

3

Loose binding and its affordances

The skeletal theory of literary valuing of the preceding chapter beckons fleshing out in a number of ways. The primary aim of this chapter is to address two principle needs in this regard and, in the course of their elaboration, to consider several other related issues. Across its first five sections, the chapter elucidates a feature of literary valuing – loose binding, as I term it – that has very often characterised the activity and examines some of its implications. Along with the preceding chapter's formulations, these additional considerations comprise the theoretical contribution of this book and also form the conceptual basis for the next two chapters. Then, more briefly in the final section (and to some degree also in the penultimate one), the chapter offers the book's initial explanation of how its theory may be of some use in the field of literary studies.

In the first five sections, the chapter continues the preceding chapter's project of seeking an alternative to ontological and genealogical approaches to literary value, but here this alternative may seem more like the very alternating ping-ponging that I have observed of others, a pivoting between claiming and disclaiming aspects of both of those approaches. In particular, with the concept of loose binding, I introduce a feature of literary valuing that has in one fashion or another served as the basis for many an ontological theory of literary value. Then, by insisting nonetheless that this feature is neither essential nor defining but historically contingent, I may seem to be casting a genealogical eye on this supposedly ontological quality. But as in [Chapter 2](#), my aim is to bracket ontology and genealogy rather than to claim or disclaim them. To say that loose binding is in practice historically contingent will not necessarily prohibit it from also being the essence of the truly

literary; and, conversely, to say that it has broadly characterised literary valuing will not require that it must do so for that valuing to be truly literary. The second clause of each of those preceding statements begs a normative question that I am not entertaining, one way or another. With this caveat in place, let us now dig a bit deeper into my preliminary theory.

Differential value

To this point in this book, I have been using the term *value* as if it were only the qualifier *literary* that complicated its denotation, but of course a number of rather different theories of value, with potentially large ideological stakes, may lurk within that everyday word. I cannot hope to enter in any significant way into this vast tradition of debate, which spans several branches of philosophy, economics, political economy, anthropology and sociology, not to mention aesthetics and literary theory. But the preliminary theory of literary valuing that I developed in the preceding chapter requires that I at least account for the operative understanding of value that it rests upon. With that understanding on the table, moreover, further dimensions of the theory will come into clearer view.

As has been evident, if not fully explained, this book takes an axiological approach to value, by which I mean an approach that is interested in the relations among what may seem very different kinds of value – an approach interested in how, say, moral, economic and aesthetic values differ but also, more importantly, in what they share. For this purpose, my ultimate conceptual touchstone is Georg Simmel's turn-of-the-century *Philosophy of Money*, which I have read as refracted through the lens of such later accounts of value as Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Contingencies of Value*.¹ Although the title of Simmel's sprawling *magnum opus* may give the impression of axiological narrowness – and indeed the work is best known for its penetrating reflections on the pervasive effects of the money economy on society, culture and consciousness – this methodologically idiosyncratic book, as its commentators have pointed out, has an ambitiously far-reaching scope. Disciplinarily anomalous, *The Philosophy of Money* today is perhaps most read by sociologists, even though Simmel understood himself as writing philosophy,

with his primary interlocutors including Kant, Nietzsche and Marx (although the latter most often silently). As Elizabeth S. Goodstein observes, '*The Philosophy of Money* asks, not what money is, but rather what the (historical, cultural) phenomenon of money reveals about human existence and the conditions of reflection on that existence.' In this way, Goodstein perspicaciously argues, the work is best understood as 'modernist philosophy' that 'is a crucial point of origin for that modern mode of reflection that has come to be called theory'.²

In brief, Simmel understands value as inhering neither in object nor subject but rather emerging in the relation between subject and object, in further relation to other subject-object value relations.³ At one juncture, Simmel makes use of a geometrical analogy to explain this point:

from the relationship between us and objects develops the imperative to pass a certain judgment, the content of which, however, does not reside in the things themselves. The same is true in judging length; the objects themselves require that we judge them, but the quality of length is not given by the objects and can only be realized by an act within ourselves. We are not aware of the fact that length is established only by a process of comparison and is not inherent in the individual object on which length depends.⁴

As this analogy clarifies, value emerges in 'a process of comparison', which means that it is inseparable from an activity that involves not only a relation among objects (here in respect to relative lengths) but also a relation between subject and object (in the act of comparing), as well as between one subject/object relation and others (in establishing and recognising length as an evaluative category). In the language of classical economics that Simmel, along with Marx, inherited and problematised, all value is thus, in effect, exchange value, even when – as in most situations, and as the analogy suggests – no physical exchange is involved. Rather, physical exchange stands synecdochically for the broader relation of contingency, which is to say that all ascriptions of value, all judgements, are realised only in relation to other ascriptions from which they somehow differ.

Thus, while the notion of exchange lies at the heart of Simmel's thinking, the term *exchange value* has minimal purchase for him,

implying as it may that value may be otherwise realised – as, say, use value or labour value, categories that Simmel puts aside. As evident in his geometrical analogy, for Simmel the value of anything, including labour, is no more and no less than whatever in any particular situation it is being compared to, and so, strictly speaking, the term *value* needs no qualification. For these reasons, Natàlia Cantó Milà has named Simmel's account a wholly relational theory of value. But as my summary has already begun to suggest, we might just as well name it differential. For while Simmel does not, of course, explain his theory by way of Saussurean linguistics, passages such as those quoted above suggest that he would have agreed that value has no positive terms but rather emerges within a system in which equivalence can only be conceived (that is, birthed as well as thought) through difference.⁵ The parallel with Saussure, moreover, signals that this theory of value does not entail ontological claims. In the same way that to theorise the differential nature of the signifier and signified is to make no assumptions, one way or another, about the referent, Simmel's description of value's contingency – at least for my limited ambitions – is a pragmatic one that does not necessarily preclude arguments that have their basis outside of that contingency. Such a pragmatic account of value, moreover, slides quite smoothly into the loose adaptation of ANT that I introduced in the preceding chapter. Put in those terms, value of all kinds emerges within a network of mediations among value-ascribing actors.⁶ The principal emendation required is that what Simmel calls subject and object are in ANT both just actors in a network, albeit ones potentially of different types. (Hence, here and throughout, when I use the Simmel's terminology of subject and object, I do so merely heuristically in respect to the immediate pragmatic situation of an act of valuing.)

Loose binding

According to this relational, contingent, differential account of value, one which puts aside the notion of use value, virtually any kind of value may in principle be ascribed to anything by anyone (or anything). Yet obviously in practice there are limits to those ascriptions, often very constrained ones. We do not usually ascribe

to pizza, say, the spiritual value of access to the divine. *Contra* Simmel's theory of value, most of us instead perceive pizza to possess a definite, straightforwardly identifiable use value. But this case is easily explicable – and generalisable – as the effect of a constellation of value ascription relations having achieved some amount of temporal persistence, a sort of hardening of a portion of the network, in the form of historically specific systems of production and consumption. The impression that pizza has the use value of, say, satisfaction of hunger is the effect of a specific set of mediations of value ascriptions across a network of actors – say, bakers, sellers, advertisers, buyers, eaters, dough, sauce, cheese, and so on (some of which already ascribe a different value to pizza) – that has achieved enough stability so as to seem an effect, rather than the fabricating process, of that value. But at any moment the constellation may shift in a way that alters the impression of a centrally determining use value. Whimsically, we might imagine a supremely successful marketing effort that convinces an ageing but still irony-loving Generation X that using frozen pizza as Frisbees is the next great suburban American pastime. More seriously, we might imagine low-carb diets becoming the norm and thus pizza coming to carry less the value of food and more that of a reactionary ideological statement.⁷ In general, however, in very many cases, a stable, persistent constellation of value ascriptions has the pragmatic effect of making some objects appear to us as more tightly associated with some kinds of value than they are with others, so much so that their value strikes us as indeed inherent and self-evident, requiring no explanation or defence. Thus, pragmatically, we may say that pizza, within the networks of valuing in which it is usually produced and consumed, is relatively *tightly bound* with the value of hunger satisfaction, and that, over a long stretch of time and wide swath of space, this tight binding has been stable enough to appear objective.

