

## Postscript: losing my religion

While I have sought to be consistent in my theorising of literary value in this book, that theorising has not really been accompanied by an overarching thesis. Rather, in addition to presenting my preliminary theory of literary valuing, my basic aim has been to describe some practical dimensions of the problem of literary value within a few of the arenas of the everyday activities of scholars and teachers of literature. Those descriptions have been regularly, if relatively briefly, accompanied by suggestions for how to navigate the problem, most of which are variations on the recommendation to recognise in some explicit way the value ascriptions that pervade literary study – variations of the exhortation, ‘Always be reflexive’. In lieu of a tedious recapitulation of the major points of the preceding chapters, therefore, in these few concluding pages I will heed my own advice and convey more personally and directly than elsewhere a sense of some of the axiological conditions that have prompted and shaped this book. I have organised these reflections under the headings of a pair of queries (as the Quaker tradition uses that term), each of which comprised for me one of this book’s prompting provocations – doubts that, while personal, I expect that I share in some fashion with others.

### **Query 1: What if literature is not as valuable as the dedication of one’s career to it would seem to presume?**

From the moment when I sounded out the first words that I was actually reading (‘Hop on Pop’, if I remember correctly), books have been among my closest friends, and they were especially so during

some elementary school years in which the day that the Scholastic order arrived was the very best, by far, of the term. At college, with its exhilarating opening of intellectual horizons, this already deep emotional connection with literature engendered transformative reading experiences that belied my chosen major of computer science, experiences that affected much of what may be said to constitute 'me'. (To name just three of the books involved: Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*.) In the emotionally turbulent years immediately following, attempts to create my own fiction, however feeble, were powerfully therapeutic. And while my eventual career as a professor of literature obviously bespeaks my devotion to it, more private reading (most recently as of this writing, Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*) continues to play an important role in shaping my understandings of self and world. In short, for almost as far back as I have memory at all, literature has been a large and diverse source of value in my life – a value that once, in a splendidly axiological fashion, baldly materialised as the definite price tag of the bonus that I declined when my boss in the software industry sought to waylay my pursuit of a PhD in English.

A similar testimony to literary value, substituting one set of idiosyncrasies with another, could, I expect, be easily enough composed by most readers of this book. And yet, I also expect that we all know, and likely have close relationships with, people who would not attest to literary value in this fashion but who are nonetheless, in every way that it counts (ethically, politically, socially, professionally, dispositionally, etc.), better people than we are – people who, that is, embody our own most cherished values more fully than we perceive ourselves to do. I certainly am acutely aware of some such individuals, for whom literature is simply not very important, at least relative to its importance to me, but who do not seem thereby any worse off. The conclusion must be, then, that the benefits of greatest import that I have received from literature have been available to others from different sources, and thus literature is no more valuable, at least in those respects, than those other sources – and, for all that I am aware, it may be less valuable. To claim otherwise, I have come to believe, is to suggest that those for whom literature is not as important lead lives that are in some foundational ways impoverished. Especially as voiced by someone who is paid to study

literature, this claim, even in its most sophisticated varieties, strikes me now as a rather arrogant, condescending, self-congratulating species of self-justification.

In the preceding pages, I have had the occasion to point to some other possible justifications for the study of literature. Rather than reiterate those here, I will cite a more obvious, much simpler and substantially humbler one: that works of literature constitute a distinctive class of cultural artefact, and so are as worthy of study as any other class of cultural artefact. In particular – and notwithstanding the poststructuralist chestnut that understands the category of person as writing’s echo – a literary artefact is an attestation of human consciousness, one perhaps with more density in this respect than, say, a shard of pottery (the study of which I admittedly know nothing about). To be sure, the privileging of human consciousness by the Western philosophical tradition (and the human exceptionalism that has motivated it) may be, as some versions of the posthumanist critique urge us to recognise, the siren’s song that has led us to the present brink of global environmental catastrophe. Nevertheless, consciousness is valuable enough to me – and, I suppose, to those who bankroll universities – to justify the study of an artefact that remains one of its key historical attestations, albeit certainly just one among many others. There may be a great deal more to literature than this, and on most days I tend to think that there is. But, for me, there need not be.

### **Query 2: Even if the works of Chaucer are ‘great’, do they and their study do more harm than good?**

When I first read the *Canterbury Tales*, which was after I had already earned an MA in English (having taken courses part-time while still immersed in my software engineering career), I was completely awestruck. Never had I encountered a work of literature that possessed such a dazzlingly combination of compelling storytelling, intellectual power, depth of insight, enchanting style and frequent, stupendous moments of sheer, infectious playfulness. A couple years later when I began my PhD programme, it was by no means inevitable that I would become a medievalist (see above for my fondness for nineteenth-century novels), yet the more literary

experience I gained, the more Chaucer continued to emerge from the crowd. The eventual acquaintance that I gained with the rest of his works confirmed the qualities that I experienced in the *Tales* and added several others. From that point to this day, when I am asked (as it seems literature professors frequently are), 'What is the best book of all time', I always unhesitatingly name the *Tales*, followed by 'of course'.

Nonetheless, I must recognise – prompted by the several scholars cited in the preceding chapters – that Chaucer's still *de facto* position as the Father of English poetry carries with it a set of values that has served, and continues to serve, as a legitimating framework for some deeply entrenched injustices. Many of those injustices, obviously, are encapsulated by the phrase 'white male Eurocentric canon', and the social, cultural, political and institutional forces that have created that canon in their own image, and have installed Chaucer as its English fountainhead, continue to have deeply detrimental impact, albeit one becoming more visible as such every day. Moreover, as many critics have also pointed out, Chaucer's works themselves are scarcely passive vehicles of those forces. Rather, those forces have not had to search very far to find in those works ideologically amenable content, which is to say, those works themselves are part of those forces.

Embarrassingly belatedly, I have become aware of a personal dimension of this aspect of Chaucer's works and their study. My grandparents on one side emigrated to the US in the early twentieth century from a rural village in the Guangdong Province of China; on the other side are Shenandoah Valley Mennonites, ultimately of Swiss-German ancestry. I readily pass as white in most situations, and I am, alas, only slowly coming to realise the extent to which, consciously and unconsciously, I have sought to ensure that passing. I am still coming to grips with how much a desire to be whiter than I am has shaped my behaviour and decisions. Looking back now almost three decades, I cannot say that my attraction to Chaucer – and to a period of English literary history that includes no authors of colour – was not a manifestation of this desire. As Jonathan Hsy has recently explored so incisively, medievalists of colour often experience intrusive inquiries about why *they* would want to be a medievalist;<sup>1</sup> conversely, therefore, my choice to be a medievalist has necessarily added to my cover.

As mentioned above, I continue to believe that Chaucer's works are great, and at this point, having devoted so much time and energy to the study of those works, I doubt that I would survive the cognitive dissonance of fully embracing the possibility that they have done more harm than good. But I cannot in good conscience argue against those who build an informed case for that possibility. To use an analogy, my appreciation of Chaucer's works lies somewhere on the continuum between an appreciation of the Weminuche Wilderness mountains at sunset and of Versailles at the height of tourist season. Both are spectacular, but, on balance, I believe we would be entirely better off without the latter.

Last words and a final query: where does all this leave the value of literature? If you have found your way through this book to this final sentence, you know where.

### Note

- 1 Jonathan Hsy, *Antiracist Medievalisms: From 'Yellow Peril' to Black Lives Matter* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2021). Hsy both answers the question and exposes (explodes) its assumptions; see especially his initial discussion of disidentification on pp. 4–5.