, John Guillory, adapting the work of Pierre Bourdieu, traces the discourse of literary value from its precipitation from more general eighteenth-century accounts of value to its current, but waning, function as the underpinning of literary cultural capital.²⁷ (In general, Bourdieu’s studies of the operation of cultural value in France – particularly *Distinction* and *The Field of Cultural Production* – have had tremendous impact on Anglo-American thinking on this topic and are often sourced for definitions of the meaning and function of literary value in a considerably less nuanced manner than in Guillory’s adaptation.²⁸) More recently, Mary Poovey has revisited the eighteenth-century emergence of a distinct discourse of literary value and its subsequent entanglements with the discourse of economic value, with consequences for both.²⁹ Interestingly, in the final sections of this study, addressing the implications of her findings for current practices of literary criticism, Poovey turns back to Hunter to develop a method of critical analysis, ‘historical description’, that does not depend on the category of literary value that she finds still haunts New Historicist readings, since only a method free of this category can delineate that category’s historical operation. Wholly devoted to the topic of value, her study seeks to be, at least in respect to literature, value-neutral.

I will return to these two rather different approaches to literary value – simply put, advocacy and critique – in [Chapter 2](#), where, as points of departure for my preliminary theory of literary valuing, I will give them better labels, scrutinise some of their implications and interdependencies and indicate some of what they leave out. At this point, I just suggest that while these two kinds of approaches by no means encompass all recent treatments of literary value, they

do account for two of the most prominent and urgently pursued argumentative tendencies. And, while these tendencies are not incompatible (indeed, they not infrequently coexist within the same study), they are logically antithetical. Hence they tend to reproduce each other, with the conceptual lacunae of the one serving as the prompt for the other, resulting in a dialectical ping-pong match with no ready synthesis in sight. I do not mean this whimsical characterisation to be slighting; this dialectical ping-ponging has in fact generated a remarkable volume of important work. I merely mean to emphasise that this present study articulates and explores the implications of an approach to literary value that seeks to play neither side.

This book adopts a pragmatic approach to literary value, one that recognises the potential validity of the claims of both the affirmative and suspicious approaches but brackets those claims by focusing on the practical implications of our everyday activities as scholars and teachers of a thing that we continue to call literature. This book argues that regardless of how literary value is formulated in advocacies of its importance, interrogated in critiques of its function or history or simply obscured or pushed aside, as a category operating pragmatically it remains inextricably essential to the field of literary studies, simply because that category is an ineluctable participant in the apprehension of an object as literary. In this light, the problem of literary value becomes not much how to define it or to find a substitute for it, but rather, in the myriad activities that we pursue as literary scholars and teachers, how to reconcile its ineluctability with our understandable uncertainty regarding its precise nature and our wary cognisance of its complicities.

As I mentioned at the outset, however, in the chapters that follow I do not attempt to prescribe sure remedies for accomplishing this reconciliation. While the book does propose some possibilities in this regard, I devote most of its pages to the more basic work of accounting for some of the several dimensions in which the problem of literary value is felt. Specifically, the book offers, as an explanation of its view regarding the ineluctability of the category of literary value, a preliminary, pragmatic theory of literary valuing, and it explores the implications and ramifications of this ineluctability for three prominent aspects of the field of literary studies in the

practical formations that they take at present and have taken in the recent past. These three aspects will serve as sites or case studies in which the sprawling complexities of the problem of literary value may be reconnoitred within a specific focus and in some depth.

Perhaps a bit counterintuitively, the [first chapter](#) does not supply the theory of literary valuing but instead the first case study: most basically, it considers literary value in relation to the edition of a literary work and specifically the Chaucer edition. The basis of this chapter is an article that I published in 2008. In reworking this material, I have sought to transform it from a reflection on the implications of what was then an ongoing critique of the Chaucer edition from the perspective of manuscript studies into a reflection on the implications of the brushing aside of that critique in the years that followed. It locates that critique at a moment in literary critical history when one set of still dominant trends (historicism in particular) was beginning to yield to others, most of which remain current today. The chapter thus looks backward and forward from 2008, showing how the problem of literary value has remained a problem throughout and arguing that the continued operation of the problem constituted one of the principal reasons why the critique of the edition never gained traction. This chapter has earned the opening slot not merely out of the convenience of its compositional chronology, therefore, but because of the way its exploration of the critique of the edition runs headlong into the problem of literary value, thereby providing an initial limning of the contours of that problem that the subsequent chapters will elaborate. In effect, it illustrates why the book's theory of literary valuing is needed. More so than the other chapters, this one spends most of its time within the confines of Chaucer studies, although its more general implications are, I believe, readily evident.

[Chapters 2 and 3](#) develop the book's preliminary theory of literary valuing. Not aspiring towards the formulation of a full-blown theory, these chapters instead follow the prompts of [Chapter 1](#) in order to identify a set of principles that they formalise in various ways, with the aim of thereby establishing a conceptual ground for this book's treatment of the problem of literary value. [Chapter 2](#), to provide additional context and rationale for this preliminary theory, first revisits the literary value theoretical ping-pong match

mentioned above. Staking out an alternative, it then presents a framework for understanding literary valuing. It argues, in a nutshell, that when pragmatically considered, literary value is the effect of an activity of mediation wholly coincident with its conception as a quality, an activity performed by actors within a network that shapes all individual instances, and an activity that is a social fact integral to the phenomenon of the literary and yet neither singular nor necessarily stable in character.

