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**Between Authorities: Exercises and Experiments in Literary  
Appreciation**

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## Contents

A Guide to Reading This Project .....	1
The Inbox of Archibald Braintree .....	9
Preface .....	10
‘Meditations on Pleasure: John Ruskin and the Value of Art in the Classroom’ .....	22
‘Resurrecting the Fallen in Thomas Kilroy’s The Death and Resurrection of Mr Roche’ .....	26
‘Resisting Motherhood in Thomas Kilroy’s Talbot’s Box’ .....	29
Commonplace Thoughts of a Commonplace Fellow .....	40
About the Author .....	41
Commonplace Thoughts of a Commonplace Fellow .....	43
Books I Have Read; Also Books I have Borrowed from the Library or Confiscated from Barnaby .....	411
Works Cited .....	414

## A Guide to Reading This Project

The first thing to say about this project is that it does not look or sound like a traditional Ph.D. thesis. It is not divided into chapters; it is indebted to individual works of literature without being aligned to theories *about* literature; and there is very little of what we might call, by way of shorthand: ‘evidence’. And yet, it is a work of serious scholarship. It is a work of serious scholarship, not least because what it represents is an effort to think about, and practice, literary criticism in a new way, in a new form. Instead of making a case, I am encouraging the reader to embrace uncertainty. Instead of proofs, I am inviting the reader to consider how much *possibility* we are able to bear.

The second thing to say is that I did not choose to abandon the ‘traditional’ model because it was difficult to follow. The simple fact of the matter is that the three academic publications included here were the first, and easiest part of the project. All three were submitted to international, peer-reviewed journals. All three were accepted on first submission. It would not have strained or even stretched me to continue in that vein for the duration of the project.

But it would have been unfulfilling; it would have left too much unexplored. In reading the plays of Thomas Kilroy, I was struck by the way his characters are completely dominated by the events of the past. They are diminished by a version of themselves – a story about who they are and what they have come from – that they cannot escape, and by a vision of a self they are unable to live up to.

It occurred to me as I read that their stories might be part of the problem. It seemed to me that other lives might be available if only Kilroy's characters were not quite so sure who they were. If Dickens' *Little Dorrit* seems to tell us that there are some prisons we simply cannot escape, that wheresoever we go, we stand always in the shadow of the Marshalsea (it is worth noting that the original title of *Little Dorrit* was 'Nobody's Fault'), it may be that we do not have to be quite so forlorn as we sometimes feel.

If the locked door and the terrible secrets of the past seem to immobilize us, then it may be that we sometimes make our secrets terrible by making them secret. It may be that we are, ourselves, the father of the dominating father whom we feel we have to destroy. It may, be, in other words, that our stories are what we seem to require, and also what we suffer from; they are the means by which we create our castles in the sky, and our dungeon cells under the ground.

What this project represents is not a promise of transformation; it is an opportunity to consider how much, and what sort of, authority we are able to live without. There is something very compelling, for example, about the Freudian explanation for Hamlet's inaction. It reawakens us to the fact that the world is always bigger and more mysterious than we are inclined to allow. The clinician as critic draws our attention to the idea that no detail is too small to be considered, because any detail might prove to be significant. The trouble is that having broadened the horizons, the clinician as critic cannot help closing them down again. The clinician as critic – the clinician as artist – becomes the clinician as diagnostician, becomes the clinician who sees the world only through the symptoms he is able to describe.

So, what I wanted to do here was to keep the interest – the excitement about potentiality – but without the Freudian formulations. What I wanted to find in the course of this project was not a new metaphor, but a way of preventing potentially interesting ideas from settling into a single, definite shape. What I wanted, in other words, was not so much a new school of criticism (or a new theory *about* criticism) as a fresh commitment to the value of conversation, even when (perhaps especially when) the conversation we're having doesn't seem to make very much sense.

This commitment to conversation, even in the face of meaninglessness (or nonsense) puts this project squarely in the territory of Lewis Carroll, and it is the spirit of Carroll, much more than Freud, that inhabits these pages. In Wonderland, word games coexist with the King of Hearts' relief that time needn't be wasted searching for meaning in incomprehensible verses.

The world underground, that is to say, resists dogmatic simplification. If Freud has taught us to attend to the secrets and slips that our use of words may reveal, then Carroll has encouraged us both to delight in the associations that words seem to call forth, and also to see the essential absurdity of our desire – our demand, even – for meaning. Sometimes, as Alice discovers in the course of her adventures, *judgement is the most nonsensical thing of all*.

If Carroll is the leading literary spirit in this project, the other guiding force has been my experience as a teacher. Indeed, it would be appropriate to call this project an exemplar of ‘*teaching-led research*’, as opposed to ‘research-led teaching’.

It could hardly be any other: I was a teacher long before I was a researcher (I began teaching at the Houston Museum of Natural Science at the age of twelve). In the course of my career, I have taught a number of subjects (science, literature, reading and early literacy, maths, history, sports and physical education, geography, theatre, Spanish; the list is not exhaustive), and I have worked with quite a variety of people: from Polish preschoolers to university undergraduates to violent criminals sentenced to terms in correctional facilities.

My commitment to conversation is therefore not just an expression of preference for a particular work of literature, or a particular kind of literature; it is also a statement about what I have found to be useful. It is a statement about what *works*. It may seem trite, but *talking* to people – taking an interest in the sorts of things that interest them – seems to help them to be more imaginative, both about themselves, and about other people.

By ‘conversation’, I mean active listening; I mean *attention to detail*. Conversation isn’t interrupting what a person is saying in order to tell her what she really means; it is a recognition, also, that ‘meaning’ is sometimes a statement about what we seem to want and fear, not an authoritative account of what has been said. Meaning is often more changeable, more uncertain than we are inclined to treat it.

Conversation, as I understand it, is less like a tennis match and more like coaxing a flame. Once it has taken hold, a good conversation can move (or be moved) in any number of directions. This past summer, I opened a discussion with an English-exchange class at NUI Galway by suggesting that the majority of people carrying umbrellas on Shop Street were either very careless assassins or amateur spearfishermen; we went on to have a very thoughtful discussion of *Doctor Faustus*. The challenge for this project has been to try to capture something of that open-endedness – that sense of imaginative possibility – on paper.



The project's major section, the book, *Commonplace Thoughts of a Commonplace Fellow*, is the culmination of all my work. In word and in form, it represents exactly the sort of open-ended engagement I sought to create. The book, which is intended for first-year undergraduates in departments of English, is one part commonplace book, and one part sketchpad. Like a commonplace book, *Commonplace Thoughts* is a *collection* of written material (but not a journal), and reflects something of the interests and character of its owner; like a sketchpad, it is *used to practice and appreciate art*.

*Commonplace Thoughts* is the property of one Archibald Braintree (a fictional fellow of a fictional college). The title of the book is a salute to Jerome K. Jerome's *Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow*, and it expresses something of Braintree's character. Insofar as he is a man who stands on his dignity, Braintree is a man who stands on one foot, and in a high wind.

Braintree's character is partly an expression of what attracts me as a writer and reader. Besides Carroll, my favorite authors are Wodehouse, Dickens, Jerome, and G.K. Chesterton; so, characters in springtime – characters who dress for dinner only to find they have to chase after their hats – are the sort of company I keep, and also seek to create.

Braintree's character is also a useful *device*. Majesty upended – or the authority figure in difficulty – is helpful for bringing nervous or self-conscious students out of their shell. It reassures them that it is okay to make mistakes; it encourages them to volunteer answers. In my own classrooms, I have used 'the story of the windowsill and the visiting puma (which turned out to be an ordinary house cat)' and the 'embarrassing incident of the carelessly-placed thumb, Facebook Messenger, and stickers of leaping sheep and monkeys walking hand-in-hand with hearts above their heads' to good effect.

The point of *Commonplace Thoughts* is not to try to overawe readers with *ex cathedra* pronouncements, the point is to encourage them to pay attention to detail, to use the details – the sentences – as preludes to a conversation, or a series of conversations. If the aphoristic nature of much of the collection can seem like something akin to a spell (an aphorism, after all, is invoked partly in order to transform our outlook or reveal secrets that seem inaccessible by ordinary means and everyday experience), then Braintree is there to remind the reader that we shouldn't allow ourselves to be entirely taken in. His humor is a way of stopping the reader from replacing one sort of story for another sort of story; it interrupts the statements about literature and

criticism as a way of showing that authority is never quite as authoritative as it seems, is never quite as authoritative as it *wants* to seem.

Like Carroll, Braintree delights in words and sentences; and like Ruskin (and Carroll too), he sees the art of the written word as something that belongs also to the *eye*. One of the most striking features of *Commonplace Thoughts* is the abundance of white space on the pages. The white space is significant: it represents both an opportunity and a commitment. A page is a thing that takes *time* to turn. The white space focuses attention on the words that appear on the page. It also affords the reader the opportunity to discover that what appears on the page is fundamentally *incomplete*. In the same way that a sketch of a leaf is both a celebration of detail and a reminder of the tree, so too is a passage from Carroll (or a remark about criticism) a way of drawing attention to the parent novel, to the work that is absent.

A sentence is a thing that takes time, effort, and skill to compose, but it doesn't tell us the whole truth. It is both a work of art in miniature and a reminder of the world beyond the frame. Good art is a prelude to a conversation, in part, because it is a reminder of how much is left to think and say; it is a reminder that what we do not know (and haven't previously considered) also demands our attention. What I wanted to create in *Commonplace Thoughts* is a sense of criticism – a sense of engagement with art – as something that is *itself* an aesthetic act. Instead of criticism being an instrument of judgement, to be remembered and repeated, I want the reader to have the opportunity to use the sentences as a prelude to a conversation, as the opening act of a grand adventure.

*Commonplace Thoughts* is intended to be *enjoyed*; it is designed to encourage its intended readers to explore and discuss whatever ideas the sentences may happen to inspire. The choice of material is intended to give the reader a blended experience. *Commonplace Thoughts* is comprised of a number of symbols, quotations, ideas, handwritten observations (the items in blue italics), handwritten prompts (the items in red italics), and a final note, penned by Braintree's friend and colleague, Barnaby.

Every entry begins with a symbol, centered above the text (the position of the symbol and text, like the margins and line spacing, is varied in order to produce different visual effects on the page). The symbols make it easy for the reader to distinguish one text piece from the next. Symbols are also familiar features of all sorts of notebooks and sketchpads. I began with the card suits (as a link to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*), and then expanded. The symbols were

partnered with the text material at random, though readers are certainly free to try to find some meaning in them (as I certainly would have done in their place).

The statements about literature and criticism – and Braintree’s observations – offer ideas for the reader to consider, and also serve as Braintree’s protest against authority, and verisimilitude. His remarks about his colleagues and his college are not intended to sound entirely plausible. They are a reminder that art is neither a mirror – nor a working model – of the world.

Braintree’s remarks about his colleagues have another function too: they serve to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that Braintree is not a person living and working in isolation. His work is part of an ongoing conversation he is having with other people. Barnaby is his especial chum (he gets the most mentions in the book). Like Jerome’s George and William Samuel Harris, and Wodehouse’s Drones Club members, Barnaby is there to remind the reader that Braintree does not stand above the fray. Whether or not one gives much credence to the idea of such a thing as a ‘historical moment’ (and personally, I do not), it is certainly true that all writing is partly a conversation with, and about, the people in our lives – the people who seem to make our lives meaningful – and so, in that sense, *Commonplace Thoughts* is partly Braintree’s way of talking about – and *to* – the people who make his own life meaningful. It is exactly for the reason of emphasizing the importance of meaningful companionship that *Commonplace Thoughts* begins with Mrs. Braintree, and it ends with the quote from *What Matters* and Barnaby’s handwritten note.

The extracts from real books are tributes to works (and sentences) I esteem and enjoy. They are sentences that, as a reader, have encouraged me to conversation. If a selection seems overlong, it is, at least, not accidental. It is a sign of appreciation, and also a gentle rebuke to the sort of criticism that talks *about* literature while keeping literature at arm’s length. *Commonplace Thoughts* testifies to a work’s importance by giving it a presence *on the page*.

The prompts are included in order to give the intended undergraduate readers things to talk about, and try. I have used a number of them in my tutorial classes. They do not tell the reader what any extract ‘really means’ (this is not criticism as excavation); they are there in order to encourage readers to see writing as a game, rather than a painful duty. I use ‘Discuss’ quite a lot in *Commonplace Thoughts*, precisely because ‘Discuss’ is, for students, the most anxiety-inducing word on any essay paper. Its open-endedness feels like a trap. That is why the first

prompt begins, ‘Discuss. Be easy. There are no tricks or traps here’. In *Commonplace Thoughts*, I want ‘discuss’ to be a word that the reader does not have to fear.

Barnaby’s note (in green) at the end of the book is a parting gesture in the direction of a conversation: this may be Braintree’s book, but Barnaby gets to have his say too.