In contrast, the value of, say, a brick is considerably more mutable. Across actors or even for the same actor, it may have value as home construction material, a piece of garden landscaping, a campfire barrier, part of a tire-changing toolkit, a paper weight, a weapon, and so on. Unless an actor's daily activities involve valuing bricks in a specific fashion, the actor is likely regularly to ascribe various values to them and sometimes find no value in them at all. In contradistinction with pizza, then, the variety of different network

constellations involving bricks, the diversity within a single constellation and the relative instability of some or all constellations mean that any one value ascribed to bricks may pragmatically strike us as *loosely bound* – less self-evident, more in need of explanation, not inherent, potentially improper. (Thus, while the value as construction material may in most situations remain self-evident, that of, say, water conservation [by placing a brick in your toilet tank] may not be.) This is not an ontological distinction but rather a pragmatic and socially and historically contingent one. Today's pizzas may be tomorrow's bricks, and vice-versa. Nonetheless, in practice the distinction may be quite consequential, since stable constellations and their tightly bound values tend to provide one sort of constraints and prompts to actors within the network, whereas unstable and loosely bound values tend to provide a different sort. The axiological 'careers' of pizza and bricks are on different paths, shaping their axiological directions and destinies.⁸

As we have seen repeatedly in this book, literature, despite seemingly sharing with pizza the evaluative category of taste, has in practice more often been like bricks in the variety of different values ascribed to it and in the mutability of those ascriptions across time and place. Smith makes a similar comparison in respect to value understood as 'functional explanations', stating that for the 'labels' 'art' and 'literature', 'The particular functions that may be endorsed by these labels ... are, unlike those of "doorsteps" and "clocks", neither narrowly confined nor readily specifiable but, on the contrary, exceptionally heterogeneous, mutable, and elusive.' Any stabilisation of these explanations is the effect of 'the normative activities of various institutions'.⁹ Put in my terms, over the course of the history of literature, the kinds of value ascribed to literature have had neither singular nor stable tight binding (though, to be sure, some values, such as pleasure, have been more stable than others), and it has been the endeavours of 'the normative activities' occurring through various, often competing portions of the network of literary valuing that have realised whatever provisional stability there has been. And at a finer-grained level, in respect to the previous chapter's formulation for literary valuing – that is, 'we register a text as literary when we ascribe value to some aspect of its perceived manner' – history attests to a habitual loose binding between particular aspects of manner and the particular values

ascribed to them. This, indeed, is a common enough feature of the activity of literary valuing, collectively considered, that we may fairly call it characteristic, albeit keeping in mind that ‘characteristic’ here does not mean either necessary or distinguishing. It is certainly possible for other kinds of valuing (as with bricks) to be similarly loose, and it is certainly possible for literary valuing not to be loose (as in the case of many individual ascribers of literary value, such as, say, Harold Bloom). Nonetheless, in the history of literary valuing collectively considered, it seems uncontroversial to observe that specific aspects of manner have been relatively unmoored to specific values.¹⁰

Indeed, as the opening pages of this book suggested, this very instability is one of the engines behind the history of literary theory, driving arguments and counter-arguments for the value of literature from Plato and Aristotle, through Sidney and Shelley, to Martha Nussbaum and John Guillory. It is also one of the reasons why the academic field of literary studies so often – and especially at present – not only has had to defend its value as *field* of study, as do many other fields, but also to defend the value of its *object* of study, which is less typical of, say, oceanography, economics or history. To cite just one example – which I encountered while flipping through what was, at time of this writing, the most recent issue of SAC – in the conclusion of a thought-provoking study of how late medieval literature grapples with philosophical dialetheism, or ‘the existence of true contradictions’, Laura Ashe states,

No one disputes ... that life as it is lived can seem overwhelmed by them [true contradictions]. I have argued that medieval literature is supremely attentive to their felt ubiquity, and I think that this gives us, now, access to some useful modes of understanding.¹¹

Ashe asserts that the study of literature (and specifically medieval literature) is valuable because literature itself is valuable – to us ‘now’ – in the particular moral sense that she has identified, and she does so, presumably, because the value of literature for us today is not self-evident or even in doubt.

Yet more telling than such in-house self-justifying claims (which are in one sense just a reflex of our scholarly habitus) is the everyday difficulty many of us experience in answering the simple question of why we think a particular text holds (more-or-less, or any) literary

value in a way that will convince those who do not already agree with us. For those of us who have at hand a ready vocabulary for features of textual manner, this difficulty is not in the identification of specific features that we find of merit. Rather, the difficulty is in constructing a convincing argument for why those features necessarily carry the particular values that we are ascribing to them. Thus, to recall an example from the [previous chapter](#), while some may point to the mini-narrative of nation foundation and unfoundation in the Declaration of Independence as evidence of its imaginative scope, others may see in this part of the document only its means of argument or matter, and remain unconvinced by claims for the merits of its manner. In this instance, we would win most of the battle if our opponent admits that it has even poor imaginative scope, for, as I have mentioned, low valuation of manner still registers the literary. The greater obstacle is convincing someone prone to see otherwise that the question of literary value is even relevant. (Readers will readily recognise cognate, actual instances of this challenge in the disdainful response from some quarters to the introduction of science fiction, comic books, and so on, into the English curricula.)

In contrast, when the material instance of a text ascribes value to manner with a high degree of social legibility (as in, say, an edition of Shakespeare), the hurdle of recognition is usually easily crossed. In these cases, the challenge that we face (and by the first-person plural pronoun here I mean specifically scholars and teachers of literature) is convincing someone that any particular feature of manner necessarily carries any particular kind of literary value – for example, that the fluid structure of Iago’s soliloquies has the value of disclosing a psychological truth in an especially accessible way, say, the truth of the abyssal structure of interiority. While our interlocutor might grudgingly agree that literature in general might sometimes disclose psychological truths, and even do so in a way that other kinds of discourse do not, she may simply not agree that these particular soliloquies disclose that particular truth. This sort of difficulty plainly constitutes one of the reasons why the academic field of literary studies has so often faced charges of subjectivism, charges that have led the field at different times in the converse directions of seeking to diminish the importance of value to its critical discourse (as with cultural studies) or to ground claims of value

in quasi-empirical accounts of language (as in some varieties of twentieth-century formalism and, in later decades, stylistics).

The history of literary criticism over the last century has shown that both of these responses, while they have greatly enriched and expanded the field, inevitably falter. As I observed in [Chapter 1](#) and will explore further in [Chapter 4](#), attempts to diminish the importance of value, as the last several decades have especially attested, are impossible to sustain as long as the field continues to embrace the category of the literary. And, as I will review in [Chapter 5](#), attempts to ground claims in empirical accounts of language (often by producing dazzlingly intricate portraits of textual manner) eventually wind up highlighting the very gap between manner and value that they seek surmount. Yet what has troubled the theory of literary value has also been what has enabled this value in everyday practice, both inside and outside the academy, to thrive. Looseness in association between manner and value has enabled the literary to hold countless values for countless ascribing actors with relatively little sense of contradiction. Hence, I might wholly agree with Ashe's claims for late medieval literature, while arguing for its very different value. More generally, one actor's, say, disinterested beauty may be another actor's expansion of empathetic breadth, and indeed this actor may be the same one at different times with different texts, or even at the same time with the same text.

Let me reiterate, however, that my point is not to claim (ontologically) that this looseness is an essential quality of the literary. Rather, I am claiming no more and no less that in the pragmatic registration of the literary, this looseness has been common and persistent enough to seem to many, in some fashion or another, characteristic. And this observation in turn puts us in better position than we were in [Chapter 2](#) to account for the role of other kinds of value in the network of literary valuing.