As the lexis of the preceding formulation signals, my preliminary theory of literary valuing relies upon some key concepts from Actor-Network Theory. [Chapter 3](#) makes this and other theoretical debts more explicit in its effort to expand upon the preliminary theory in a few important ways. In particular, [Chapter 3](#) considers the implications of a broadly characteristic (if not necessary) feature of the activity of literary valuing, which it names loose binding. To accomplish this, it first makes explicit its understanding of value as a general category, for which it draws from the work of Georg Simmel and later theorists of value in his vein, blending Simmel's ideas with those from Actor-Network Theory to present a fundamentally differential, dynamic account of value. Elucidating loose binding in those terms, the chapter then develops a pragmatic framework for understanding how different kinds of value mutually determine one another and, as an illustration of these several points, considers Giovanni Boccaccio's reflections on the value of poetry, as exemplified by Dante. The chapter closes with two sections that begin to answer the question of 'so what'. The first of these does this by way of clarifying the relation between the concept of loose binding and the hoary formalist one of defamiliarisation, while the second suggests that the axiological framework that I am proposing might serve as the 'big tent' that the field of literary studies no longer possesses.

While this book offers its preliminary theory of literary valuing for whatever utility it may possess on its own, the theory also informs the following two chapters. [Chapter 4](#) tackles one of the most troubling aspects of the problem of literary value, its ideological complicity (as acutely evident in, e.g., colonialist, white supremacist and androcentric ideologies), considering this in respect to the idea and practice of canonicity. For this purpose it

revisits the canon wars of the late twentieth century, but its main aim is to identify how, and then explore the implications of the fact that, the ineluctability of canonicity and simultaneously its inescapable complicity remain with us. Towards this end, it draws on the preceding chapters' preliminary theory of literary valuing to describe several concrete manifestations of how canonicity ineluctability emerges despite attempts to evade or to identify an alternative to it, and, conversely, of how canonicity's ideological complicity inevitably haunts explicit efforts to defend it as a principle. The chapter concludes by providing an example of how this dilemma, although not resolvable, might become generative rather than merely perplexing, and thereby constitute one of the field's distinctive disciplinary contributions.

The topic of the book's [final chapter](#) is interpretation, understood in its most general sense as the activity that we perform when ascribing any sort of meaning to a literary text. As in [Chapter 4](#), to manage the (even more) sprawling nature of this topic, the chapter keeps its focus trained on specific manifestations of the problem of literary value, here in instances of interpretation or reflections on interpretation. It examines such instances from several decades ago up to the present, using them to elucidate a foundational problem of interpretation in the terms of [Chapter 2](#) and [3](#)'s preliminary theory of literary valuing. In particular, it emphasises that one essential facet of the infamous hermeneutic circle is that value ascription inaugurates the activity of interpretation, is its outcome and pervades it at each step. The chapter then takes a close, sustained look at the efforts of one celebrated medievalist, Lee Patterson, to come to grips with this very problem in his efforts to establish a firm grounding for academic literary study, seeking to trace in Patterson's response the challenges and pitfalls that such efforts may entail. In its final section, the chapter considers a pair of recent medievalist interpretations that point toward a way of leveraging those challenges as a source of critical insight while keeping at bay entanglements in paradox.

In a brief postscript, I seek to take my own advice of pursuing a reflexive critical practice and lay my cards on the table, so to speak, in regard to literary value in general and Chaucer's value in particular.

Notes

- 1 Judith Butler, 'The Future of the Humanities Can Be Found in Its Public Forums', *MLA Newsletter*, 52:4 (2020), 2–3.
- 2 *OED value* n., 6.a and 6.c.
- 3 Maura Nolan, 'Making the Aesthetic Turn: Adorno, the Medieval, and the Future of the Past', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 34:3 (2004), 549–75 (571).
- 4 E.g., John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Malden: Blackwell, 1990).
- 5 James F. English, *The Global Future of English Studies* (New York: John Wiley, 2012), casts doubt on this ubiquitous narrative of crisis and decline when English Studies is considered in a global context. Yet the experiences that I list are widely enough attested, at least in North America, to suggest that even if the rhetoric of crisis may be overwrought, the field is going through a basic transformation in respect to the institutional and discursive contexts in which it has for many decades existed. Such basic transformations are, of course, typically experienced as crisis and decline by those with an investment in the status quo.
- 6 This view is particularly common in journalistic forums. See, e.g., Verlyn Klinkenborg, 'The Decline and Fall of the English Major', *New York Times* (23 June 2013), New York edition, p. SR10.
- 7 Consider, e.g., the massive expansion in North America of the number of individuals whom higher education serves, the consequent effect on employment qualifications and the consequent change in public perception of what a university degree accomplishes. English, *Global Future*, treats these and related phenomena under the heading 'massification', arguing that a vision of universal higher education realised at something akin to the level of R1 universities or elite liberal arts colleges was always a fantasy. For a well-known different diagnosis, see Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
- 8 Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- 9 David F. Bell, 'A Moratorium on Suspicion?', *PMLA*, 117:3 (2002), 487–90 (488). Bell goes on to oppose this view.
- 10 For one of the book-length accounts of this disciplinary 'paradigm shift', see Antony Easthope, *Literary into Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1991).