*Commonplace Thoughts* closes with *Books I Have Read*; Also *Books I have Borrowed* from the Library or *Confiscated* from Barnaby. This is a salute to Pierre Bayard’s wonderful book, *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*. It is both a reference to the fact that the concept of ownership is a fluid and uncertain thing in the college (Braintree and his colleagues frequently take pens from one another), and it is a final reminder of Braintree’s fundamental unreliability (he is interested in art more than truth). It is also a means of distinguishing between the ‘real’ sources and all the works – and authors – I have invented. The list of *Works Cited* at the end of the project includes the works I have actually consulted (*Books I have Read*, which is a part of *Commonplace Thoughts* itself, is a list of all the invented material).

I wish to make it absolutely clear, however, that the writing about literature in *Commonplace Thoughts* is all *real* criticism. The titles, like the authors, may be products of my imagination, but as a critic, I am prouder of it than I am of any of my published pieces (the ideas are better, and it certainly has all the best lines).

The rest of the project (I call it ‘the rest’, but it appears before *Commonplace Thoughts*) should be understood as belonging to Braintree’s desk inbox. It consists of my three published pieces and a preface. The published pieces are linked to *Commonplace Thoughts* by a passing reference which Braintree makes to me in the early part of the book (I am not mentioned again).

The ‘Preface’ is ostensibly written by Braintree’s head of department, and it introduces a book that doesn’t actually exist. It functions as the bridge between the more traditional (published) pieces and the practice-based work of *Commonplace Thoughts* (I’ve placed it first because it develops some of the ideas I’ve included in this guide). It also gives readers a way of noticing both what Braintree pays attention to (what he seems to value and take from a work) and what he chooses to leave out (what doesn’t attract his interest and imagination; what isn’t worthy of inclusion in his book). Some of the material from the preface finds its way into Braintree’s *Commonplace Thoughts*, despite his fraught relationship with the preface’s author.

In its post-doctoral afterlife, *Commonplace Thoughts* will be developed, and the Inbox pieces will be cut altogether. In going, they will tread a well-worn path. Behind the observations,

asides, and bountiful white spaces of *Commonplace Thoughts*, there are over twelve-hundred documents full of material that failed to make the cut – and failing, were allowed to fall by the wayside.

If this project does not seem to encompass very many works, I would say only that it is already rather broader than it will one day become. Volume, I think, is not infrequently a barrier to literary appreciation, and it seems to me that I can offer no greater testament to a work of literature than to say that I spend hours at a time with it, and revisit it regularly, and do not find it diminished by re-visitation. The fact that I do not even particularly like *Talbot's Box* will, I think, give the reader a sense of the sort of time and attention I give to works that I really enjoy.

This project is about literary appreciation more than explanation. Instead of answers, what it offers are opportunities to take an interest. Instead of diagnoses and specialist vocabularies, it says to its intended readers: 'Here are some sentences; see what you make of them, and let's have a conversation'. It is criticism as enjoyment. What it says is that literature is something we can be thrilled by even if we don't understand it, and perhaps, especially if we don't understand it. What it says is that sometimes, to find oneself in possession of an interesting sentence is treat enough, and it is my sincere hope that the reader will find here at least a sentence or two that he or she can enjoy.

## **The Inbox of Archibald Braintree**

## Preface<sup>1</sup>

This project has had a long genesis. It has developed; I cannot say whether it has progressed. That is not intended as an equivocation; it is something much closer to a creed. Expressed loftily, we might call it something like ‘a belief in democracy and the democratic spirit’. Put more prosaically, we might call it ‘literary appreciation’, or even: ‘enthusiasm’. And it rests on two essential principles. The first is that self-expression does not necessitate estrangement. Growing into ourselves does not require us to lose interest in other people. The individual self is the person (with all its varied aspects and competing interests) that we cannot help being. But self-knowing, if it is a virtue, is not always a cardinal virtue. It is not infrequently a sort of self-parody: a relentless repetition of those aspects of ourselves that are most familiar to us. Pursued too determinedly, it can become a merciless regimen of self-diagnosis where the symptoms always feel debilitating and the prognosis is invariably poor. The second principle follows on from the first. It states that uncertainty is not always an ailment. The evacuation of doubt does not have to be the end towards which all mental activity must strive; and taking an interest in things for their own sake (and without regard to ourselves) is sometimes the sanest, healthiest thing we can do.

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<sup>1</sup> From Rupert Kimberley-Kent’s book, *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*. Copyright © 2018.

What these two principles share is an underlying dissatisfaction with diabolical engines of being as the fundamental, explanatory feature our lives. Fear is certainly a powerful motivating force; but that is not at all the same thing as saying that life is essentially tragic. As creatures, we are susceptible to negativity bias; but that does not mean that we must live principally in the shadows. Instead of declaring with Jonathan Harker that ‘I doubt; I fear; I think strange things, which I dare not confess to my own soul’ (Stoker 21), this book asks the reader to consider whether the unknown (and that includes what we do not know about ourselves) can be experienced as something other than threatening. Instead of thinking of ourselves as forlorn figures in need of buttressing (or saving), it asks the reader to consider what might be gained by seeing ourselves more as interlopers in a fantastic game: one that does not always seem to have any rules (or, like Monopoly, has rules, only no one who plays seems to know quite what they are). If we cannot (and maybe should not) be absolutely content with ourselves, and confident about who we are and what we believe, it may nevertheless be possible to wonder what it would be like to think and read in a way that privileges curiosity above confidence, and even above contentment. If searching for truth (both about ourselves and about the world around us) causes us to sometimes discover things we would have preferred to remain hidden, it may be that disappointment does not always have to be debilitating. If peace of mind is something we desire, it may be that our desire (our demand, even) for peace of mind is part of what is causing us to feel so fragmented, so at war with ourselves.

The conflict itself is ineluctable. We are as insufficiently equipped to handle our lives as our ancestors were to handle theirs. The question is whether it is possible to regard joy and sorrow as intonations rather than absolute states of being that we must either strive for or try to escape. As authors of our own lives, we ‘write intolerably ill’ (Montaigne 261). But it may be that there are alternatives to the forms of writing we think we know; it may be that there are alternatives to defending our corner. We are structuring, pattern-seeking creatures, but we never quite seem to make very much sense. We shape facts into stories; but the world, including the facts of our lives, may be, as Nassim Nicholas Taleb writes in his book *Fooled by Randomness*, ‘more random than we think’ (Taleb, xxiv). Our stories provide a respite from the whirlwind of existence. ‘We read a good novel’, G.K. Chesterton wrote, ‘not in order to know more people, but in order to know fewer’ (‘Our Note Book’). But what we take as a cure is also part of the disease; the absence of buffeting winds does not mean that we are in safe harbors. If art can seem



to make life more bearable, it also beguiles us into the belief that real life is not as pleasurable as it might be; it is, perhaps, not as pleasurable as it *should* be. Art, in that sense, is soothing, but it is also self-serving. Under the guise of telling us the truth, it can trick us into a condition of dependency. It may cause us to feel worse than the circumstances of our life seem to require. When William Hazlitt declared 'It is *we* who are Hamlet' (*Characters* 70), he drew attention to something about Shakespeare's universality that is worth considering: Hamlet does not just give voice to fears and anxieties we hold in common, he also calls them into being. He is, in Harold Bloom's famous phrase, part of 'the invention of the human, the inauguration of personality as we have come to recognize it' (*Shakespeare* 4). Affect, that is to say, carries with it the potential for influence; whatever moves us can change us. Even description is never just that.

But if words are not always what they seem, and they can (and do) communicate more than we always care to acknowledge, it may be that our aesthetic principles rather than our words are what is principally holding us back and making us feel so ill at ease with the stories we are able to tell (and not tell) about ourselves. It may be that if our principles were more inquisitive than condemnatory, then even bad writing might be of interest. It may be that we treat aesthetic interpretation too much like an act of consecration. Interpretation is, first and foremost, the fact of taking an interest. But what else it can be, or must be, is perhaps a question we have been too quick to answer. What has become the traditional form of the academic paper has been elevated to something like an article of faith. The academic paper says that if you use particular words in a particular sort of way, a truth will be revealed. It makes claims to objectivity, but it isn't at all clear that we really know what objectivity is, or how exactly we can achieve it. The fact of something we call the unconscious (which includes descriptions of biological functions that operate independent of conscious decision-making) throws into question whether, and to what extent, it is possible to be objective at all. It may be that acknowledgments of subjectivity are as close as we are able to come. It may be that the spirit of inquiry is best expressed by an approach to art and life that is more curious than knowing. It may be that knowledge is advanced as much by trying as by arguing.

In the essays of Michel de Montaigne, words are precisely what the ritual of writing is trying to uncover. Meaning is therefore a process of unfolding; the value is inextricably wound together with the experience both of writing and of reading. And what Montaigne applied to the study of himself, Sigmund Freud applied to the study of other people. One of the great thrills

Freud described in *The Interpretation of Dreams* was the discovery that the material of dreams is drawn even from the ‘most indifferent and insignificant’ (77) details. For Freud, the insignificance of the dream material was a form of psychic censorship: it is the mind’s effort to conceal the dream’s second, more important source (264). The material of dreams was also a call to expression. Psychoanalysis is, in part, a recognition that everything is interesting, not least because anything might prove to be important. It is a method of treatment very much like close reading. It is also an invitation to renewal. Psychoanalysis is a call to look at the world and at ourselves with fresh eyes. If we are not always what we would wish to be, we are, at least, always more than we seem. Our words have value even when they seem to come out wrong. Perhaps especially when they seem to come out wrong.

For the analyst as well as for the patient, ‘The readiness is all’ (*Hamlet* 5.2.169). That is to say, every new experience – and that includes the experience of healing – begins with a surrender: a surrender of certainty. Readiness is a prerequisite of insight; readiness means, among other things, receptiveness to all that lies beyond the limits of rationality. It is partly for that reason that Freud has been called ‘a late romantic writer’ (Phillips 366). Psychoanalysis, although it expresses itself in clinical terms, is an effort to see beyond the rational surface we permit ourselves to acknowledge. It is an effort to move out of what the poet John Keats called ‘the Chamber of Maiden Thought’ (‘Letter to J.H. Reynolds’ 397); it is, in other words, an intermediate point on the path to Negative Capability. Keats used the term ‘Negative Capability’ as a way of describing a quality of mind by which ‘a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (‘Letter to George and Tom Keats’ 370). Negative Capability means ‘adventure’ in its broadest and truest sense. It is a recognition that the world is a good deal bigger than we thought it to be; it is also a good deal more mysterious. Negative Capability is not the same thing as omniscience; it is more like an attitude of attentiveness. It is something like the meeting ground between imagination and abnegation. That is to say, it is broad enough to want to see beyond itself, but it is not so narrow as to believe that it has actually succeeded. It is knowingness expressed as an acknowledgement of limitation; limitation expressed as a desire to know more than we do. It is a call to experience more of what the world has to offer; it is also a requirement to make room for other people.

The idea of Negative Capability says that the divisions we feel within ourselves do not have to be disarming. Precariousness is not a challenge to perspective, it *is* the perspective.

Energy rather than constancy is the proper framework of experience; Hazlitt called this ‘Gusto’: ‘power or passion defining any object’ (‘On Gusto’ 201). It does not mean preferring what is odd above what is ordinary. It means having an eye for both. It means adaptability. Negative Capability means learning to look at the world in the way that Alice learned to look at Wonderland. It means realizing that when we allow ourselves to begin to see a new place, or to see an old place in a new way, we will sometimes find that our lessons come out wrong. It means we might find ourselves saying that ‘London is the capital of Paris, and Paris is the capital of Rome’ (*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* 19). And it means that we should not be in a hurry to reject what it is we have just received. Sometimes, what we think we know is actually what we are suffering from. Sometimes, what we think we know is what is holding us back and preventing us from having a new experience.

‘We teach people how to remember’, Oscar Wilde wrote in ‘The Critic as Artist’: ‘we never teach them how to grow’ (216). Real growth is, in part, an art of forgetting; it begins with learning to place to one side. And that is seldom easy: the desire for growth is in no way a simple idealization. It is an act of conscious risk-taking. Growth means something more agnostic than mere improvement. It means accepting that what is worth knowing may take us beyond the limits of our control. It means willingness to experience the world on someone else’s terms. The sort of reading that I want to encourage in this book is committed more to the spirit of adventure than to upholding a particular set of findings. It is committed more to opportunities than to explanations, which is another way of saying that it is committed less to explanations than to nearly anything else. Reading, like listening, is, among other things, a test of what, and how much, we are able to endure. And the test of all expertise is resilience. True knowledge is not rationality above everything else; nor is it principally a body of insight about our emotions. It is that which is able to endure the violence of our passions, the waywardness of our private (and indeed, professional) predilections. The lesson of *Oedipus* is that that none of us is as clever as we think we are. Like Oedipus, what we sometimes suffer from is not blindness, but myopia.