Interlinked networks and other metaphors

In a brief, practically oriented argument for the value of literature – a contribution to a *PMLA* forum providing answers to the question, 'Why Major in Literature – What Do We Tell Our Students?' – Azade Seyhan writes,

As literature professors and major advisers, we have all along impressed on our students the role of literature in understanding the human condition and its predicaments. We present literature as a powerful alternative way of knowledge; we read it as a social document, as stories of lives that history forgot to record, and as a guide to moral agency and responsibility. Literature brings into focus and clarifies – in historical, cultural, social, and psychological terms – what is distant in time and geography ... Literary texts offer alternative or novel insights into history, generate an awareness of fundamental human predicaments, record or recover silenced voices ... The study of literature engenders a passion for knowledge and compassion for those who do not necessarily share our views.¹²

I have selected this passage because I believe that some or all of its claims are ones that many literature faculty do indeed make about the value of literature (though perhaps less publically and more guardedly), and because it typifies how many of those claims are for values that are not, in a strict sense, literary. For example, while literature certainly does ‘record or recover silenced voices’, just as surely it is not the only medium that does so, and hence, by itself, this value cannot be said to be a distinctively literary one. Various lexical cues in the passage, however, point to the usual way that these values are joined with the idea of the literary. With ‘*alternative way of knowledge*’ for example, the implication is that literature possesses a distinctive quality that makes it in some fashion more, or somehow uniquely, efficacious in realising these values. Such ascriptions of distinctive qualities, as I have argued, ultimately rest upon narrower ascriptions of value to textual manner. Although it is not Seyhan’s purpose to specify the latter, an example might be that a particular novel’s use of interior monologue records ‘silenced voices’ in a richer, deeper and more memorable way than is achievable by other means.

Seyhan’s comments illustrate how the characteristic loose binding of literary value both facilitates and, by that same token, demands linkage to other-than-literary values. On the one hand, if her mostly tacit ascriptions of value to textual manner are what underlie its grander claims for what literature does for us, it is the loose binding between value and features of manner that enables those ascriptions to carry that weight, since, in contrast with a tightly bound situation such as pizza, the value of those features

does not seem immediately self-evident and hence constrained. As Seyhan's comments display, the very ambiguity deriving from loose binding as to what constitutes *the* value of literature enables literature, functioning rather like a lint roller, to lap up an array of different values without apparent contradiction or incoherence. On the other hand, that so much of this 'lint' is not in fact strictly literary suggests how the lack of self-evident value at the level of feature of manner is, from another perspective, a weak link: it does not so much 'carry' the weight of grander claims of value as it appeals to them, because in that way it appears strengthened, tightened, more necessary. To continue the above example, the ascription of the values rich, deep and compelling to a specific instance of interior monologue may be confirmed by an appeal to the weightier and more urgent value ascription that sees that instance as the successful recording of a silenced voice. The (circular) logic, that is, is that the interior monologue must be rich, deep and compelling because those qualities are what entail the success of its recording of a silenced voice. Or, to cite an actual example, Ashe, considering a moment in Thomas of Britain's *Tristan* in which the titular character reflects on a moral double-bind, ascribes to its literary mode of fiction the value of that which 'imagines others as whole individuals with inner lives, capable of incurring complex obligations to one another'. And she continues, 'Fiction, then, is the justified falsehood, itself inherently contradictory ... a full attention to the contradiction, to the incommensurable and unknowable but nonetheless absolutely real suffering of others, is the basis of a moral existence.'¹³ What thus ultimately confirms for Ashe the success of *Tristan*'s rendering of 'whole individuals with inner lives' is an appeal to literary fiction as providing nothing less than a 'basis of moral existence'. Such sheer acceleration of value ascription elevation is by no means unusual but will rather be familiar to any regular reader of certain varieties of literary criticism. Ashe's essay, in this respect, is just a particularly adroit example of how the recognition of literary value can so seamlessly seem to necessitate recognition of a linked other-than-literary value.

In general, then, in the activity of literary valuing, loose binding tends to provoke appeals to other kinds of value as a kind of tightening, strengthening or propping of literary value ascriptions. As my examples have suggested, such tightening is often realised

by positioning literary value as serving or leading to other kinds of value perceived as possessing greater weight and urgency. This tightening acts as a sort of axiological ballast, giving an ascription of literary value to a feature of textual manner stronger motivation, if not actually greater necessity. Moreover, one such appeal easily provokes further ones. Thus, for example, the value of vividness ascribed to a novel's rendering of character may serve the value of empathy with the other, which may in turn serve the values of intercultural understanding and geopolitical peace. In this case, the literary value of vividness gains weight by means of its linkage to empathy, which in turn gains weight from the linkage to the value of peace, and together these linkages have greatly tightened the association between the novelistic feature of character description and the particular literary value of vividness. Moreover, in this series of linkages empathy and peace may come to be apprehended not just as possible candidates for the greater values made available by means of a literary value but also as kinds of literary value themselves, because of the way that the narrower literary value has mediated them. That is, literature, by way of its quality of vivid rendering of character, may be understood as providing distinctive, unique access to the values of empathy and peace.

Admittedly, however, the very multiplication of metaphors in the preceding discussion (e.g., propping, serving, etc.), along with their uncertain relation to the metaphor of interlinked networks of value introduced in the preceding chapter, suggests some further clarifications are in order. One pressing question pertains to the presumed difference between literary and other kinds of value on which metaphors such as propping and interlinked depend. Given this book's limited theoretical ambitions, as well as its pragmatic, differential and axiological approach to value, I must put aside any categorical considerations of kinds of value, without thereby denying that some such distinctions might ultimately hold between, say, beauty and justice. Rather, in my approach, what distinguishes an ascription of literary value from an ascription of some other kind of value is simply the relative notional proximity of that ascription to textual manner as practically encountered in any given activity of valuing. Typically, say, the value of a sense of deep immersion into someone else's consciousness will strike actors as 'closer' to the device of interior monologue than the value of global egalitarian

politics, and thus these values may manifest as the former literary one being propped by the latter other-than-literary one. In comparison, the aforementioned value of empathy might manifest as either literary or other-than-literary, depending on what other values are most immediately in play in the activity of valuing.

This shifting status of perceived kind of value based on relative notional proximity to textual manner is in fact just a corollary to the Simmelian general theory of value as differential. Since values emerge only in relation to other values, relative notional proximity to one thing or another, as one vector of difference between values, is both a condition and an effect of the axiological network. The differences that a differential network requires are also the kinds of differences that it produces and around which it is organised, however provisionally and dynamically.¹⁴ In this respect, what I have been terming a network *constellation* I can now more precisely define as a set of mutually mediating value ascriptions that share a salient notional proximity to a particular vector of difference, thereby evoking a sense of other-than value ascriptions in respect to that vector that are increasingly less directly relevant or just wholly unrelated. In a tightly bound situation like that of pizza, the constellation in effect has more distinct borders. Within the pizza constellation, the value of, say, economic justice – in comparison to the apparently more immediately relevant values of hunger satisfaction and gustatory pleasure – will strike many actors as marginally relevant at best, even though in a larger view of the network economic justice still plays a mediating role in relation to those latter values. In contrast, in a loosely bound situation, the constellation's borders are considerably more porous. The immediate values of a brick as, say, sturdy, hard, heavy and inexpensive are more easily linked to the other-than-brickly values of, say, gardening, aquarium embellishment or self-defence.¹⁵

The various metaphors that I have offered for this porousness underscore different aspects of it. The metaphor of interlinked networks emphasises the salience of differences between constellations. The metaphor of propping emphasises how, in any given ascription of literary value, an ascription of an other-than-literary value may play a role so immediately directive that the two ascriptions may strike us as at once distinguishable and yet inseparable. Propping also suggests what is more plainly emphasised in the

metaphors of strengthening and axiological ballast: that linkage to other-than-literary values provides an expanded axiological scope, which is one and the same as a measure of importance, thereby increasing the sense of weight and urgency of the literary value ascription. Finally, the metaphor of tightening emphasises how the weight and urgency accomplished by the expanded axiological scope may make ascriptions of value to manner seem more necessary because of the perceived stakes of what they entail.

Boccaccio's genealogical ontology

A more extended consideration of an instance of literary valuing, in the form of a direct commentary on the nature of literary value, may be helpful at this point, in order further to illustrate some of the ideas rather abstractly presented above and in the preceding chapter. Among the vast number of possibilities, I have chosen for this purpose Boccaccio's *Trattatello in laude di Dante* [*Short Treatise in Praise of Dante*], given my period focus and the literary historical significance suggested by the fact that two of the five entries in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* falling between the years 500 and 1500 are by Dante and Boccaccio, respectively.¹⁶ This piece is roughly equivalent in aims and in actual function to a modern introduction to an edition of a canonical author's works, combining as it does information about the author and his social and political contexts with commentary on his works and their value. Yet because Boccaccio himself was a writer of grand ambition, with much of his career still before him (he completed the first recension of the *Trattatello* between 1351 and 1355), the piece also functions as a defence of the literary author's calling, as exemplarily embodied in Dante. In particular, the piece formulates a defence of that calling as a defence of the value of poetry, which it argues to be, on the one the one hand, the antidote to the mercenary values of Florentine commercial society (as Boccaccio frequently characterises them)¹⁷ and, on the other, as equal to – or even essentially the same as – the indisputably supreme spiritual value of theology.