- 11 Carlos J. Alonso, 'Editor's Column: My Professional Advice (to Graduate Students)', *PMLA*, 117:3 (2002), 401–6 (401). Cf. the observation of James F. English, 'Literary Studies', in Tony Bennett and John Frow (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Cultural Analysis* (London: SAGE, 2008), pp. 126–44, from a few years later that 'according to what has lately become a persistent and intensifying complaint, literary study has practically disappeared from many higher-educational institutions, and the true literary scholar is today a largely residual figure' (p. 126).
- 12 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).
- 13 George Levine, 'The Real Trouble', *Profession* (1993), 43–5 (43, 43–4). See also Levine's more extensive consideration of the issue around this same time in 'Introduction: Reclaiming the Aesthetic', in George Levine (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ideology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), pp. 1–28, some of the contributions to which collection perform the very demystification about which Levine is both understanding and anxious; and, more recently, see George Levine, 'Saving Disinterest: Aesthetics, Contingency, and Mixed Conditions', *NLH*, 32:4 (2001), 907–31. For another mid-nineties collection that as a whole voices similar ambivalence toward literary value, see James Soderholm (ed.), *Beauty and the Critic: Aesthetics in an Age of Cultural Studies* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997).
- 14 For one particularly lucid diagnosis of the sometimes hyperbolic perceptions of the demise of literary studies at the hands of cultural studies, see Rita Felski, 'The Role of Aesthetics in Cultural Studies', in Michael Bérubé (ed.), *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 28–43.
- 15 Steven Connor, *Theory and Cultural Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 14.
- 16 For one representative sampling of value-friendly literary critical approaches, see *PMLA*, 125:4 (2010), a special issue on 'Literary Criticism for the Twenty-First Century' guest edited by Jonathan Culler.
- 17 Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), p. 2.
- 18 MLA Teagle Foundation Working Group, 'Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature', *Profession* (2009), 285–312; *MLQ*, 72:3 (2011), a special issue on 'Literary Value'; *ChR*, 39:3 (2005), a special issue on 'Chaucer and Aesthetics'; Gregory Jusdanis, *Fiction Agonistes: In Defense of Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Peggy A. Knapp, *Chaucerian Aesthetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan,

2008). Also symptomatic in this regard is the fact that beginning in 2007 the MLA forum for The Teaching of Literature sponsored an annual session on the rather forum-existential topic of 'Why Teach Literature Anyway'. The series extended through 2020, although the 'Anyway' disappears from the title in 2012.

- 19 I cite additional studies of this sort in later chapters.
- 20 Teagle Working Group, 'Report', pp. 289, 289, 290. Cf. Jusdanis's neo-Horatian formula of literary value – 'to provide pleasure and a social purpose at the same time': 'On the one hand, we derive much enjoyment and excitement as we step into an illusory world. Yet from its fictional universe, we are also able to gaze back at the actual one, criticize it, see alternatives, or seek to transform it' (*Fiction Agonistes*, p. 3).
- 21 Harvard Humanities Working Group, 'The Teaching of the Arts and Humanities at Harvard College: Mapping the Future', https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/sdkelly/files/mapping_the_future_12_april_2013.pdf (2013; accessed 4 January 2020). For example, the report states, 'As the profiles of our disciplines shrink, we might also turn to those works that magnify the discipline, sometimes known as the canon ... A revisited canon could, however, be more flexibly sensitive to the conviction that works of enduring force and fame remain worth reading not least because great works of art never speak with unequivocal voice for one, closed position. That open-ended self-division is the very condition of their greatness' (p. 31).
- 22 Thus, to offer a single anecdote, when hearing about the topic of this book, my former colleague Jake Mattox – a scholar and teacher of nineteenth-century American Literature – quizzically rejoined, 'But aren't most English departments training people to challenge the whole question of value?'
- 23 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
- 24 Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, pp. 11, 16. Those who have followed Eagleton's career know that on this topic his views have continued to evolve. See, e.g., Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).
- 25 For a succinct history of the wider domain of axiological theory that traces the emergence of this anti-essentialist position, see John Fekete, 'Introductory Notes for a Postmodern Value Agenda', in John

Fekete (ed.), *Life after Postmodernism: Essays on Value and Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), pp. i–xix. Notably – and, in retrospect, presciently – as a whole the essays in this collection pivot between this anti-essentialism and something closer to advocacy.

- 26 Ian Hunter, *Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988).
- 27 Guillory, *Cultural Capital*.
- 28 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
- 29 Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).