We are never quite masters of our own experience, and never less than when to be heard is what we most urgently require. A sense of certainty about what we are experiencing can be a dangerous self-deception. There is, in other words, something undeniably tragic about Oedipus’ discovery that he is wedded to his mother; there is, however, something quite comical about it too. Both aspects are present in the play and serve to remind us that however well-traveled we

may be, we are never quite so far from home as we might think. If we cannot quite bring ourselves to believe that the play might have been a comedy rather than a tragedy, it is at least possible to believe that it did not have to be as tragic as it was. What we come to experience as the fundamental sorrow of the drama is not a sorrow of conflicting, conflictual forms of gratification, of a man who found a guilty sort of affection where the innocence of the child had been denied. The tragedy of Oedipus is (I think) principally a tragedy of interpretation: it is a tragedy brought about by his having only one way of looking at the world. It is the revenge of the riddle upon the man who believes that to master word play is to master mystery itself. It is the exaggerated acting out of a fool's confession. In Oedipus' account of his own life, Wordsworth's line 'The Child is father of the Man' ('My heart leaps up when I behold') is transformed into a kind of demon shadow that Oedipus will not allow himself to consider escaping. He is overawed by his own interpretation, and so he comes to be dominated by it. He mistakes an idea for the entire truth. Like so many serious-minded people, Oedipus swims in the shallows of his own discoveries, and mistakes them for an ocean. He is an explorer who comes to drown in his own bath.

Self-mutilation, in that sense – in the symbolic sense – is a corrective: the breaking up of the self (or some part of the self) is a renunciation of the overbearing model of ourselves that we can only fail to live up to. As readers, we are left to wonder what the Oedipal story might have been like if Oedipus had not been quite so sure who and what the play was about. As critics, we are left to wonder whether Oedipus was more like a semi-literate author or merely a dangerously proficient editor of his experience. As critics, we are left to wonder whether reading is what we should really be doing, or really want to be doing, or whether, as the psychoanalyst Pierre Bayard argues in his book *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*, the act of reading is, in one sense, a way of preempting the possibilities of a conversation, a rigid preference for what has already been written over all that might be said and is still to emerge. Fundamentally, these are both questions about authority, which means, also, that they are questions about desire, and what the limitations of desire can or should be: whether a novel or drama – indeed, any kind of story – is essentially something that restricts or sets free.

And the answer, it seems, is that it is probably a bit of both. Experiments with and questions about authority are one of the ways we learn to make sense of our appetites. If we not infrequently resent demands that are made of us (the authority of others), it is also true that we

sometimes seem to revel in our status as object. We find fulfillment in a power that looks very much like powerlessness. When we are not being denied more than we can endure, we seem to be fascinated by the sorts of checks or limits that might be placed on our desires. That is one of the reasons why romance novels remain so alluring, despite the various efforts that have been made over the years to discredit and dismiss them as ‘unliterary’ and therefore unworthy of attention. It is one of the reasons why the advances of science (which is itself a sort of passionate cotillion with uncertainty) have failed to see off religion, and Christianity in particular. The story of Christ, whatever else it may be, is a compelling romance. It is the story of a god – or the God – reimagined in the guise of the defenseless figure. Like the story of Jane Eyre, like the story of Anastasia Steele, the drama turns on the recognition that what seems to be weakness is really strength in disguise: the seemingly submissive heroine is really the driving, dominating force in the story. Like ‘Beauty and the Beast’, romance tells us something both about our own power, and about the power we are able to master. It tells us also that the Oedipal story does not tell us everything about the forces and divisions within us, that we may be more like Creon and Antigone than we realize or are prepared to acknowledge: simultaneously king and supplicant, driven and also confused by our desire for authority and for something that is uninhibited, more elemental. We want, simultaneously, to break the world apart, and also hold it together, to be both oppressor and oppressed. We are fascinated by the possibility of being physically and psychologically overpowered, but we want to be able to end the story by declaring, along with Jane Eyre: ‘Reader, I married him’ (Brontë 448).

The distinction between these two kinds of needs – between need that looks like a requirement for direction and need that feels like desire, in all the complications that entails – is the distinction between Mr. Rochester and the diagnostician. It is a distinction of authority, but authority of a particular kind. Mr. Rochester says, in effect: ‘This is who I will be, but only if you allow it’; the diagnostician says: ‘This is who you are, and there is no use your trying to deny it’. The one says: This is a game, let us pretend’ (and Mr. Rochester does quite a lot of that in *Jane Eyre*); the other says: ‘This is the truth, so you had better accept it’. One is art, the other is propaganda, and it is propaganda even when it is helpful, perhaps especially when it is helpful (propaganda, after all, is partly a statement about what others find compelling; it would be something else if it did not seem to be working). One is the expression of something that is interesting (and may even be inescapable); the other turns art into something that seems to

require a defense. The one is interested in authority as a necessary condition of treatment; the other is interested in how authority makes us feel.

And both are required; at least, we seem to need one and the other some of the time. If ‘Advice is’ as the clinical psychologist, Jordan Peterson says, ‘what you get when the person you are talking to wants to revel in the superiority of his or her own intelligence’ (‘Rule 9’), it also offers us the hope that our problems can be solved. If accepting advice feels like an admission that we are actually sick, it can also help us to make life more manageable when we are feeling too overwhelmed; it offers an alternative to seemingly limitless confusion. But if authority is something that we cannot entirely live without (and possibly should not want to), it is also one of the things that makes life difficult. When authority is not telling us what we must do, or cannot do, it is not infrequently trying to convince us that authority itself is wholly authoritative, that what it sees and knows is all there is, that the life we lead is all the life there is. At its worst, it is the story of the dominated child who grows up to be the sort of adult who, like Chesterton’s logician, ‘seeks to get the heavens into his head’, only to find that ‘it is his head that splits’ (*Orthodoxy* 27). At its worst, it is the story of the child who, like Eve, is punished for breaking the first rule, the only rule she cannot possibly obey, and it is the story of the man who, like Adam, grows up to believe that he is a god, or rather: that he is the God.

In *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom predicted that ‘Freud as a writer will survive the death of psychoanalysis’ (350); in Bloom’s estimation, Freud belongs to a great dramatic tradition: ‘his vision of civil war within the psyche’ (350), the story Freud told about the drama of the inner life will be his legacy, and will continue to feel compelling as an artistic account, long after the particularities of psychoanalysis as a clinical practice have faded into oblivion. Whether Shakespeare was, as Bloom argues, ‘Freud’s hidden authority, the father he would not acknowledge’ (346), there is a sense that, in some ways, Freud was a latecomer to the genre that he helped to popularize, and that whether Freud was ‘a late romantic writer’ as the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips suggests (366), psychoanalysis in some way marks a continuation of something, rather than a beginning. It may be that the great works of psychoanalysis – including *Hamlet*, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Little Dorrit* – were written before *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and that what Freud’s work represents is, among other things, an effort to describe a particular kind of relationship between art and criticism, between the artist as patient and the critic as artist. The story of psychoanalysis is then, in one sense (at least partly) an

uncompleted chapter in the history of authority. Psychoanalysis, that is to say, is both a critique of authority and an admission that authority is also what it cannot quite escape, and so cannot help, to some extent, becoming. What psychoanalysis does, or seems to do, at its best is to make the familiar unfamiliar; it encourages us to think ourselves out of the formulations we have become entrapped in. It is not actually a guarantee that our problems can be resolved; what it does say is that our problems can be seen from different perspectives, can be talked about in different ways, with different words, and some of these might seem persuasive: if they cannot help us to feel cured, which they can't (the drama, the internal life, is fundamental and incurable), psychoanalysis might, at least, help us to feel differently about them; it might turn us into the sort of patient who is better able to endure the tribulations (and also the triumphs) of our existence.

So, when Ernest Jones wrote that Hamlet's inability to avenge his father was a consequence of 'that intellectual cowardice, that reluctance to dare the exploration of his inner mind, which Hamlet shares with the rest of the human race' (102), Jones was, in a sense, drawing attention both to the possibilities and the limitations of the psychoanalytic practice. He told us both that we are cowards, and that we may have good reason to be cowardly. If some 'ground which he dare not or cannot avow to himself' (Jones 89), some 'long "repressed" desire to take his father's place in his mother's affection' (Jones 99), prevented Hamlet from carrying out his duty, it isn't entirely clear whether a more aware Hamlet would necessarily be less inhibited, nor is it obvious that such a Hamlet would actually be desirable. For better and for worse, the psychoanalyst, like the artist, doesn't quite know what to do about the matter of narrative form. The story is the thing that, whether because it is too painful or too familiar, needs to be broken up, but a story is what the activity of breaking up is always trying to return to: for better and for worse, stories are what we seem to require, and also what we suffer from. If the critic is a person (or the sort of person) who understands that each of us is an artist, and an artist does not always tell the truth, the critic is also the person who apprehends the danger of his own insight: criticism, to the extent that it claims to be authoritative, is always in danger of turning the critic into the person whose claim to have a cure is really a symptom of disease, is always in danger of turning the expert into the most ignorant person in the room.

One of the great lessons that experience teaches us (if we are lucky enough and attentive enough to learn) is that, in the words of former FBI hostage negotiator, Chris Voss, 'It's really

not that easy to listen well' (Voss and Raz 27). What we call listening is all too often something much closer to interpretation, which is, itself, a sort of ventriloquism, but a ventriloquism that has forgotten what a doll is, and that a doll is what it is holding. At its best, criticism, it seems to me, is really a practice of learning to listen; first and foremost, it is an art of silences. As an art, it values availability over authority, which means, among other things, that the critic is not so much a guide as a person who is able to bear the uncertainty of other people, or to put it another way: the critic is a person who takes an interest in other people but isn't entirely sure that he knows what a person is. Like a player in a Dickensian adventure, the critic extolls humanity precisely because, like Pancks, 'that dingy little craft' (*Little Dorrit* 150), humanity itself does not seem quite human; it is something much more unexpected, much more mysterious. When criticism is written down – when it isn't or cannot be a conversation, or a drama – it is something like the fact of strolling down a street or floating down a river, combined with an uncertainty – even an easiness – about where that might take us, and what might happen along the way. It is the fact of wearing a white tie coupled with the very real prospect of having, shortly, to run after one's hat. The critic, that is to say, is both entertainer and entertained. Like a player in a farcical comedy, what the critic really knows is that honest conviction is always on the verge of turning into an almighty fall; like the survivor of some great courtly intrigue, he understands that aspiration is always in danger of turning into Macbeth, or worse, Oliver Cromwell, that inside every self-help book is the story of Cain's descent into Hell.

Criticism then, or the type of criticism that follows in this book, is not for everyone; at least, it is not for everyone all of the time. What follows in these chapters is a series of experiments with and about the matter of authority: about how much authority a critic should want to have or be willing to give up, and this means it is also about how much authority a critic is able to live without. It would therefore be a mistake, I think, to claim that this book is equally suited to every sort of reader. It would also be a mistake to expect that a reader will find every experiment to be of equal interest. First and foremost, this book is written for people who are comfortable with uncertainty (or who think they might be); it is also for people who feel so let down by the stories they have about their lives and about the world that they are willing to see where uncertainty might take them. It is not intended for people whose lives are already so chaotic that more uncertainty is the last thing they need, and nor is it likely to be of any interest to people who find satisfaction in the clarity that their worldview seems to give them (I do not



mean that such people would not benefit from uncertainty; I mean only that they will probably neither like nor welcome it).

This is not a book that deals in explanations, nor is it a book that feels the need to come to some point. In that sense, I have begun as I mean (for the most part) to go on. Amy Dorrit threw back the shadow of the Marshalsea because she chose the Marshalsea; in the end, it may be that it is only by our being reconciled to our past that we can learn to live with it. If there is such a thing as ‘happily ever after’, it may be in the realization that we have not become, like Mrs. Clennam, the victims of our own authority, immobilized in a chair of our own crafting. If, at its worst, criticism involves the realization that some walls resist all efforts at removal, that despite the benefit of sunlight and a country to stretch our legs in, we may nevertheless come to declare, along with Miss Wade, ‘I have the misfortune of not being a fool’ (*Little Dorrit* 663), then at its best, criticism is the fact of not being trammelled by what we demand of others, and by what we cannot quite bring ourselves to say. It is an acceptance, even, that a fool may be what we really are, that if we cannot absolutely be cured, we might, at least, not be quite so badly off as we might have believed, that if we cannot help knowing that a churchyard is full of stones, it is also worth remembering that one of these once contained a sword, that within every person is contained the spirit of the man or woman who would be king, that a king may be what we really are, even when we are not at our best.

If we do not want to call this an aspect of divinity, it is at least a belief that when we look at ourselves, and when we look at other people, we are not looking into the void, that if the truth cannot exactly set us free, it does not have to drive us mad. If Camelot, like the court of Oedipus, seemed to fall because the truth was something too terrible to face and too traumatic to survive, then it is worth remembering that the story of Arthur ends with the prospect of a new beginning, that tribulation can be turned into triumph, that if what we experience is sometimes overpowering, it may be that how we experience – the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves – is also important, that we might feel differently if we had a different story to tell, or were not quite so sure we knew what story we were reading.