While the antagonism between commerce and poetry is felt throughout the *Trattatello*, Boccaccio considers the relation to

theology mostly in a single, substantial digression. At the outset of this section, he describes an instinctive spiritual impulse among 'ancient people', who recognise the existence of a transcendental 'supreme power above all others', and then he locates the origin of poetry in a primordial moment in which language is fashioned into an instrument suitable for worship of this power:

To avoid worshipping this great power in silence or with almost mute rites, they wanted to pray to it with noble-sounding words so that it would be propitious to their needs. And since they believed that this being exceeded all others in nobility, they were eager to use words removed from all plebeian or common styles of speech, which would be worthy to be uttered in the presence of the deity to which they offered sacred prayers. Furthermore, in order that these words might appear to be more effective, they wanted them to be arranged according to laws of fixed rhythm, so that their sweetness would eliminate harshness and boredom. Certainly all this could not be done in a vulgar or ordinary form of speech, but in a way that was artistic, elaborate, and novel. The Greeks called this form 'poetic', and whatever was composed in it was called 'poetry', and those who created or used this style of speech were called 'poets'.¹⁸

Here we encounter a veritable inventory of evaluative terms pertaining to textual manner, from 'noble-sounding', to 'arranged according to laws of fixed rhythm', to 'artistic, elaborate, and novel'. Although the terms are vague (a habit of many theorists of literary value, both before and long after Boccaccio), the sort of propping that I described above is plainly evident. For instance, the value of 'sweetness' pertaining to an arrangement of words is depicted as wholly in service to the other-than-literary spiritual value of the 'great power', as indeed in practice it no doubt actually was, and continues to be, in such ritual situations.

Boccaccio insists, moreover, that this 'great power', at least for some of the best of the ancient poets, was in fact the Christian God, as would only later be fully revealed. It is the ancients' necessarily partial knowledge in this respect that leads him to the literary features of fictionality, allegory and figuration:

the ancient poets have followed, as far as the human mind can, the trail of the Holy Spirit, which (we see from Divine Scripture) revealed through many mouths its profound mysteries to those who were to come, inspiring them to utter in a veiled way what in due time it

intended to unveil through open deeds ... the poets in their work, which we call poetry – sometimes using various fictional gods, sometimes changing men into different imaginative forms and sometimes convincing us with the persuasive argument of their creations – show us the origins of things, the effects of virtues and of vices, what we should avoid and what we should follow, so that we can come, by acting virtuously, to that goal which they, who had no real knowledge of the true God, regarded as the highest blessedness ... [for example,] poets portray the beauty of the Elysian Fields, which I interpret to be the sweetness of Paradise, and the darkness of Dis, which I take to mean the bitterness of Hell. Our poets did this so that, enticed by the joy of the one and frightened by the anguish of the other, we should follow the virtues that will lead us into Elysium and avoid the vices that might make us be precipitated into Hell.¹⁹

In comparison with ‘noble-sounding words’, these literary devices – which Boccaccio claims possess the more specifically literary value of giving ‘comfort to the minds of the simple’ (that is, pleasure)²⁰ – are not only suitable for worshipping the divine but further provide a means of human access to knowledge about Christian truths, even before the Christian era. Pulling out his trump card, then, Boccaccio observes that Christian scripture itself uses these same devices for the same purposes. In this way he arrives at the most grandiose claim that in his day could be made for the value of literature: ‘I say that theology and poetry can be considered almost identical when their subjects are identical. In fact, I will go even further and decree that theology is nothing less than the poetry of God.’²¹ Literary value here is linked with spiritual value so securely as to be virtually indistinguishable from it. And since for Boccaccio God encompasses the entirety of the axiological network in all its countless constellations, at once its centre and its circumference, literary value is elevated to the pinnacle of all earthly values.

And yet, the five-word qualification within Boccaccio’s grand claim – ‘when their subjects are identical’ (six in the original: ‘dove uno medesimo sia il soggetto’) – holds great import, in effect undoing much of what the rest of the statement asserts. In its immediate context, the qualification refers to the referential gulf between Christian and pagan writing that Boccaccio acknowledges a few paragraphs before, namely, that ‘[s]acred theology is concerned

with divine truth, while ancient poetry deals primarily with pagan gods and heroes ... obviously false, erroneous, and contrary to the Christian religion'.²² Hence, while the value of the aforementioned aspects of textual manner, even in pre-Christian texts, could be in service to Christian spiritual value, they could just as well be in service to some other 'obviously false, erroneous' spiritual value. This situation highlights how the tightening of literary value ascriptions achieved through appeals to other sorts of value is in fact just that, rather than, say, an infused manifestation of some greater value uniquely available via literary manner, as in some ontological accounts of literary value. The secure link between literary and spiritual value turns out to be a pro forma one, belying an underlying looseness in which 'true' and 'false' versions of the latter value are interchangeable.

But the situation for literary value is in fact even direr than this, as that five-word qualification ultimately reaches back to the comments that bridge Boccaccio's initial claims about poetic language and his later ones about fiction and figuration. There he extends his account of the primordial origin of poetry through the emergence of polytheism and animism up to the initial establishment of polities around deity-kings, who were originally men who 'began to devise clever schemes or other designs that would make themselves masters of the ignorant masses of their regions'. One of these 'clever schemes' was to leverage the spiritual practices presumably already in place: 'they used faith to instill fear into their subjects and to insure by oaths the obedience of those whom they could not subjugate by force'. For this purpose, the poets were instrumental:

These things could not have been easily done without the collaboration of the poets, who, in order to extend their own fame, as well as to win the favor of the princes, delight their subjects, and persuade everyone to act virtuously (which actually ran contrary to their true intentions), made the people believe what the princes wanted by masterfully contriving various fictions that are wrongly understood by the uneducated today, to say nothing of that earlier time. The poets employed ... exactly the same style that the first people used to praise only the one true God.²³

Here we see the same aspects of textual manner ('exactly the same style') that had been linked to authentic spiritual value ('the

one true God'), linked instead to a collection of rather less lofty values: worldly renown ('their own fame'), political patronage ('the favor of the princes', which presumably entailed economic benefits) and what might be termed, roughly and anachronistically, the propagandistic utility of a sort of false consciousness, the power to make 'the people believe what the princes wanted' with 'fictions' that encourage the people 'to act virtuously' when the real intent of poets is otherwise, presumably that of keeping the people in line. Colloquially, we might say that the poets have sold out: that is, they have redirected literary value (e.g., 'artistic, elaborate, and novel' forms of speech) away from its original, authentic and true spiritual value to a set of worldly, politically dubious and self-serving values. It turns out, therefore, that almost from its very origin, poetry has served something akin to the very mercenary values that so vex Boccaccio's about his contemporary Florence. While he most often depicts the latter values as the antithesis of and indeed outright antagonist to Dante's poetic accomplishments, here his own argument prompts him to acknowledge the continuing possibility of poetic complicity, as the celebration of deity-hero-kings 'still is today ... the duty and function of the poet'.²⁴

In less judgemental language, we may say that this passage, in the context of the whole digression on poetry, underscores the capaciousness and flexibility of literary value's characteristic loose binding. Boccaccio's account of the origin and uses of poetry, however fancifully speculative in some respects, is in several others wholly plausible and even in some points historically demonstrable. While I have for the sake of illustration called attention to apparent self-contradictions in this account, Boccaccio presumably would see none, and he would be justified in doing so. Poetry may be close to a verbal sacrament, as in Dante's case, or it may be an instrument of tyranny wielded by artistic mercenaries (a role that, as we know, Boccaccio sometimes felt his friend Petrarch too readily accepted). Ascriptions of value to textual manner do not demand mediation of any specific other kind of value, which is to say that they may plausibly mediate a range of rather different or even antithetical values, without contradiction or incoherence. Moreover, with its non-contradictory antitheses, Boccaccio's digression on poetry also illustrates how genealogical accounts of literary value (here, the story of how it becomes an instrument for instilling false consciousness by

pretending to be one value while actually being another) may not only accompany ontological accounts (here, the relation between literary value and Christian truth), but even how the latter accounts prompt the former, and vice-versa. From this perspective we see again how ontological and genealogical accounts, however rhetorically opposed, are in fact complementary. They collectively seek to cover the axiological territory annexed by way of loose binding and are simply exploring different regions of the same domain.