When a stranger steps on our toes, we can assure ourselves that it isn’t our fault, that the stranger is a person of dubious character and doubtful parentage, or we can tell ourselves that we are the sort of person who deserves to be stepped on, that we went unnoticed because we are not worth noticing. When we think of criticism as being, among other things, a quest for

understanding, we sometimes find ourselves believing that life is the sort of thing that really can be decoded and understood (and decoded and understood by us), that if a person is not improved by our intervention, the failing is with the other person, and not with our prescription. At its worst, criticism can make it difficult to bear the reality of other people. Like the activist who feels that ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are not sufficiently comprehensive terms for describing the lives we want to lead, the critic is always in danger of essentializing by over-defining, is always in danger of turning a possibility into a prison.

If art is most like life when we are turning the material of a life into a story, it may that the practice of criticism, whatever else it is, is partly a feeling that no story is ever complete, but that every story is at least slightly misleading: like a good guide, it is always just a little too willing to show us what we want to see. If we think of the overbearing teacher as being the sort of person who interrupts what a child is saying in order to tell the child what she really means, then criticism is both a curiosity about what is being said, and also a wariness about the possibility of being taken in. It is both a celebration of the individual and also a suspicion that we may be deceiving ourselves when we claim to know who we really are. It is, in that sense, the very opposite of an idealization. Like the knight Perceval, we are always on the road to discovering that what we think we know can only take us so far, and never quite so far as we would like, that what we call ‘expertise’ is also an illusion of competence that has been stretched beyond its limit. It isn’t that nothing is really true, it is just that nothing is quite as true as we want it to be, isn’t quite as true as we feel we need it to be, that at its best, experience is partly the fact of encountering our own ignorance without being overwhelmed by it. It is the fact of facing new things coupled with the realization that assimilation is not always what is required. Sometimes, it is okay to feel that the story we have been telling ourselves doesn’t seem to make very much sense. Sometimes, what we call the good life is partly an effect of being a very poor artist.

## ‘Meditations on Pleasure: John Ruskin and the Value of Art in the Classroom’<sup>1</sup>

In his influential work, *The Political Economy of Art*, the English art critic John Ruskin wrote about the importance of making art available in the classroom. It was Ruskin’s belief that bare walls hindered scholastic achievement: ‘the notion of fixing the attention by keeping the room empty, is a wholly mistaken one: I think it is just in the emptiest room that the mind wanders most; for it gets restless, like a bird, for want of a perch, and casts about for any possible means of getting out and away’ (*Political Economy* 148-149).

It was not enough to communicate information verbally, Ruskin knew. Education could not be limited to the ear. The eye must be tutored too, for, he asserted, ‘the eye is a nobler organ than the ear; and that through the eye we must, in reality, obtain, or put into form, nearly all the useful information we are to have about this world’ (151). In order for knowledge to really take hold, it was necessary that the student should be granted ‘a sight of the thing you are talking about’ (151). But introducing art into the classroom was not simply a mechanism for translating words into images. Art education meant *bringing to life*. What art provided was not merely an image to look at, but access to a better quality of understanding. What Ruskin saw in works of art was an essential interconnectedness between the individual and the universal. Vision, for him,

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was published in the August 2017 issue of the *Teaching Artist Journal*.

meant balancing acute attention to detail with a deep awareness that a painting was also a conduit by which the ‘living aspect of past things’ could be accessed (152). Bringing to life one thing meant bringing to life all of nature.

But ‘nature’ for Ruskin was not a mere abstraction. He believed that the value of the universal could only be understood and appreciated by valuing what was real, and already to hand. Accessibility was therefore key to Ruskin’s way of thinking. He understood that people are principally interested in what is before them (193). His own experiences sustained him in that belief: his readings on matters of economy, for example, did not extend beyond the writings of Adam Smith (vii). Economists, Ruskin felt, wrote principally upon matters that were of no interest to a general reader: ‘Whenever I have taken up any modern book upon this subject’, he wrote, ‘I have usually found it encumbered with inquiries into accidental or minor commercial results, for the pursuit of which an ordinary reader could have no leisure, and, by the complication of which, it seems to me, the authors themselves had been not unfrequently prevented from seeing to the root of the business’ (vii – viii). ‘Root’ is a keyword. Ruskin believed that education was a matter of growth, of development. But education itself was not the origin of ability. The ability was within the person. The function of education was to bring out that ability, and see it flourish. The best way to bring it out was to begin by allowing it to explore and consider precisely those things about which the person was already curious.

And what was true for the general reader was especially true for children. In *The Elements of Drawing*, he advised that a child learning to draw should begin by trying to put onto paper ‘the things it can see and likes’ (*Elements* vi). The role of the teacher was to encourage, not to force: ‘I do not think it advisable’, he wrote, ‘to engage a child in any but the most voluntary practice of art. If it has talent for drawing, it will be continually scrawling on what paper it can get; and should be allowed to scrawl at its own free will, due praise being given for every appearance of care, or truth, in its efforts’ (v-vi). The development of talent was to be achieved by means of focus, and restriction. Focus and restriction did not mean that a child’s attention should be turned away from enjoyable things; rather, it meant that the child should be encouraged to concentrate on the things that he or she liked best. Limitation was not a punishment or an arbitrary display of authority. It was necessary only in order to allow the child to access and experience real pleasure (vii).

This idea of the necessity of limitation is fundamental to Ruskin's notion of art economy. 'Economy', in the spirit that Ruskin used it, meant 'the wise management of labour' (*Political Economy* 10). It would be a mistake, however, to read the book principally as a political treatise. It certainly can be read in that manner. The consequence of such a reading, however, is that one doesn't get very far, or get on very well. *The Political Economy of Art* is not really a blueprint for managing a state or a society. Rather, it is a vision for managing and perfecting pleasure:

If, indeed, the question were only between enjoying a great many pictures each a little, or one picture very much, the sum of enjoyment being in each case the same, you might rationally desire to possess rather the larger quantity, than the small; both because one work of art always in some sort illustrates another, and because quantity diminishes the chance of destruction. But the question is not a merely arithmetical one of this kind. Your fragments of broken admirations will not, when they are put together, make up one whole admiration; two and two, in this case, do not make four, nor anything like four (85).

Read as a meditation on pleasure, Ruskin's views still seem very important in our own time. His work serves to remind us that pleasure is earned through habits of practice and patience. What is worth having cannot be rushed. Real education has no short cuts. A survey course in art appreciation will teach us to resign ourselves to a condition of perpetual dizziness. It will certainly not teach us to love art, though it may cause us to wonder whether there is really any such thing as art at all. Nor will such an education help us to get on in the world. Unless we have first learned to appreciate one thing, we will be unable to love the next thing, or the multitude. That is true of every field of study; its application is not limited only to the visual arts. Learning always begets learning, and there is great value to be found in starting small.

Every day, we hear that our students are being overwhelmed by the ubiquity of information. The concern is certainly real, but considered as an idea, there is a danger that it may confuse more than it communicates. Information has always been ubiquitous, and students have always felt overwhelmed. The experience of living has always been greater than our ability to assimilate it. The sense of living in a world that is too big for us is not a new burden, and neither is it a new freedom. It is something far more important: it is a reminder of fellow feeling. It

reminds us that we are not alone; we never have been alone. What has changed is not a matter of volume, but of relationship. The relationship between how students are educated now and what they are being educated for is perhaps wider than it has ever been. Education continues to privilege collection and categorization; it continues to think principally in terms of answers and authority. But technology has moved on. The students of today do not have difficulty acquiring information. They do not even have to go to a library in order to obtain the resources they need to complete their coursework. The internet has placed vast collections of books and articles at their fingertips. The difficulty is knowing what to do with a resource once it has been acquired. Here, students struggle. They know that education is important, but they are made anxious by their not knowing 'the answer'. What they do not realize is that what we do not know is at least as interesting as what we do know. The unknown is always worth exploring; what is already known is not always worth repeating. Our students have grown accustomed to looking for an authority to tell them what to write. What they need is a relationship of their own.

But relationships take time. Meaningful relationships take more time still. Students cannot develop a relationship with a work of art if they are always being forced to move on. What they need is to be able to stay a while. What they need is to learn patience, patience and practice. A painting is not exhausted because it has been seen. A book is not finished because it has been read. But what remains, only the individual can say. As teachers, we do not need to be prescriptive. We certainly do not need to address the problem by formulating some new theory of pleasure. All we really need to give our students is time, time and our attention. It is not necessary that we should always know what to say; it is imperative that we learn to see. Instead of telling our students what we expect them to take away, why don't we give them something much more valuable? A lesson will give them a few facts they will struggle not to forget. The grant of a bit of time to consider and create will leave them with something they will remember for a lifetime.

## ‘Resurrecting the Fallen in Thomas Kilroy’s *The Death and Resurrection of Mr Roche*’<sup>1</sup>

Despite its description by Frank McGuinness as “one of the hardest and most uncompromising statements on heterosexuality in the Irish theatre” (qtd. in O’Toole 217), Thomas Kilroy’s debut play, *The Death and Resurrection of Mr Roche* is remarkable principally for the challenge it poses rather than for any determination it may contain to inveigh against certain odious attitudes extant in modern Ireland. As readers, we are all called upon by this multiplex text to consider whether or not the intolerant man is nevertheless a redeemable man; the regenerative potentiality of the play therefore finds its fulfillment not only in the restoration of the eponymous Mr. Roche, but more importantly, in our discovery of our own capacity to forgive the intolerant man at whose hands Mr. Roche has suffered.

The intolerant man whom we are invited to consider is Kelly. It is a subtle but significant detail that in the moment of his introduction to us, Kelly is standing still, illuminated by the light of a lamppost (Kilroy 11). In that brief moment, Kelly is entirely unguarded against any construction we should choose to place upon him. If we choose to do so, we may regard Kelly as existing in some unblemished or carefree condition which is natural to him, and to which he may aspire one day to return. Alternatively, we might choose to concentrate our attention either on the bottles under his arms or on the ramp which seems to portend Kelly’s descent into the private

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was published in the August 2016 issue of *The Explicator*.

hell of his subterranean Dublin flat (11); if we take a gloomy view of these arrangements, we might anticipate that Kelly's descent is both fated and final. The wretchedness of Kelly's condition is first made manifest by his drunken staggering and degenerate speech:

KELLY: (*Staggering slightly*) Half eleven and all's well! Cripes, I'm piss-eyed. Where's me keys? Keys, keys. In me pocket. Fair enough. Proceed to place bags on ground. Beware of bottles. Then extract keys. No, no. No. No – hold bags with both. No, won't do. Jaysus, what a predicament. (11-12)

The order and delivery of these opening elements perform a number of functions simultaneously. Kelly's stagger alerts us to the fact that he is a subject in decline, and the death and resurrection motif indicated by the title of the play will naturally cause us to associate the staggering man before us with Mr. Roche, the man whom we expect is to die and be reborn. It is an association which persists throughout the play, and it is not altogether clear whether Roche and Kelly are connected only by their secret homosexual encounter, or whether Roche is, in fact, to be regarded as an embodied aspect of Kelly's character. Nor is it necessary that the nature of their connection be made clear; what is artistically interesting is not what we determine individually, but that we are invited to explore and choose from among a number of plausible possibilities. The bottles Kelly carries in this opening scene alert us to the fact that the immediate cause of his staggering is attributable to his being saturated with drink. Again, it is likely that the title of the play and our expectations of its themes will direct us implicitly to a moral view of Kelly's condition and behavior, and will disincline us to regard him as a whimsical or carefree fellow. His inebriated state suggests that he is a man who stands apart from the company of polite, respectable society. Kelly's drunkenness also serves a very practical function: it permits Kelly and his longtime friend, Seamus to discuss their shared past and so provide the reader with necessary background information without the exchange seeming unduly forced (12-13).

The impression of Kelly we derive from his opening actions is that of a man in trouble. His first remark, however, seems to directly contradict this assessment. "Half eleven and all's well!" (11). All is not well, of course. Kelly's statement must not be taken as an accurate diagnosis of his condition, but neither should we assume that Kelly's words signify an error of



judgment on his part. Kelly is an insincere speaker.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that he lacks the capacity for introspection. On the contrary, Kelly seems to suffer from a fear of the self-knowledge which he possesses. He also fears the exposure of his secret will cost him the company of his companions. It is only because we are alone with him that Kelly admits to us that his words are not to be relied upon. His adoption of the call of an official of the town is incongruous with his anti-social state of intoxication. And just in case we should have missed his hint to us, Kelly then goes on to tell us that all is not well: "Cripes, I'm piss-eyed" (11). Thereafter, in the company of his associates, Kelly will never again permit himself to be entirely frank. The entry of Seamus, Kelly's companion and onetime friend, is presaged by Kelly's repetition of the words 'key', 'same', and 'up' (12). Repetition is the device by which Kelly's unhealthy relationship with himself and with his companions is symptomized, and it becomes the distinguishing characteristic of his speech throughout the rest of the play; thereafter, in each of his dialogue segments he either repeats himself in word or idea, or he repeats a word or remark spoken by one or another of his companions.

The play's opening image, Kelly's inauspicious opening remarks, and his adherence to a pattern of unreliable, repetitive speech are exemplary of the many facets which will substantially inform and shape our understanding of Kelly throughout this multiplex play. The vitality of the play is not principally attributable to its forceful opposition to intolerance; rather, its energy arises from our being called to consider how our view of Kelly and his prospects is formed and solidified within the framework which the play has provided. If we trouble ourselves to be assiduous and deliberate in our reading, we will discover that the play has assisted us to arrive at a better understanding of our own capacities not only to judge, but also to forgive our fallen fellows.

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<sup>2</sup> See Sampson. Sampson and I are in agreement as to Kelly's lack of candor, but I would wish to emphasize pathos over irony in the play. Both readings can be justified by the text, but my own view is that reading for irony causes the play to feel more like a demonstration than a drama.

## ‘Resisting Motherhood in Thomas Kilroy’s *Talbot’s Box*’<sup>1</sup>

The plays of Thomas Kilroy have been much remarked upon for their foregrounding techniques of artifice and theatricality, antithetical to the modes of naturalism. Constituent in these discussions has been a shared view among critics that Kilroy’s (male) characters are performing subjects, and that what they are performing is an experience of fractious and fracturing identities.<sup>2</sup> Far less critical attention has been given to the exploration of Kilroy’s female characters. Anna McMullan’s article, ‘Masculinity and Masquerade in Thomas Kilroy’s *Double Cross* and *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde*’ (2002) offers a welcome corrective to this neglect by drawing attention to the normative, stabilizing roles that women play in Kilroy’s work.

The present essay highlights the broader interpretive potentialities of women as subjects in their own right, and posits a new character focus according to which our understanding of *Talbot’s Box* might be revitalized.<sup>3</sup> It argues that two of the play’s characters, the first Priest Figure and the Woman, represent a collaborative effort by two women to highlight and to resist their confinement into roles of symbolized motherhood. In this aim, they are ultimately

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was published in the 2016 issue of *Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies*.

<sup>2</sup> See Sampson; Roche; Dubost; Grene; Murray.

<sup>3</sup> *Talbot’s Box* was first performed at the Peacock Theatre in Dublin on October 13, 1977 as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival. For premier and text publication information, see Byrne.

unsuccessful. Their relationship is fractured, and its object thwarted by the intervention of First Man and Second Man, and by the rebirth of Matt Talbot.

That the Priest Figure and the Woman are worthy subjects for our consideration is indicated by the central theme of Matt Talbot's story, and by the structure of Kilroy's play. The eponymous Talbot is inspired by and to some extent echoes the life of the Venerable Matt Talbot (1856-1925) of (scant) historical record.<sup>4</sup> The real Talbot was a Dublin laborer who, at the age of twenty-eight, gave up the alcohol to which he had become addicted, and lived the rest of his days in a state and spirit of ascetic devotion to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Thematically, the narratives of Kilroy's Talbot and the historical Talbot are organized around questions about what it means to be born and reborn. The Talbot of record has been used as a means to illustrate the teachings of the Catholic Church in Ireland.<sup>5</sup> The rebirth of Kilroy's Talbot is the result of an act of violence against women, committed in the first act of the play. The beginning of the second act in many ways mirrors the opening of the first. The relationship between the two permits us to understand that the violence we have witnessed is exemplary of a condition, rather than a single, isolated act. From this we are able to glean something of the fears and torments which afflict and influence the life and mind of the otherwise largely unknowable Matt Talbot.

*Talbot's Box* opens with darkness (Kilroy 9). Darkness is a condition that both fascinates and beguiles. It is a state of statelessness. It is a condition without form. It is an end as well as a beginning. It represents a moment of infinite opportunity and an unbroken expanse of infinite closure. It is blind without the need of sight. It is unity without being. To disrupt it is both an act of liberation and an act of violence against a condition of peace. It has the power both to conceal and to reveal. Darkness is the analogue of pure light. It is a paradox, qualified in the opening line of *Talbot's Box* by the raising of the lights, and by '*the strains of the hymn 'Faith of Our Fathers''*' (9). The intervention by the hymn draws our attention to the darkness as an element of the play. It helps us understand that the darkness is not simply a transition to a beginning, it is vital to the act of beginning. Darkness is the beginning. The hymn establishes a relationship with darkness and calls for our active interpretation of what it means to be in a condition of darkness. For some of us, the darkness may seem to signify something that is to be striven against and

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<sup>4</sup> For an interesting, if perhaps not altogether disinterested account of the life of Matt Talbot, see Glynn.

<sup>5</sup> See Canavan; Cassidy; Duff.

overcome. The hymn, therefore, might be understood as a welcome intervention by Christ and the Church on behalf of humanity. For others, the darkness may seem to represent the evils and ignorance of the Church itself. What is significant is that for all of us, the hymn will focus our attention on the negative aspects and potentialities of darkness. We feel that what we desire is light. Only in the light are the beneficent forces of the divine active and present. Only in the light may we find truth. That we hear '*strains of the hymn*' (9) gives us a sense of something that has a communal and a familial, as well as a religious essence. It seems to suggest that the play itself is a component of a condition, a longer tradition that both precedes our theatrical experience and anticipates its future condition, expressed ambiguously both as further dissolution, and as greater unity. We do not have darkness and then a hymn; we have darkness and strands of the hymn. They are inextricably connected, units of the same whole. They ebb together as the light rises, but they are elemental in everything we are about to witness. Their vitality is absorbed, elaborated, reflected, refracted, and challenged in every transition. We see it absorbed in the opening of the box and in the movements of the actors. The bodies of the actors manifest the pieces of the hymn. They testify to its fractured reality but they do not as yet portend any particular resolution.

The box itself sustains this impression of interconnectedness between constituent parts. By preventing the actors from entering and exiting the acting space, Matt Talbot's box posits a fundamental connectedness between the events and characters in the drama, such that characters are present and are implicated in events, even where they are neither moving nor speaking. The opening of the box reveals '*the PRIEST FIGURE busily manipulating the pedestal into position to one side. On it, statuesque, is the WOMAN, in the costume and pose of a statue of the Virgin*' (9).

Kilroy stipulates that the character of the Priest Figure 'should be played by an actress' (Production Details Page). The decision is significant, as is the title under which the actress assumes the vestments of the Church. 'Figure' is a qualifier: the word disrupts our efforts to easily assimilate the actress' femininity with the ready ideas of Mother Church by calling into question the Priest Figure's degree of membership within the Church, her capacity for agency, and even her corporeality. Because she is neither 'priest' nor 'figure' we are called upon to interrogate the possibilities and complexities of her ambiguous title, and to probe its implications for the woman who bears it. For example, the fact that her femininity is incongruous with the

priesthood might incline us to the belief that her gender is to be understood symbolically, but the qualifier casts doubts as to her status and station, and so permits us to consider her, if we elect to do so, in the character of a person. Nor does the function of the garments she wears serve to relieve the ambiguity: that she is '*in soutane and biretta*' (9) at once supports her interpretation as priest and also suggests that they are being used to deliberately disguise or prevent her self-representation as a woman. But womanhood is a necessary condition for motherhood, and where its expression is thwarted there must be a corresponding diminution of symbolic effect. To acknowledge that she is a Priest Figure should, therefore, cause us to question not only her position with respect to the Church, but also her position relative to family structures of which she may be a part, and to her own body. The title given to her also demands that we be conscious of our interpretive choice to symbolize or to particularize her, and it encourages us to evaluate the effects of that choice relative to our understanding of the play, episodically and as a whole.

Examining the play more closely, we see that the ambiguous condition of the word 'figure' actually allows Kilroy to give us two distinct Priest Figures, each of whom suggests a condition of being which, while superficially satisfying, is in fact an illusion. The first – the one this essay is concerned with – is an individual woman, symbolized into the role of a mother figure. The second is an articulated institution (the Irish Catholic Church), particularized as an individual father: that is to say as an 'actual' priest.

That the Priest Figure is not one character, but two, is suggested both in the terms by which the first Priest Figure identifies herself, and by the terms by which each Priest Figure is identified by the other characters in the play.

The first Priest Figure assumes the office of Mother Church, and thrice identifies herself with its embodiment. She poses and replies to First Man: 'Yes – yes! Mother Church!' (12). Later, she advises First Man to 'Return to the bosom of Mother Church' (14); and in the third instance, she replies: 'Yes? Over here!' (15), when Woman mentions 'Mother Church' (15). This first Priest Figure is addressed by the other characters only as a feminine subject. First Man exclaims to her: 'Oh, Mother, Mother, I gave it all up when I was fifteen.' (14); moments later, he implores of her: 'Oh, Mother, help me over the hump.' (14). The Woman, referring to the chains worn by Talbot, remarks: 'It is – miraculous. Or rather will lead to miracles when Mother Church –' (15). She is interrupted, then continues: '– when Mother Church will raise this simple man to the calendar of the saints.' (15). The second Priest Figure is addressed by the title,

‘Father’ (24, 31, 46, 47, 53, 54, 55, and 56). It is this second Priest Figure who attempts to influence and manipulate Matt Talbot.

The point of demarcation between the two Priest Figures is the aftermath of a sexual congress of the characters, as a result of which Matt Talbot is reborn (13-17). The line denoting the change is given to the First Man, who signals the dissolution of the link between the Woman and the Priest Figure by remarking, ‘All is forgiven. Good day, sister.’ (16). The Woman is not addressed by name or by title before this line. The Woman addresses the Priest Figure only twice thereafter (24 and 25). The identifier ‘Mother Church’ is not used again. Having positioned the Woman, the Priest Figure addresses her opening remarks to the audience:

My dear brethren in Jesus Christ! We are gathered here this evening to give honour to Matt Talbot (1856-1925). A simple Dublin working man. For years he had been a drunkard. A sinner. But then, my dear brethren, then – at the age of twenty-eight he was touched by the Holy Spirit. He reformed. Gave up the drink –  
(9)

Her repetition of the word ‘brethren’ is significant. The second Priest Figure never uses the word. Instead, he refers to his congregation as ‘My dear people’ (24). ‘Brethren’ serves to draw our attention to the woman underneath the vestments. She wears the symbols of Mother and Mother Church, but the ideas for which they stand are a lie: she knows that what is valued are the symbols themselves, not her. She uses the word only twice more, both times as a means of drawing our attention to her true femininity (10).

The Woman whom the Priest Figure arranges (9) also exists under conditions of imposition. Like the Priest Figure, the Woman stands representative, both of the Church, and of the state of motherhood: she is arranged ‘*in the costume and pose of a statue of the Virgin*’ (9). In the manner of her display, we see these symbolic offices as impositions against her nature: the Woman is not, in fact, a statue, and we know that the actress will not be able to maintain the pose into which she has been positioned, indefinitely. That her position precedes our awareness of her indicates that her condition is not assumed only for our benefit and instruction: what pain she feels is a pain of being, not a pain which arises only from being watched. Nevertheless, Kilroy permits us to understand that under the grotesque imposition, there is some faint glow of her true

character, some inner beauty of spirit, which, if permitted to develop independently of the pressures to which she has been subjected, might flourish into something beyond symbolism, something real and meaningful: she is not a statue, but she is '*statuesque*' (9), an elaboration of the priestly 'figure'. So too is the Woman an elaboration of the Priest Figure herself. The effect is that the Priest Figure touches upon an idea in such a way as to invite reaction, and the Woman develops, explicitly, the criticism implicit in the words of the Priest Figure. She is the step too far, the resisting voice which the Priest Figure encourages to act and challenge, but which she dares not claim as her own.

In the first instance, their combined force provides the transition from the Priest Figure's speech to the Woman's expression of her desire to get down from the pedestal by allowing us to associate the reborn Talbot with the Woman's own desire to be reanimated. Directly she has invited the Woman's question, 'How long do I have to stand like this?' (9), the Priest Figure sets up the Woman's next revelation by saying: 'You're supposed to be the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary!' (9). We know it is a setup because the statement would be unnecessary otherwise. Both the Priest Figure and the Woman know who the latter is supposed to be. The heavy stress placed on the sacred title by the use of all three words invites us to understand both that the Woman is not actually a statue of the mother of God, and nor is she a virgin. The Woman's reply, 'Don't I know it!' (9), is a wry negation of her artificial position in both senses. From it, we can also deduce the significance of the '*blooded white medical coats*' (9) worn by the two men: it is her blood. That the blood is not simply a means of denoting the characters' role is indicated by the men themselves: they are assistants, not morticians. Their function relative to Talbot is not penetrative, but superficial only: to present a form, a face, to 'prepare the corpse for its descent and consequent ascent or further descent, as the case may be' (11).

The pattern between the two women is continued. Resuming her summation of Talbot's life, death, and discovery, the Priest Figure states: 'And when they came to take him, they discovered that he had bound himself with penitential chains, chords –' (10). Immediately, the Woman draws our attention to her own corporeality, and permits us to draw a distinction between Talbot's suffering, which was chosen by him, and her suffering, which is imposed upon her: 'I'm going to get a cramp if this goes on much longer!' (10), she exclaims. The Priest Figure continues: 'Such penance – such prayer – like a strong light, you see, blazing, and then he passed from this valley of darkness into eternal light –' (10). Again, the Woman uses the Priest Figure's

cue to draw attention to the more physical reality they share together: Talbot is still very much with them, and his body smells (10). The Priest Figure's histrionic exhortation to 'Remain on your pedestal at all costs!' (10) invites a strong reaction from the Woman. The Woman exclaims, 'I will not!' (10), and immediately jumps down.