Defamiliarisation revisited

While Boccaccio's meditation upon literary value in the *Trattatello* may illustrate aspects and consequences of loose binding in an especially cogent fashion, it is certainly far from unusual in what it reveals. I will cite just two of many possible other examples. Looking backward several centuries, one might notice that the Old English poem *Widsith* conveys dramatically a similar simultaneity of idealisation and demystification of literary value, likewise ultimately prompted by loose binding. In this poem, a first-person Christian poet/narrator depicts the activities and accomplishments of a pagan counterpart, conveying in poetry to a presumably monastic audience how the titular pagan *scop* creates encomiastic poems for politically powerful patrons in exchange for gifts, sometimes celebrating them simply for that very gift-giving.²⁵ Looking forward several centuries, one might see in Walter Benjamin's famously ambivalent and ambiguous comments on aura, which are prompted by the differences in manner between art of the past and the technologically reproduced art of his present, a compact formulation of the two sides of the axiological coin. Reproducing in a single idea the formulations that *Widsith* and Boccaccio divide between Christian and pagan, aura encompasses the values of uniqueness, authenticity and artistic tradition, and simultaneously serves as a cultic instrument of mystification that, as Benjamin's editors put it, helps to 'reinforce the larger claims to political power of the ... ruling class'.²⁶

Revealingly, what all these instances of meta-axiological accounts of literary value share is a tendency to follow mediations of literary value ascriptions through the axiological network to notionally

totalising kinds of value – ones that seem to comprehend all others and serve as the ultimate motivation and measure of human action. Each of these kinds of value, however different or even antithetical they may seem in respect to one another, appears at once all-pervasive in human experience and yet also intangible – a presence that is also, at a more basic level, an absence. For Boccaccio, as we have seen, these totalising kinds of value are spiritual and political, as manifested in the Christian God and in the power of rulers. Both of these were obviously everywhere present in some fashion in the actions, institutions and human self-knowledge of Boccaccio's lived experience, but they were also, as attested by voluminous medieval writings on the topics, fundamental aspects of reality that remained in some essential way immaterial (and were thus not surprisingly frequently linked to one another).²⁷ Although my sample size of meta-axiological accounts is of course exceedingly minimal, from those cited elsewhere in this book, or just from a passing familiarity with the genre, it seems fair to conclude that literary value's characteristic loose binding lends itself to extension not just to other-than-literary kinds of value but especially to these totalising, intangible kinds of value. And inasmuch as what Boccaccio, *Widsith* and Benjamin describe corresponds in some fashion to actual practices of literary production and consumption, we may further conclude that this sort of extension may (at times) characterise the ascriptions of literary value that occur within those practices themselves. This is all just to say – in a vaguer though much simpler, more typical way – that literature often claims to disclose the truth, whatever that may be, and that no small number of literary theorists have sought to elucidate how it in fact does so.

In ontological accounts of literary value, this sort of extension to totalising values is usually understood as categorically defining, with literary practices that do not exhibit such extension taken to be inferior examples of the literary or just not truly literary at all. In contrast, from the axiological perspective that I have sought to develop, this sort of extension is one of the affordances of loose binding, which is itself not a categorical feature but rather, as I have said, widely but not universally characteristic of literary valuing. In the history of literary theory, and especially the stage of that history inaugurated by twentieth-century formalism, this affordance has often proven pivotal, connecting, as it seems to do, discrete aspects

of textual manner with a range of possible totalising kinds of value. Since formalism has been one of my regular interlocutors in this book, a brief consideration of my preliminary theory of literary valuing in respect to formalism's use of this affordance will help further to elucidate that theory and its differences from formalism, old and new. More importantly, it will lead to a specification of one of ways that my approach to the problem of literary value might help to navigate that problem.

From the perspective of my preliminary theory, what is crucial to notice in the example of Boccaccio's digression is not just the extension of literary values to totalising values but also the extension to different kinds of totalising values that are mutually defining through their antagonism. This observation returns us to the Simmelian differential nature of value, in which one kind of value emerges only in relation to others. The axiological ballast obtained through the weighting of literary value ascriptions with other-than-literary value comes at the 'cost' of alternative other-than-literary values that in fact make that weighting possible through their difference from the weighting value, that is, through their status as, in a sense, rejected options. By that same token, moreover, the very requirement that some options must be rejected for the choice to occur affords the possibility that the choice will bring into view the rejected alternatives, making unusually salient what is always actually the case: that our axiological paths are defined by those not taken. To put this point simply, for Boccaccio, Dante was a great theological poet precisely because he was not a mercenary one, and this difference brings into sharp relief, as we saw in the digression, the relation between spiritual value on the one hand and economic and political values on the other, a relation (among others) that differentially determines each kind of value.

In some contexts, therefore, loose binding in literary value ascriptions may afford not only an extension to totalising values but also a kind of bird's-eye perspective on a portion of one's axiological environment. The activity of literary valuing may disclose perspectives on some of the myriad interconnected networks of value that are always operative in our day-to-day experience. And this particular affordance, in turn, may easily be understood as itself the most defining value of literature. That is, it may be identified not merely, as I understand it, as a historically available

possibility for any situation of loose binding – which is itself a historically available possibility for any activity of valuing – but rather as the essence of the literary. It is precisely in relation to these points that my approach to literary valuing converges with and diverges from formalism.

As I argued in the [previous chapter](#), the ascription of value to textual manner necessarily effects some degree of notional decoupling of manner from matter, as that ascription requires (and so produces) some degree of a recognition of manner as such. This decoupling may in turn be understood as itself a feature of textual manner. For formalism, because the decoupling puts referentiality into a kind of frame, it constitutes the quintessential formal effect of self-referential staging, of an act of communication that calls attention to its own features. And because this effect is understood as a feature of manner, ascriptions of value to it, like all loosely bound ascriptions, may produce the secondary effect of the axiological bird's-eye view. This disclosure of one's enmeshment within axiological networks, ultimately deriving from loosely bound ascriptions of value to the textual feature of literary staging, is what formalists have long recognised as defamiliarisation. I wholeheartedly affirm defamiliarisation, therefore, as something that engagement with literature may accomplish. In my approach, though, it is just that: simply a possibility and neither necessary, nor categorical, nor normative.²⁸ To construe it as any of the latter would be to step into one of the pitfalls of ontological approaches that I summarised in the [previous chapter](#). Nevertheless, defamiliarisation does constitute a distinctive effect, one that may be of help in our inevitable negotiations with the problem of literary value.

Particularly resonant with my approach is the account of defamiliarisation by Prague School formalist Jan Mukařovský. Writing about the absorption of the reader by a novel such as *Crime and Punishment*, Mukařovský argues,

The change which the material relationship of the work – the sign – has undergone is thus simultaneously its weakening and strengthening. It is weakened in the sense that the work does not refer to the reality which it directly depicts, and strengthened in that the work of art as a sign acquires an indirect (figurative) tie with realities which are vitally important to the perceiver, and through them to the entire universe of the perceiver as a collection of values. Thus the work of art

acquires the ability to refer to a reality which is totally different from the one which it depicts, and to systems of values other than the one from which it arose and on which it is founded.²⁹

In my terms, the ‘weakening’ of the sign occurs when the decoupling of manner from matter, necessary for value ascription, is itself perceived as a feature of textual manner, underscoring a self-referential staging that entails ‘that the work does not refer to the reality which it directly depicts’. The ‘strengthening’ of the sign occurs when this feature is valued as such (and, as Mukařovský states, the weakening and strengthening are simultaneous, since to perceive the feature is to value it), with the accompanying loosely bound ascriptions of value prompting a salient movement outward through interlinked networks, tying the value of the feature to ‘realities which are vitally important to the perceiver, and through them to the entire universe of the perceiver as a collection of values’ – what I have called a bird’s-eye view of an actor’s axiological environment.