But as well as animating the Woman, the Priest Figure's forceful exertions serve to animate the two men (11). Their animation disrupts the relationship between the Priest Figure and the Woman. Immediately, both become secondary figures. The Priest Figure is no longer able to anticipate and guide speech; instead, she finds herself reacting to the speech of First Man and Second Man. The shift occurs where the Priest Figure instructs the men to 'Hurry up back there!' (11). The remark by the First Man, 'I thought t'was to be a sorta trial.' (11), implies an action – or inaction – which is similar to what we have come to expect from the Priest Figure's relationship with the Woman, but the further development of the pattern is thwarted by the intervention of the Second Man, who remarks: '’Twas my understanding ’twas to be an entertainment.' (11). The back and forth of the dialogue is then, for a time dictated by the conversation of the two men. The significance of the women is not yet at an end, however. The animation of the two men is only a sort of practice birth; it prefigures the rebirth of Matt Talbot. The diminution of the Priest Figure and the Woman is symbolic of the loss of real status experienced by a woman who has performed her birthing function. It is not complete, however, because it is a practiced act, a theatrical device. It lacks a subject upon whom a familial name has been bestowed.

The real apotheosis of their function is expressed as a thinly-veiled sexual encounter between the Priest Figure and First Man (13-16), initiated by the entrance of the 'attractive nursing sister, carrying chains –' (13). It is worth noting, however, that even where they are at the apex of their sexual expressiveness, the actions of the two women are still being dictated by the two men: without the interruptions by the Second Man, it would be entirely possible to read the encounter between the Priest Figure and the First Man as an act of confession, only; but with Second Man's contribution, it is nearly impossible to miss the sexual connotation. His question, 'What's going on around here?' (14), demands that we query what we are seeing, and as if to help us to the right conclusion, he sings snatches of a love song: 'A-roamin' in the gloamin', with my bonnie lass from –' (14). That he is '*Rooting about under the trolley*' (14) (an action he has not performed heretofore and never repeats) while the First Man is '*On his knees before*



PRIEST FIGURE' (14) will be of further information to the more sexually experienced reader. The details are too specific to be read innocently; but for the Priest Figure, it means that the significance of the act is all on his side. The Woman, likewise, is not permitted to express herself on her own terms. Her statement draws our attention, both to her sexuality and to her chains. Here the chains are functioning not as Talbot's chains, but as her chains. She is initially repulsed by the Second Man (13) only to return again (14). Her second effort is successful, and after a short conversation with the Second Man, she '*throws herself upon the trolley and kisses the figure of TALBOT, passionately*' (15). The act is not a liberating one. The ridiculousness of its execution invites our laughter, which has the effect, not of validating her expression of desire, but of further suppressing it as an act of harmless whimsy. We have placed ourselves in the shoes of the First Man, and as with the Priest Figure, we are not, therefore, simply witnesses to her oppression; we are, ourselves, agents of her oppressed condition.

The First Man then exclaims: 'I've made my peace! Hey, everyone! I'm at peace with the Lord my saviour! All is forgiven! Good day, sister.' (15-16). What is being signaled here is his sexual and spiritual fulfillment, achieved by his intercourse with her real body; implicit in this is the assumption that the Priest Figure was simply a means of achieving that end. He does not ask what she got out of the experience. Nor does he permit either of the women to determine the effect of their intercourse; instead, the two men announce the birth of Matt Talbot (17). Thus, the bodies of the two women are appropriated and symbolized again into a state of motherhood, and what would otherwise have been merely a sexual liaison is therefore defined as a procreative act, resulting in the rebirth of Matt Talbot. Thereafter, the women's identities are not bound to one another, but to Talbot.

Talbot is reborn in the light of truth, but neither the light nor the truth it reveals is uplifting. Instead, the light draws our attention to the fact that Talbot is born into a world where people are in pain:

*With a sudden, startling energy, he rises on the trolley and flings both arms out in the shape of crucifixion. As he does so, blinding beams of light shoot through the walls of the box, pooling about him and leaving the rest of the stage in darkness. The other four figures cringe back, the women screaming. (17).*

This pain is more than the pain of the delivery room: ‘A high-pitched wailing cry rises, scarcely human but representing human beings in great agony. As it reaches its crescendo it is of physical discomfort to the audience.’ (17). The unnatural, violent conditions of his birth are symptomatic of a world in which proper affection is wanting. Directly Talbot has been born, First Man callously remarks: ‘I find the ah – specimen interesting.’ (18).

Pain is to be elemental in the life of Matt Talbot. The opening of the second act gives us some knowledge of his early years:

*Before the lights go up, the shaking voice of TALBOT can be heard in the darkness, singing snatches of hymns. The lights find him kneeling on his trolley. To one side, a makeshift tenement kitchen. At a table, drinking their tea, the WOMAN, FIRST MAN and SECOND MAN dressed, respectively, as mother, little boy and father of the Dublin slums. While TALBOT sings the FATHER makes rude gestures up at him while the MOTHER tries to restrain the FATHER. (37).*

As with the opening of the first scene, darkness and hymns are linked: here, instead of ‘strains’ (9) we have ‘snatches’ (37). The second Priest Figure addresses the audience (37), but since there is no longer a relationship with the Woman to foreground his remarks, he is very quickly cut adrift from the action. As the scene develops, the Father’s anger grows:

*She tries to hold him and they struggle. Cries of ‘Get off me’, ‘Don’t’, ‘Please don’t’. He begins to beat her, brutally, finally knocking her unconscious onto the floor while he collapses into a chair. FIRST MAN has run forward, petrified, a frightened little boy looking out into the world. (39).*

We can see the parallel Kilroy has created between the two openings in order that we should understand that his women – his mothers – suffer in conditions in which life leaves them. The beating of Talbot’s mother early in the second act (39) represents a perverse appropriation of the quest for voice, for liberation from present conditions, as expressed at the beginning of the play. Here again, the Woman is objectified, but this time, it is in relation to the dishes: in the

eyes of the father, both are items of domestic economy, which lack individuality and agency, even in the spheres to which they have been uniquely assigned. Neither their destructibility nor their humanity causes him to exercise greater care and consideration for them; rather, he sees their vulnerability as slights against himself: in his mind, they are not victims, but agents which have conspired to thwart his ambitions and deny him his proper dues (39). We see the effect of his rage join the blood on the white medical coats from the first act (9); we see their unity as a shameful indictment of what it means to be a woman in the world Kilroy is showing us.

And it is because his father was violent that we understand Talbot's desire for solitude: he is afraid that he might become his father. Talbot knows of his 'bad temper' (50). He knows that he hates (46). He feels that 'It takes another to bring out the worst in everyone.' (22), and where he expresses anger or irritation, it is always directed against the Woman, or the Priest Figure (20, 22, 47, 48, 51, and 57). We know that in some place inside him, he already is his father. Matt Talbot lives only a life of isolation so that he may escape himself, but he believes in the possibility of a better world; he imagines a world in which the light reveals people living in peace, and where we hear honest work rather than hymns. Here, the actions of man have been turned to good account:

The old man worked at the bench, shavin' the yella timbers in the sunlight. An' the boy used help him. They worked together. They niver spoke. No need for words. Nuthin' was heard but the sound of timber. Then wan day – wan day, the boy left. He put down the tools outta his hands. Again, nare a word. The old man came to the door with him. They kissed wan another. Then the mother came like a shadda from the house 'n she kissed the boy too. Then the boy walked down the road in the dust 'n the hot sun. An' way in the far distance of the city he could hear them, the sound of the hammers 'n they batin' the timbers into the shape o' the cross (63).

But we do not live in that world; not yet. For Kilroy's Talbot, darkness was the only condition to which he could aspire as a being of the world: 'Beggin' your pardon, Father, I think meself the darkness is Gawd.' (47).

As the play ends, *'The great doors of the box are closed from without by the two MEN and the WOMAN who stand looking in through cracks in the walls from which bright light comes which illuminates their faces.'* (63).

And we are left to wonder whether the light bodes well or ill for the future.

## **Commonplace Thoughts of a Commonplace Fellow**

## About the Author

A graduate of The Duke of Gloucester Day School and Marshal's College, University of Pembroke, Archibald Braintree's academic career was, for the most part, characterized by quiet obscurity. After taking his BA and MA degrees, Braintree accepted a post at King's College, University of Worcester. The position suited him, and he remained a fellow of the college until his retirement. An amiable family man and amateur flaneur, Braintree might have passed quietly into history, were it not for an incident which took place in the middle years of his employment. The exact details of that incident may never be fully known, but it seems that Braintree was the co-author of some manner of practical joke, undertaken at the expense of his then head of department, the much-renowned and highly respected Professor Rupert Kimberley-Kent, author of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*.

It may be that Braintree's involvement in the affair was nothing more than the idle whim of an idle hour; or it may be that he had some definite purpose in mind which is, as yet, unknown to his biographers. Whatever the truth of the matter, it is generally agreed that Braintree played his part so spectacularly that his fellow scholars began to look upon him as a man of ready resource and no little intelligence. Indeed, it is not going too far to say this his entire career began to be seen in a new light, and it was not long before a number of papers, and no fewer than twelve books, were produced about his work.

Naturally, his *Commonplace Thoughts* was not overlooked in the general excitement. In ‘Through a Mirror Darkly: Reflections on Modern Education’, it was claimed that ‘the various and fragmentary nature of the text is influenced by, and symbolic of, the sort of open-ended pursuit of knowledge that was a hallmark of the young Braintree’s own Montessori education’. Another researcher expressed the view that ‘Braintree’s reliance on humor in the book is part of a larger strategy of democratization: the reader who can share in the joke is also a reader who shares in the capacity to produce critical insight...Our realization that the critical extracts are largely inventions is, therefore, Braintree’s way of telling us that we must fill in the blanks, that we must become critics in our own right: “To whom do I turn?”, *Commonplace Thoughts* invites us to ask. “Myself. There is no one else by”’.

In the midst of this flurry of fresh scholarly attention, Braintree’s friends and colleagues at Worcester remained steadfast in their view that his head, and everything in it, was mostly ornamental, though they were willing to concede that when it came to the placement of bags of flour and assorted rubber reptiles, Archibald Braintree certainly ‘has his moments’, and his skill and discretion in such and similar matters, at least, is not to be lightly discounted.

*Commonplace Thoughts of a Commonplace Fellow*

*By Archibald Braintree, M.A.*

*Fellow of King's College, University of Worcester.*

*Worcestershire.*



## Ω

*Returning one evening to the home that I share with Mrs. Braintree, I discovered a parcel on our doorstep. A red 'fragile' label was affixed to the top, and the state of the package seemed to indicate that the postman had tried, assiduously, to test the claim. I asked Mrs. Braintree what it was, but having opened the parcel, she was forced to admit that she could not say. It might have been a novelty children's puzzle, or it might have been the discarded remains of one of the uglier Egyptian pyramids. In any case, I decided to keep it.*

*For some reason that I could not quite explain, it seemed to speak to me...*

Ψ

*'Literature, like magic, is both transformative and revelatory. A good sentence is very like a good spell, and even academic writing involves a kind of sorcery'.*

*Discuss. Be easy. There are no tricks or traps here, no lessons I expect you to repeat. Say whatever comes to mind, and then see where it takes you.*

§

It has been the fashion of successive ages to regard the artist as an intellectual. Today, we go much further. Mere intellect does not satisfy. Our attention demands a much greater return. It does not matter that a novelist has told a good story; it is of vital importance that a novel should speak to the condition of the country. A novel might forbear to give us giants and witches, but it must not fail to tell us the full truth about everything.

*From Alone on the Wild Moors: How Literary Criticism Lost Its Way*, by Vivienne Everleigh

≈

‘I don’t know what you mean by “glory”’, Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. ‘Of course you don’t – till I tell you. I meant “there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!”’

‘But “glory” doesn’t mean “a nice knock-down argument”’, Alice objected.

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less’.

‘The question is’, said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things’.

‘The question is, said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all’.

From *Through the Looking-Glass*, by Lewis Carroll



In the essays of that famous Frenchman, Michel de Montaigne, words are precisely what the ritual of writing is trying to uncover. Meaning is therefore a process of unfolding; the value is inextricably wound together with the experience both of writing and of reading.