For Mukařovský the value of the literary (or, more generally, of the ‘aesthetic function’) resides in this ability to disclose the ‘systems of values’ underlying the reader’s concrete social existence, systems that may thereby ‘experimentally crystallise into a new configuration and dissolve an old one, [and may] adapt to the development of the social situation and to new creative facts of reality, or at least seek the possibility of such adaptation’.³⁰ These systems of values are – as they were in Boccaccio – totalising ones, and they are unrelated to literary value except inasmuch as the latter is their point of access:

The material components of the artistic artifact [i.e., features of textual manner], and the manner in which they are used as artistic means [i.e., the values ascribed to those features], assume the role of mere conductors of energies introduced by extra-aesthetic values. If we ask ourselves at this point what has happened to aesthetic value, it appears that it has dissolved into individual extra-aesthetic values, and is really nothing but a general term for the dynamic totality of their mutual interrelationships.³¹

In the terms of this account, Boccaccio’s ‘noble-sounding words’ are ‘mere conductors of energies introduced by’ the ultimate ‘extra-aesthetic’ value of an omnipotent spiritual power, and so the ‘aesthetic value’ of those words becomes an index of the Christian

understanding of God as encompassing ‘the dynamic totality of [the whole set of extra-aesthetic values] mutual interrelationships’. Mukařovský has in effect formulated a precise, technically elaborated, secular, Marxist version of Boccaccio’s digression – one that, in its wider applicability, supplies a satisfyingly detailed account of how the activity of literary valuing may lead to disclosure of a some crucial portion of an actor’s axiological environment.

For Mukařovský, the availability of this disclosure is categorical and normative: it describes the ultimate, defining value of the most truly literary of literary texts when readers value them for the right reasons and not, for example, ‘only insofar as [a text] is educational or arouses the emotions’.³² Yet to dismiss those latter sorts of ascriptions of value in favour of the single one that Mukařovský has identified is – as discussed in the preceding chapter in relation to Rita Felski’s work – to present an impoverished, elitist, historically blinkered and dubiously ontological theory of literary value. Instead, we may pause here with my preliminary theory of literary value and place a more contingent, pragmatic concept of defamiliarisation in our pocket, so to speak, as one possible means for literary scholars and teachers to navigate the problem of literary value.

A big tent

The next two chapters take up the problem of literary value in relation to canonicity and interpretation, thinking through in light my preliminary theory of literary valuing the practical challenges of that problem as they manifest in those regards. But with my theory (such as it is) now in place, before turning to those particular arenas of literary scholarship and teaching it will be helpful to consider what the theory may have to offer more generally to the field of literary studies beyond a rather diminished version of defamiliarisation.

As I noted in this book’s introduction, over the past several decades the question of what actually makes the field of literary studies a distinctive academic discipline has garnered no small amount of debate, polemic and professional angst, and at least according to some commentators the resulting disarray has damaged the field’s

public's perception. To recall Carlos J. Alonso's observation from 2002, '[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.'³³ As James F. English summarised this view in 2012, the field, having lost its claim on a 'central and anchoring position among the disciplines',

adopted a strategy of multiple positions, fostering a proliferation of new methods, materials, and constituencies, but, in the eyes of some, splintering itself across too broad an array of incompatible subfields, from book history to television studies, subcultural ethnography, and the poetics of race – squandering its disciplinary coherence and thereby further undermining its academic legitimacy.³⁴

In light of this conundrum, one contribution my preliminary theory might make is to provide for the field – *in situ*, without any necessary other alterations – a unifying framework, one that reveals 'an array of incompatible subfields' to be instead an exhilaratingly rich and diverse area of study that is nonetheless held together by a definite centre of gravity. For if, as I have said, *literary value* is a redundant phrase because *literary* is necessarily already a value-laden adjective, then we can readily understand the label *literary study* as the exploration of that value-laden condition. More precisely, it is an exploration of actors' mediations of other actors' ascriptions of value to textual manner, and of their mediations of ascriptions of other kinds of value that are interlinked with (or serve as props for) the former ascriptions. In these terms, any particular literary research project may be understood as exploring one portion of the axiological network by tracing the mediations of one such set of actors. What then distinguishes one project from another are its starting set of actors, the relative capaciousness and granularity of the examination of mediations, and the scholar's self-positioning (whether implicit or explicit) in relation to the delineated portion of the network.

Although this language may seem quite alien to how literary scholarship of whatever stripe understands itself, it actually quite straightforwardly encompasses the whole breadth of that scholarship, at least as far as I am familiar with it. It encompasses, say, both a twenty-first-century scholar's ideological critique of the relation

between the text of advertisements and the qualities of superheroes in 1950s Marvel comics, and a 1950s scholar's appreciation of the timeless virtue of nobility in Othello's final speech. In the first instance, the scholar positions herself as critically examining a network of other actors' value ascriptions (those of the readers and producers of the comics, as well as those of the advertisers, among others); that is, she positions their ascriptions at some implied distance from her own. Her project may involve a large archive of comic books, which she analyses according to some taxonomy of manner (say, the *topoi* of superhuman attributes), being less interested in any particular comic and more in the axiological links between mid-century US capitalism and this form of popular culture. In the second instance, the scholar positions himself directly alongside of Shakespeare's ascriptions of value, implicitly proposing that his ascriptions overlap with Shakespeare's in more and less significant ways. This enables him to understand the text as an intricate record of directly intuitable authorial value ascriptions, leading him to minute explorations of the linkages between specific features of manner and the totalising values that he understands as ones organising both his and Shakespeare's cultures. The differences between these approaches obviously afford different kinds of tracings of the axiological network, with different kinds of results. But both are no more and no less than such tracings, and together they provide a fuller account of the axiological network than either approach would separately.

To consider an actual example, we may return to the work of Tim William Machan that constituted an important interlocutor in [Chapter 1](#). Taking a manuscript studies approach to Chaucer, Machan fashions a critique of modern Chaucer editions on the basis of their imposition of anachronistic aesthetic categories on Middle English poetry. In the language of my axiological framework, Machan's project takes one or more of those modern editions as an entry point into the axiological network and follows traces of mediations to proximate actors such as precedent editions and editorial traditions, and established models of literary and epochal history; and to proximate other kinds of value, such as ideological, cultural and social. Machan scrutinises aspects of manner of those modern editions but positions himself at a critical distance from their ascriptions of value. In contrast, my own rather different sort

of historicist project, *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt* (to return to an example broached in [Chapter 2](#)), begins with the much more traditional network entry point of authors' ascriptions of value, in this case, those of the so-called fifteenth-century Chaucerians. Retrospectively, I may now characterise that project as tracing the mediations of value ascriptions among authors, literary predecessors, political and religious patrons, and so on, and assessing the nature and historical significance of the reciprocal relays among the different kinds of values involved. At those times when the study leans toward a reclamation effort for this period's oft-denigrated poetry, my axiological distance shrinks, with my own ascriptions of value overlapping in some ways with those of some of the actors I describe.

Thus, the typical literary research triumvirate of author, text and reader, and the sometimes radically different kinds of studies that a focus on one or the other engenders, are subsumable into my framework as different entry points into the axiological network. Moreover, any of the current kinds of literary study, even when they move beyond this triumvirate, may just as easily be rearticulated in the terms of this framework. So, to list just some of these kinds (most of which are of course nonexclusive of others), distant reading, descriptive reading, ethical approaches, critical race theory approaches, ecofeminist approaches, object-oriented approaches, animal studies approaches, some versions of cultural studies and media studies approaches, cognitive poetics, LGBTQ+ approaches, affect theory approaches and New Formalism may all be rearticulated as some form of exploration of the axiological network, since they all manifestly consider ascriptions of value, whatever their own positioning in respect to those ascriptions. (In the following chapters, the several examples of literary study that I consider in the terminology of my theory provide further illustrations of this rearticulation.) Even research that scarcely considers literary texts, as strictly defined, constitutes an inquiry into some portion of the network of literary valuing if the adjective *literary* is in any way operative.

Such a rearticulation of the array of approaches to literary scholarship, however schematically and informally performed, would constitute more than just superficial substitutions of one set of terms for another. It would have the potential to serve as a big tent for the

field of literary studies that all of us within the field might recognise as such. An explicitly articulated axiological framework may make visible the coherence that the field actually already possesses, emphasising the remarkable breadth and depth of the complementary ways that myriad subfields and approaches account for literary valuing. David J. Alworth, in a review of how ANT has been and might further be adapted to literary studies, advocates for a criticism that ‘heeds Latour’s call to “follow the actors”, whoever or whatever they are and wherever they lead’; what I am claiming is that in the diversity of our existing approaches, we are already doing this rather capaciously.³⁵ Moreover, I believe that the axiological framework, if shorn of its specialist language, has the potential effectively to communicate that coherence to crucial external audiences, in the form of, say, department mission statements that characterise what we do as explorations of the way that the world, in all its dimensions, becomes value-laden.

I will leave these activities of translation for internal and external audiences to another day and, I can only hope, to some of those who have found any of these ideas persuasive. More humbly, let me instead acknowledge that I have no expectation that literature departments will someday rename themselves, say, departments of literary axiology, or that literary researchers of any significant number will begin explicitly incorporating an axiological framework into their projects. If, as I have imagined above, literary scholars and teachers were simply to recognise in some way the relevance of this framework to what they do – which, I admit, is already an extravagantly ambitious surmise – that recognition by itself could have powerful effects and would not require those scholars and teachers to alter what they do on a day-to-day basis. I am not therefore calling for a dramatic rethinking of the field of literary studies, as does, say, Felski in *The Limits of Critique*, as sympathetic as I am to that study and the way that it draws on Latour to propose an alternative mode of literary inquiry.³⁶ Nonetheless, I do believe that the axiological framework, if it were to be explicitly drawn upon in particular scholarly projects, could have some potential benefits. I will mention just three.

First, the framework helps to draw our attention to our own positionality within the network whose mediations we are tracing and so encourages us to include in that tracing the mediations of

value that lead from the initial set of actors to ourselves. In the light of these latter mediations, otherwise obscure aspects of our own axiological environments may emerge, and hence our accounts of other actors' value ascriptions may be enriched, or some of our own blind spots uncovered, by way of this dimension of critical reflexivity. An explicit axiological framework would help us neither to privilege, obscure, nor deny any particular ascription of value, including our own. So, for example, for my *Poets and Power*, the framework would have encouraged me to provide a more explicit argument for the literary value that I implicitly ascribe to the fifteenth-century Chaucerians. Rather than just locating the latter's value ascriptions firmly in the past, I might have also identified the continuities and contrasts between those ascriptions and the ones that the study itself necessarily makes across the transhistorical axiological network, thereby addressing one of the logical gaps in the book's argument.

Second, as suggested in the preceding chapter, the framework may provide another way to think through the thorny question of the relations of text to intertexts and other kinds of so-called contexts. These relations may all be understood as an actor's necessary mediations of the value ascriptions of other actors within the portion of the network being traced. For the typical instance of author as actor, for example, proximate other actors would include the usual array of precedent literary and non-literary texts, formal and topical conventions, actual and implied audiences, desired or real patrons, targeted or contracted publishers, and so on. What the framework would provide is an emphasis on the reciprocity of the relations among all these actors, directly or indirectly, seeing their ascriptions of value as necessarily immanent in each other and hence in the literary work.³⁷

Third, keeping to the example of author as actor, the framework may help to elucidate the operative dynamics of the old chestnut that sophisticated literary works self-reflexively stage an inquiry into their own value. The framework underscores how for some authors the loose binding between textual manner and value is an especially pressing concern, since for them the stakes of whether or not their writing is 'good' may be quite high, and hence the appeal to other kinds of value may become especially salient, requiring explicit consideration in some fashion. The characteristic flexibility

and mutability of connections to interlinked networks, accordingly, may be as much a threat as an asset. While interlinkages associate an author's writing with many other kinds of apparently more weighty value, they may in their very lack of firm stability also hint that those associations may not hold; so what seems worth writing one day may seem pointless the next. The props and costs of other kinds of value – whether and how much the props actually function in that way, and what sorts of costs and how much of them are expended – may consequently become urgent concerns and hence themselves key topics of the writing. As a result, the writing incorporates, in some sort of directly thematised fashion, a wide swath of its own axiological network. One subsequent critical project would then be to limn the broad and sometimes fraught axiological dynamics of the work's inquiry into own reason for existence.

To be sure, none of these three benefits would be at all new to the field. Each already characterises many projects in one fashion or another. Moreover, there are numerous projects that strike me as already exemplifying – in their own terms, of course – what a more comprehensive adaptation of an explicit axiological framework would entail. For example, outside of my research area, two of those that I have recently come across are Deidre Shauna Lynch's *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* and, in a more metacritical vein, Shai M. Dromi and Eva Illouz's 'Recovering Morality: Pragmatic Sociology and Literary Studies'.³⁸ My preliminary theory of literary valuing does not have the ambition to remake the field of literary studies but rather to give it some additional confidence, help it through some of its internal and external conundrums, and encourage some of the trends that it already possesses. The framework serves to underscore the nature of our accomplishments as literary researchers, clarify the relations among our various projects and highlight how, collectively, literary studies reaches ever more broadly and deeply toward values that are always in motion. If it would help to give this theory/framework/schema a name, *axiological compositionism* (to borrow a term from Latour) would be an apt one.³⁹ But I suspect that unhappy phrase would hamper the aforementioned aims more than further them, and thus I offer it here, at the end of my theorising, and put it aside.

Notes

- 1 Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). *Philosophie des Geldes* was first published in Berlin in 1900; an enlarged edition appeared in 1907. For Simmel's account of value, see esp. pp. 59–119.
- 2 Elizabeth S. Goodstein, *Georg Simmel and the Disciplinary Imaginary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 170, 155. In addition to this study, for Simmel's understanding of value I have particularly benefited from Natàlia Cantó Milà, *A Sociological Theory of Value: Georg Simmel's Sociological Relationism* (Bielefeld: Transcript Publishing, 2005); and, for or Simmel's anticipation of some elements of poststructuralism, from Deena Weinstein and Michael A. Weinstein, *Postmodern(ized) Simmel* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Bryan S. Green, *Literary Methods and Sociological Theory: Case Studies of Simmel and Weber* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value', in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 3–63, offers an illuminating and influential adaptation of Simmel's theory of value, one which, for example, John Frow draws upon in developing his construct of 'regimes of reading'; see Frow, *The Practice of Value: Essays on Literature in Cultural Studies* (Crawley: University of Western Australia, 2013). Ralph M. Leck, *Georg Simmel and Avant-Garde Sociology* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), provides a lucid account of Simmel's career and its afterlives, explaining, among other things, how Simmel's reputation in his own day as a leader among Berlin's politically and socially progressive artists and intellectuals suffered a reversal when he came out in support of the Great War. For a trenchant, Marxist-based critique of Simmel's theory of value, see Paul Kamolnick, 'Simmel's Legacy for Contemporary Value Theory: A Critical Assessment', *Sociological Theory*, 19:1 (2001), 65–85, a reference that Gabriel Meyer-Lee sent me as part of our ongoing debate about value.
- 3 More accurately, this is how Simmel frequently describes value. As Green points out, Simmel in fact alternates between this 'semiotic' account and one that seems more 'realist', a tendency that Green takes as evidence of Simmel's dialectical style. For my purposes, it suffices to centre Simmel's more Smith-like moments.