From *Je Suis L'Essay: How an Imperfect Art Shows Us Who We Are*, by Alasdair Ogden

Δ

*I chanced to see Mrs. Maybury on my way in to College this morning. I offered her a cheerful greeting, but she passed on swiftly. The trouble with being a literary fellow is that people do not stop to chat. They seem to live in fear that I am always on the verge of asking them what they have been reading.*

## II

Good art is not a matter of proofs, it is a matter of possibilities. What it offers is a break from certainty. Good art removes us from the life we seem to lead. This quality has sometimes been called ‘strangeness’; it means something more than mere difference.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by  
Hermione Digby

Ψ

*Make a list of twenty sentences that have affected you. Choose ten from works of fiction, and ten from works of nonfiction. Title this list 'My Grimoire'. Alternatively, you may call it 'First Assignment'. For your second assignment, write thirteen 'spells' of your own. Keep it light on the 'livers of toad'.*



≥

Unlike the flaneur who flits and chooses to be out because his creditors happen to be in, the truly inquisitive spirit is a habitual meanderer, and wanders not because it is right or beautiful to do so, but because his nature compels him, and he can do no other.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

≅

*Scully asked me if I knew anything about cricket; when I said I was stumped, he slunk off with that hang-dog look that so often comes to Americans when they discover that the rest of the world knows as little as they do.*

*I do not see very much of him anymore.*

*Barnaby thinks he may have looked the wrong way before stepping into traffic; by that, he means, of course, that Scully is probably down among the archives. He may be right, but I do not think that Barnaby is helping to enhance our reputation as a research institution.*



Do not sneer at the time when the creed of humanity was on its honeymoon; treat it with the dreadful reverence that is due to youth. For you, perhaps, a drearier philosophy has covered and eclipsed the earth. The fierce poet of the Middle Ages wrote, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here," over the gates of the lower world. The emancipated poets of to-day have written it over the gates of this world. But if we are to understand the story which follows, we must erase that apocalyptic writing, if only for an hour. We must recreate the faith of our fathers, if only as an artistic atmosphere. If, then, you are a pessimist, in reading this story, forego for a little the pleasures of pessimism. Dream for one mad moment that the grass is green. Unlearn that sinister learning that you think so clear; deny that deadly knowledge that you think you know. Surrender the very flower of your culture; give up the very jewel of your pride; abandon hopelessness, all ye who enter here.

From *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, by G.K. Chesterton

§

*I told Barnaby that I should like to drown him in the lake. Barnaby, not to be outdone, expressed his desire to drown me in the lake. We both agreed that friendship is impossible where there is not shared sympathy and common interests.*

*'In lacus veritas', as the saying goes.*

Ψ

*'The fox knows one thing, and the hedgehog knows one important thing; but the "fretful porpentine" does not know quite so much as it fears, so that that it injures many, but none more so than itself'.*

*What might this quotation tell us about Shakespeare's Hamlet?  
And what, if anything, might it be telling us about the world  
outside the play?*

## II

The first thing that should be made clear is that Dr. Muller is not a Doctor of Medicine: he has not come into his title by his knowledge of the human organism. Strictly speaking, he has no knowledge of the human organism; at least, he has no knowledge of the human organism beyond that which any layman might possess. He knows that you should get up when you are well, and you should lie down if you are ill; but as to the rest of it, he really has very little to say that is worth listening to or repeating. Dr. Muller cannot distinguish a femur from a fibula, and his only advice for a patient with high fever is to have a cup of tea and try to think of other, happier things. such as: cricket, and crisps, and crayons with unusual names (such as ‘Just-a-Bit-Green’, and ‘Mediocre Maroon’).

It hardly needs saying then that his views are his own. They should not be taken seriously by anyone who is in need of medical attention. No medical board has certified his credentials. It has been said that his diagnoses are ‘willfully wrong and dangerously haphazard’. It has also been stated that ‘Dr. Muller is nothing short of a deranged lunatic who would have been sectioned long ago were it not for the fact that his dismal mental condition – extraordinary anywhere else – is merely of a kind with the university department that employs him; indeed, he is regarded there as something of a junior member who “still has a way to go in the business”’.

From *Sent Down: Stories from a University Town*, by Philip Sherwood

£

‘If I am not mistaken, sir,’ Mr Wegg delicately hinted, resting a hand on his stall, and bending over the discursive Boffin, ‘you alluded to some offer or another that was in your mind?’

‘I’m coming to it! All right. I’m coming to it! I was going to say that when I listened that morning, I listened with hadmiration amounting to haw. I thought to myself, “Here’s a man with a wooden leg – a literary man with –”’

‘N – not exactly so, sir,’ said Mr Wegg.

‘Why, you know every one of these songs by name and by tune, and if you want to read or to sing any one on ‘em off straight, you’ve only to whip on your spectacles and do it!’ cried Mr Boffin. ‘I see you at it!’

‘Well, sir,’ returned Mr Wegg, with a conscious inclination of the head; ‘we’ll say literary, then.’

“‘A literary man – *with* a wooden leg – and all Print is open to him!’” That’s what I thought to myself, that morning,’ pursued Mr Boffin, leaning forward to describe, uncramped by the clothes-horse, as large an arc as his right arm could make; “‘all Print is open to him!’” And it is, ain’t it?’

‘Why, truly, sir,’ Mr Wegg admitted, with modesty; ‘I believe you couldn’t show me the piece of English print, that I wouldn’t be equal to collaring and throwing.’ ‘On the spot?’ said Mr Boffin. ‘On the spot.’ ‘I know’d it! Then consider this. Here am I, a man without a wooden leg, and yet all print is shut to me.’

From *Our Mutual Friend*, by Charles Dickens

Ω

Every successful therapy begins with a surrender; that is one reason why clinicians cannot help being interested in *Hamlet*. Consent to treatment is not a guarantee of success, but for the patient as for the Prince, 'the readiness is all'.

From *Thy Kingdom for a Couch: On the Character and Personality of Hamlet*, by Atticus Prescott



Ψ

*Barnaby is wondrously ill-suited to this world. The world, and everything in it, does not offer sufficient scope for a man of his talents. Where others are content to begin the day with a mere boiled egg, Barnaby does not seem to think it is worth getting out of bed at all, unless he can be responsible for a raging conflagration.*

*A psychoanalyst friend of ours thinks that Barnaby may have a complex, but this seems over-scrupulous: mere professional restraint. Barnaby's company of complexes number in the dozens. Identify at least twenty-four of these. Do not be afraid to invent complexes of your own. There is no danger of a misdiagnosis. No doubt Barnaby has them anyway. Include descriptions and symptoms. If you happen to see Barnaby, you may bill him for your time, but know that it is unwise to accept a cheque.*

*Anyone who has seen me trying to climb into a pair of socks would be in no doubt that I am not one of the age's great minds. Mrs. Braintree assures me that the thing can be accomplished in one or two easy steps, but that has not been my experience. I never feel that I have made any progress until I have been going at it for at least a round half hour, and whether or not it is absolutely necessary to rest on the small of my back with my ankle beside my ear, I find that the process moves invariably in that direction.*

≈

The riddle of the Sphinx in *Oedipus* is a treacherous riddle about the changing nature of man on his march toward death. The Sphinx has the head of a man, because like a great many men, it is satisfied with mere answers. Far from being a wise man, Oedipus showed only that he knew a little about how to walk (it was the business of travelling, after all, that got him into trouble in the first place), and nothing at all about how to live.

From *Oedipus and the Problem of the Inner "I"*, by Meredith Badger



It is impossible to enjoy idling thoroughly unless one has plenty of work to do. There is no fun in doing nothing when you have nothing to do. Wasting time is merely an occupation then, and a most exhausting one. Idleness, like kisses, to be sweet must be stolen.

From *Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow* by Jerome K. Jerome.



The preface of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is a powerful piece of writing, but its total effect is somewhat marred by disunity between idea and execution. It disports in opposition to the material conditions of life, but it will not content itself with being stylish. It determines to argue, and argument diminishes Mr. Gautier's rich and varied prose from a pageant to a point.

Mr. Gautier defined his terms as a competition between opposites, and then, like an enthusiastic sportsman, he set about trying to defeat his opponent, quite forgetting that to take part in the contest is to affirm an object, and therefore a use. His preface signals a determination to separate art from any concern that might limit its capacity for expression. It absolves art from any commitment to matters of politics and religion, but it does so by replacing one set of dubious constructs with another set of dubious constructs. It casts down utility in order to elevate uselessness. In place of morality, it affirms an amorality that is no less judgmental than the thing it is trying to throw off. It confers no new freedoms; it is merely a precept masquerading as a liberation from precepts.

Mr. Gautier tells us that art is useless, but what his art *work* tells us is something rather different. What his art work tells us is that works of art can be used to raise mere caprice to the status of dogma.

From *Through a Country Wilde: The Artistic Landscape of Oscar Wilde*, by Charlotte Cornish



*Much like the keeper of a zoological garden, Barnaby is unwilling to play a bit part. The aspect of quiet reserve, so prized among the academic classes, forms no part of his character. He cannot join any company without 'making an entrance'; when he departs, he 'goeth' as if closely pursued by a bear, or an insolent undergraduate. Office ornaments and items of auxiliary furniture are frequent casualties of his whirlwind visits. Last week, he broke a side table; yesterday afternoon, he had to be disentangled from a bust of Queen Victoria (in her later years).*



The most far-fetched idea of them all was proposed by a man called Ulric the Unwashed. Ulric (who was centuries ahead of modern medicine in his belief that using soap behind the ears and in the middle of sandwiches does more harm than good) wore twigs in his hair and shunned polite society.

For this reason, his company was much sought after: none of his neighbors had any manors either.

From *King Wilfred the Wise, and Why He Wasn't: A Fairytale*, by Clementine Blythe



The idiosyncrasy of everyday experience is actually worth attending to, so that reading widely may, at least in that sense, be a barrier to enjoying a good book.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.



△

What is, today, a rare sort of student used to be merely a common sort of reader.

From *Art Appreciation in the Aftermath of Universities*, by Griffin Brownrigg

Ψ

*'A shared love of cargo shorts more than the idea of e pluribus unum is what really unites the peoples of the United States'.*

*Discuss. In your answer, refer to at least one real-world example, and no fewer than three literary sources.*



MABEL CHILTERN

Oh, I love London Society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics. Just what Society should be.

From *An Ideal Husband*, by Oscar Wilde.

Ψ

*Muller's words had annoyed me, but determining to take the high road (and also his favorite pen), I passed out of his office and did not slacken my pace until I had gained the fresh midday air.*

*Some hours later, I was accosted by Barnaby, who informed me that the pen (which I was still holding) had been taken from his personal collection. Naturally, I did not return the instrument; no doubt, Barnaby had taken it from someone else, and I did not wish to make myself a party to his misdeed.*

## II

Uncertainty is not always an ailment. The evacuation of doubt does not have to be the end towards which all mental activity must strive; and taking an interest in things for their own sake (and without regard to ourselves) is sometimes the sanest, healthiest thing we can do.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

Ω

It was a confusion of ideas between him and one of the lions he was hunting in Kenya that had caused A. B. Spottsworth to make the obituary column. He thought the lion was dead, and the lion thought it wasn't.

From *Ring for Jeeves*, by P.G. Wodehouse

§

Scientists not infrequently good artists. They are good artists because they are not afraid to be children. Like children, they look at the world and wonder. Their curiosity is more powerful than their sense of certainty. It is also more alive.

From *Artists Are from Mars, Scientists Are from Wonderland*, by Bertram Winterbourne

≈

*I reiterated my claim that there are men in this world who lack my refined spirit, and Mrs. Braintree admitted that there might be one or two. The rest of the evening passed pleasantly enough, and when, some few hours later, Mrs. Braintree said 'blow out that candle, you hopeless fathead', it was not difficult to detect the note of love in her voice.*



\*

Art is not a panacea; life is much more than a process of pain management. Everyday life is very often extraordinary; even good art is sometimes very dull.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by  
Hermione Digby

\*

Self-expression does not necessitate estrangement. Growing into ourselves does not require us to lose interest in other people. The individual self is the person (with all its varied aspects and competing interests) that we cannot help being. But self-knowing, if it is a virtue, is not always a cardinal virtue. It is not infrequently a sort of self-parody: a relentless repetition of those aspects of ourselves that are most familiar to us. Pursued too determinedly, it can become a merciless regimen of self-diagnosis where the symptoms always feel debilitating and the prognosis is invariably poor.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

\*

The trouble with historicism is that it isn't quite certain whether it is giving a poor account of a good story or a fantastical account of a history that never was. It privileges what we feel we have gained by living in the present, and it undervalues all that we have lost by not living in the past. The historical perspective thinks that it goes to the past because it has something to reveal; what it often seems to forget, or overlook, is the fact that the past understood itself in ways that we simply cannot access or replicate. The complaint against historicism, therefore, is not that it doesn't understand the past, it is that it doesn't understand itself.

From 'The Corpse of Criticism: The Death of Historicism, and Why It Won't Be Missed', by Prudence B. Wayfair

Ω

*Muller looks rather like a walrus who has just eaten the elder of the brothers Karamazof and is feeling the better for it. His reputation as a literary man, that is to say, is not wholly undeserved.*

£

Any musical person will tell you that once you let the trombones in on the act, it really is impossible to distinguish one piece of music from the next.