- 4 Simmel, *Philosophy of Money*, p. 86.
- 5 For the overlap with Saussure's ideas, see Green, *Literary Methods*, pp. 136–76. Admittedly, Simmel sometimes seems to reduce all value comparison to just one of its many modes – sacrifice – which squares neither with Saussurean semiotics nor with his own geometrical analogy. For helpful comments on the matter, see Cantó Milà, *A Sociological Theory*, pp. 158–67. Again, for my purposes I am centring Simmel's more Smith-like formulations.
- 6 This reformulation aligns with how Latour has described the descriptive target of ANT as 'matters of concern' in contrast with 'matters of fact'; see Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry*, 30:2 (2004), 225–48.
- 7 I expect readers will readily recall actual examples of such value shifts, e.g., those large-handled combs that teenagers purchased *en masse* in the 1970s, not to use as combs (at least not for many of us), but simply to display in our back pockets.
- 8 I adapt the metaphor of careers from Appadurai.
- 9 Smith, *Contingencies of Value*, p. 43.
- 10 From the point of view of a theory of literary value with a starting point other than Simmel, however, this statement, while uncontroversial, may simply describe a history of bad reading. See, e.g., Terry Eagleton, 'Bodies, Artworks, and Use Values', *NLH*, 44:4 (2013), 561–73, whose starting point is Marx. Although here and throughout I do not extend my claims beyond literary value, the applicability of loose binding to aesthetic value generally is obvious. Indeed, it seems applicable to what Lucien Karpik has defined more generally as the *singularity*, of which aesthetic objects are a subclass. See Karpik, *Valuing the Unique*, trans. Nora Scott (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), esp. the section 'What Are Singularities' (pp. 10–13), in which the characteristics of 'multidimensional', 'structured', 'uncertain' and 'incommensurable' that Karpik describes for singularities bear relation to the concept of loose binding. That my example of bricks also illustrates loose binding, however, plainly indicates that loose binding is not restricted to singularities. Simmel provides a curious account of the origin of aesthetic value as a kind of *unbinding* that occurs over time through a collective forgetting of an originally more tightly bound value, so that what we take to be, say, the aesthetic value of the beauty of cherry blossoms (or, presumably, a painting thereof) is in fact a kind of 'echo' of the originally more tightly bound value of the sustenance provided by ripe cherries. See *Philosophy of Money*, pp. 73–5. This strikes me as one of those moments of creeping realism

that, as I have mentioned, Green notices in *Philosophy of Money*, and also, perhaps, Simmel's attempt to play Marx off of Kant, or vice-versa.

- 11 Laura Ashe, 'How to Read Both: The Logic of True Contradictions in Chaucer's World', *SAC*, 42 (2020), 111–46 (146).
- 12 Azade Seyhan, 'Why Major in Literature – –What Do We Tell Our Students?', *PMLA*, 117:3 (2002): 510–12 (511–12).
- 13 Ashe, 'True Contradictions', 145–6.
- 14 This obviously means as well that differences in kinds of value, and in the relations among kinds, are not constant over time and space, as many scholars have explored from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Diane Cady, *The Gender of Money in Middle English Literature: Value and Economy in Late Medieval England* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), for example, examines how the historical differentiation of economic value from such values as 'friendship, love, and poetics' has obscured the relation of the former – and, crucially, its entanglement with 'gender ideology' – to the latter (p. 51).
- 15 I realise that this conceptualisation of axiological constellations as at once both separate and linked, with ascriptions both 'inside' a constellation but also necessarily defined by those 'outside', broaches the sort of irresolvable false binaries that poststructuralism has famously identified. In this respect, I have found helpful Brian Massumi's discussion of the idea of 'immanent outside' and his related distinction between system and process, with the former roughly corresponding to my notion of constellation and the latter to interlinked networks. See Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), esp. pp. 8–11.
- 16 Vincent B. Leitch *et al.* (eds), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 3rd edn (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018). The other representatives of the Middle Ages are Moses Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas and Christine de Pizan. The *Norton* prints selections from Boccaccio's reflections on the nature and origin of poetry in his later *Genealogia deorum gentilium* ('The Genealogy of the Gentile Gods'), many of which repeat and develop ideas from the *Trattatello*. I quote the English translation of the latter from *The Life of Dante (Trattatello in Laude Di Dante)*, trans. Vincenzo Zin Bollettino (New York: Garland, 1990), and have benefited from Bollettino's introduction, as well as from David Wallace's text of and notes to an excerpt of the work in A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott, with David Wallace (eds), *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100–c. 1375: The Commentary*

Tradition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 492–503. For the Italian, see Boccaccio, *Opere in Versi, Corbaccio, Trattatello in Laude Di Dante, Prose Latine, Epistole*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci (Milano: R. Ricciardi, 1965), pp. 565–650. My discussion here develops ideas about the *Trattatello* that I aired in *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), which in turn were inspired by David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

- 17 To quote just one of many instances of the *Trattatello*'s rhetorically elaborate diatribes against commercial values, 'Your [Florence's] wealth is a transitory and unsure thing ... Alas! Will you glory in your merchants and craftsmen, of whom you have plenty? You will do so foolishly. Commerce, continually goading one with avarice, is a menial trade; craftsmanship was at one time engaged in nobly by men of genius until a second mercenary nature made it corrupt and worthless' (Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*, p. 26).
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 35–6. As Wallace notes, in this passage, as well as in several others in the digression, Boccaccio closely adapts material from Petrarch's letter to his brother Gherardo in which Petrarch defends his poetic calling against his brother's religious objections. The irony that this engenders, given what we will shortly see to be some of the implications of other passages in the digression, was surely not lost on Boccaccio. For the extracts from the relevant letter (*Epistolae familiares*, x:4), see Minnis, Scott and Wallace (eds), *Medieval Literary Theory*, pp. 413–15.
- 19 Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*, pp. 37–9.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 38. Here, as well as at other moments, Boccaccio gestures to the Horatian linkage of the literary value of pleasure to the other-than-literary value of wisdom.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 37.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 25 See, for example, the *scop*'s first-person account of Queen Ealhlid in lines 99–102 of the text in *Old English Shorter Poems: Wisdom and Lyric*, ed. Robert E. Bjork (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- 26 Quotation from the introduction to Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland,

- and others (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 15, and see pp. 23–4 for Benjamin's comments on aura most pertinent here. The notion has of course elicited vast commentary; a helpful entry point is C. Stephen Jaeger, 'Aura and Charisma: Two Useful Concepts in Critical Theory', *New German Critique*, 38:3 (2011), pp. 17–34.
- 27 With this notion of totalising present absences, readers will recognise the precedent of a number of familiar and famously knotty theoretical formulations – Althusser's of ideology, Derrida's of the transcendental signified and Lacan's of the Law, to name just three. But I believe that my point here is straightforward and limited enough not to require any lingering in these waters.
 - 28 Michael Bérubé, *Rhetorical Occasions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), pp. 315–16, observes that the idea, as Shklovsky developed it, was contingent upon literary modernism.
 - 29 Jan Mukařovský, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*, trans. Mark E. Suino (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1970), p. 75.
 - 30 *Ibid.*, p. 90. Cf. Derek Attridge's account of literary value quoted in the preceding chapter.
 - 31 Mukařovský, *Aesthetic Function*, p. 88.
 - 32 *Ibid.*, p. 8 n. 5.
 - 33 Carlos J. Alonso, 'Editor's Column: My Professional Advice (to Graduate Students)', *PMLA*, 117:3 (2002), 401–6 (401).
 - 34 James F. English, *The Global Future of English Studies* (New York: John Wiley, 2012), p. 7.
 - 35 David J. Alworth, 'Critique, Modernity, Society, Agency: Matters of Concern in Literary Studies', in Rita Felski and Stephen Muecke (eds), *Latour and the Humanities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), pp. 275–99 (291).
 - 36 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). Although Felski does argue with forceful urgency against the mode of inquiry that she defines as critique, she nevertheless leaves room for it in the field, along with other modes. More strident calls for rethinking the field in Latour's terms include some of the contributions to Felski and Muecke (eds), *Latour and the Humanities*, e.g., Muecke, 'An Ecology of Institutions: Recomposing the Humanities', pp. 31–51; and Yves Citton, 'Fictional Attachments and Literary Weavings in the Anthropocene', pp. 200–24.
 - 37 Cf. Smith's point that 'Every literary work ... is thus the product of a complex evaluative feedback loop that embraces not only the ever-shifting economy of the artist's own interests and resources as they

evolve during and in reaction to the process of composition, but also all the shifting economies of her assumed and imagined audiences' (*Contingencies of Value*, p. 45).

- 38 Deidre Shauna Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (University of Chicago Press, 2015); Shai M. Dromi and Eva Illouz, 'Recovering Morality: Pragmatic Sociology and Literary Studies', *NLH*, 41:2 (2010), 351–69. In my *Literary Value and Social Identity in the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), I attempt an explicit application of the framework to traditional author-centred criticism, at least as far as I had developed the framework to that point. See also, among several other recent medieval literary studies, Nicholas Perkins, *The Gift of Narrative in Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), which 'follows the actors', so to speak, by way of gift theory.
- 39 Bruno Latour, 'An Attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto', *NLH*, 41:3 (2010), 471–90.