From *Sent Down: Stories from a University Town*, by Philip Sherwood

‘If the little fiend had got in at the window, she probably would have strangled me!’ I returned. ‘I’m not going to endure the persecutions of your hospitable ancestors again. Was not the Reverend Jabez Branderham akin to you on the mother’s side? And that minx, Catherine Linton, or Earnshaw, or however she was called – she must have been a changeling – wicked little soul! She told me she had been walking the earth these twenty years: a just punishment for her mortal transgressions, I’ve no doubt!’

From *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Brontë



Hamlet is not only a greater fool than Macbeth, he is also acting in bad faith. It is superfluous to point out that his treatment of Ophelia is abominable; so far as Hamlet is concerned, there is no Ophelia. There is no Gertrude; there is no Claudius. The murderer who must be killed is as insubstantial as the Ghost who demands vengeance. According to Hamlet, there is no one in the play but Hamlet.

*From Thy Kingdom for a Couch: On the Character and Personality of Hamlet*, by Atticus Prescott

Ψ

*'Whether the beauty of surfaces is diminished by a terrible depth is partly a question of whether or not one can swim, and partly a question of how far the shark chooses to swim'.*

*Discuss.*



£

*In future, I must take precautions not to allow Barnaby to get started on the state of his stomach. Barnaby has an extensive cache of complaints about the many dinners that have tried and failed to live up to his high expectations. Egg salad, so he tells me, is his particular Waterloo.*

\*

Modern Warfare, although indistinguishable from Modern Love in most respects, differs from the latter on this one crucial point: only in Modern Warfare are there no restrictions limiting the number of participants who may be engaged at any one time.

From *Where Art Thou?: On the Trail of the Romance Novel*, by Aurelia Law



Art is perfectly useless, according to the sublime Oscar Wilde, who was right about everything. He also told us that all bad poetry is sincere. Had I the power to do so, I would command that these words be engraved above every gate at every university, so that each student might ponder the splendor of the insight.

From *The Western Canon*, by Harold Bloom

## Ω

*Barnaby said that he would like to take my legs off below the knees in a game of football next week. I assured him that I would like nothing better, provided, of course, that he and I can find some reason to cancel our afternoon meeting with Professor Kimberley-Kent.*

*At this, Barnaby became despondent; he had quite forgotten that we were scheduled to meet with Professor Kimberley-Kent. He asked me if I thought it had anything to do with our using permanent markers where dry-erase pens were called for. I said I thought it might, but I could not be entirely certain. It might be one thing, or it might be another.*

*Professor Kimberley-Kent, I am sorry to say, is not one of our great admirers.*

≈

Kings and queens think that money is harvested from special farms in the country. It is the common view among these greedy monarchs that when the supplies of one farm have all been exhausted, everything can be put right again, simply by working on a different farm, or by invading another country. France is the country that they like best. Kings and queens consider the year to have been wasted if they did not invade France at least twice.

From *King Wilfred the Wise, and Why He Wasn't: A Fairytale*, by  
Clementine Blythe

Δ

Fear is certainly a powerful motivating force; that does not mean, however, that life is essentially tragic. As creatures, we are susceptible to an overindulgence of negativity; but that does not mean that we must live principally in the shadows. Instead of declaring with Jonathan Harker that ‘I doubt; I fear; I think strange things, which I dare not confess to my own soul’, it is worth considering whether the unknown (and that includes what we do not know about ourselves) can be experienced as something other than threatening. Instead of thinking of ourselves as forlorn figures in need of buttressing (or saving), it is worth considering what might be gained by seeing ourselves more as interlopers in a fantastic game: one that does not always seem to have any rules (or, like Monopoly, has rules, only no one who plays seems to know quite what they are). If we cannot (and maybe should not) be absolutely content with ourselves, and confident about who we are and what we believe, it may nevertheless be possible to wonder what it would be like to think and read in a way that privileges curiosity above confidence, and even above contentment. If searching for truth (both about ourselves and about the world around us) causes us to sometimes discover things we would have preferred to remain hidden, it may be that disappointment does not always have to be debilitating. If peace of mind is something we desire, it may be that our desire (our demand, even) for peace of mind is part of what is causing us to feel so fragmented, so at war with ourselves.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

≤

Outside the universities, people go on reading. Outside the universities, people go on appreciating art. Art is very much alive. More than that, it is vibrant. It is only the universities that we are making arrangements to bury. The service promises to be very small. It will not be able to help being very dour. The epitaph alone will run into the hundreds of syllables.

From *Art Appreciation in the Aftermath of Universities*, by Griffin Brownrigg

Ψ

*'He who fights too long against dragons is doing it badly, though still better than some'.*

*Discuss.*





The old man worked at the bench, shavin' the yella timbers in the sunlight. An' the boy used help him. They worked together. They niver spoke. No need for words. Nuthin' was heard but the sound of timber. Then wan day – wan day, the boy left. He put down the tools outta his hands. Again, nare a word. The old man came to the door with him. They kissed wan another. Then the mother came like a shadda from the house 'n she kissed the boy too. Then the boy walked down the road in the dust 'n the hot sun. An' way in the far distance of the city he could hear them, the sound of the hammers 'n they batin' the timbers into the shape o' the cross.

From *Talbot's Box*, by Thomas Kilroy



*'Someone has blundered'. Professor Kimberley-Kent is wroth;  
Barnaby is not troubling to hide his amusement; and I am with my  
Tennyson, shaking my head with quiet contemplation at the  
wastefulness of it all.*

*At least, I would be, only I can't seem to find my Tennyson.*

*I don't think I lent it to anyone. The demand for that poet, alas, is  
not what it used to be.*

At the end of his essay, 'A Defense of Poetry', Percy Shelley famously declared that 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. That claim has had a rich afterlife, and is still frequently quoted, not least by poets. The elixir that poetry seems to offer even to ordinary conversation has always been a powerful intoxicant; latterly, however, Shelley's words have been adapted as a way of encouraging us to the belief that the world would be a much better place if parliaments were actually filled with artists rather than politicians. But as enticing as that prospect may sometimes seem to be, we are perhaps in danger of overlooking the rich ideas that Shelley's essay affords us to consider. Shelley's 'Defense' is not really a treatise on the exercise of political power; it is actually an essay about the power of the imagination.

For Shelley, imagination is that class of mental activity which apprehends the 'similitudes of things'. Whereas reason acknowledges differences, and describes relationships in terms of those differences, imagination perceives the fundamental unity of all things. Poetry is 'the expression of the imagination', and because he saw imagination as being in harmony with that which is universal, Shelley did not regard poetry as being something that was restricted to a particular kind of person, or a particular mode of expression. A poet could be a poet, but so could a philosopher. Poets can be all sorts of people. Likewise, the poetical project can express itself in any number of composition types. Poetry, for Shelley, was not strictly a matter of form; it was a matter of sympathy: 'to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word, the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression'. 'A poem', he wrote, 'is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth'.

'Eternal' is a key word for Shelley; highlighting it underlines a distinction between what Shelley was saying in his essay, and how his words have been used. Poetry is not partisan. The poet 'considers the vices of his contemporaries as a temporary dress in which his creations must be arrayed, and which cover without concealing the eternal proportions of their beauty'. But it is not the object of poetry to address itself to the particular circumstances of the age. Shelley warns that a poet 'would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither. By this assumption of the inferior office of interpreting the effect in which perhaps after all he might acquit himself but imperfectly, he would resign a glory in a participation in the cause'.

The sort of poetry Shelley championed nevertheless has a moral function that is also a utilitarian function. That function, he argued, is especially powerful precisely because it addresses itself to that eternal beauty which cannot be diminished or superseded by any temporary pain or by the accidents of history. 'Poetry', he wrote, 'lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar'; as the voice of the imagination, it offers an alternative to the narrowness of mere self-identification. That capacity to experience the world as something other than oneself is the basis of true morality: 'The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own'.

Imagination, for Shelley, is the 'great instrument of moral good'; it is useful because it is an active instrument. Poetry provides the energy and inspiration necessary to awaken the mind to a whole host of possibilities. 'It is', Shelley wrote, 'at once the center and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life'.

What Shelley is elaborating in his essay is something much more than lofty sentimentalism. He is identifying a point of contact between reason and imagination that is worth exploring. The divisions and distinctions have been thoroughly elaborated; possibly, they have been overelaborated. Today, we understand and accept that reason may serve to temper the wild predilections of the individual and turn them into something that is thoughtful and mature. But we have not sufficiently explored all that the imagination has to offer. We have asked what reason can do for the imagination; it is time to explore what the imagination can do for reason.

From 'Poetry and the Imagination', by A.P. Wilberforce

He was dressed in tin armour, which seemed to fit him very badly, and he had a queer-shaped little deal box fastened across his shoulders, upside-down, and with the lid hanging open. Alice looked at it with great curiosity.

‘I see you’re admiring my little box,’ the Knight said in a friendly tone. ‘It’s my own invention – to keep clothes and sandwiches in. You see I carry it upside-down, so that the rain can’t get in.’

‘But the things can get out,’ Alice gently remarked. ‘Do you know the lid’s open?’

‘I didn’t know it,’ the Knight said, a shade of vexation passing over his face. ‘Then all the things must have fallen out! And the box is no use without them.’ He unfastened it as he spoke, and was just going to throw it into the bushes, when a sudden thought seemed to strike him, and he hung it carefully on a tree. ‘Can you guess why I did that?’ he said to Alice. Alice shook her head.

‘In hopes some bees may make a nest in it—then I should get the honey.’

‘But you’ve got a bee-hive – or something like one – fastened to the saddle,’ said Alice.

‘Yes, it’s a very good bee-hive,’ the Knight said in a discontented tone, ‘one of the best kind. But not a single bee has come near it yet. And the other thing is a mouse-trap. I suppose the mice keep the bees out – or the bees keep the mice out, I don’t know which.’

From *Through the Looking-Glass*, by Lewis Carroll

\*

The Culture Secretary felt that zebras were an unnecessary addition to the animal kingdom: ‘postmodern ponies’, she called them, and all of her friends seemed to know what that meant.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



*The office door opened slowly to reveal the timid form of a young man with brown hair and a face like a young cavalryman who has been ordered to show some esprit de corps and must confess to his commanding officer that he entered the army to fight the French, not to speak it.*

*It was Anderton, and he wanted to speak to me about his essay.*

*That struck me as odd; Anderton, I knew, didn't have an essay to speak of. I had made a note of the fact in my records, but it didn't seem sporting to refer to it just then. Besides, I am not one of the College's grand moralizers. I invited Anderton to take a seat, and my words, so far as I can recall, were good, plain English.*



All art is works of art because all art is a matter of detail.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by  
Hermione Digby





Keats' Negative Capability tells us that the divisions we feel within ourselves do not have to be disarming. Precariousness is not a challenge to perspective, it *is* the perspective. Energy rather than constancy is the proper framework of experience; Hazlitt called this 'Gusto': 'power or passion defining an object'.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

Bankers are some of the very highest and mightiest people in any land in all the world. They wear expensive silk trousers and they work in buildings made entirely of smooth stone. They know the meaning of words such as ‘interest’ and ‘investment’ (or they have invented meanings, which comes to much the same thing), and they maintain that a good paper is something that must be unfolded in order to be read. The *Financial Fiefdom* is their favourite. They take it with their crumpets and their morning cup of tea.

The *Fiefdom* is delicious; the crumpets are too, though sometimes they are a little tougher to get down. But they always manage in the end. Crumpets, like financial crashes, are no match for the mighty banker, who can accomplish nearly anything when he sets his mind to it.

A great many people are very envious of the bankers’ power. Nearly eight out of ten people would like to work in nice buildings and wear expensive trousers. Ten out of ten people would like to get the better of their tea and morning crumpets, and more people would like to eat their papers than care to admit the fact out loud.

Because bankers are very powerful, it is generally thought that the life a banker must be very pleasant and peaceful, but this is not always so. Sometimes the life of a banker is not comfortable, and sometimes it is not convenient. Sometimes it is not even safe. This may come as something of a surprise; still, it is wholly and entirely true. Banking is sometimes very dangerous work. Though not a single banker has actually been eaten by a lion or pushed out of a window (lion-lunching and defenestration are the usual standards by which dangerous work is measured), the work comes with its risks all the same.

From *Bullish Floors and Flaws Laid Bare: Why the Banks Were Torn At the Seams*, by Sophia Barney

Ψ

*'If life seems to give you lemons, you might be mistaking life for a lemon tree'.*

*Discuss.*

≈

*Enfield may be a specialist in the field of Irish theater, but that does not excuse the fact that he is an extremely careless sort of walker. We are all of us mere flesh and bone to him. Age and status are no safeguard when Enfield is up and moving.*

*A few of his conquests have given me a great deal of satisfaction; but Enfield, I am sorry to say, is not a 'big ideas' sort of person. It is a point of principle with him that he does not discuss the mangling of colleagues.*

*For that reason, he is seldom invited to speak at important College functions.*

\*

Chester Arthur Tippit is used to being misunderstood. People see him, and they jump to conclusions.

‘Ooohhh, a cat’, they exclaim.

But the Prime Minister knew better.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings

## II

The Circumlocution Office was (as everybody knows without being told) the most important Department under Government. No public business of any kind could possibly be done at any time without the acquiescence of the Circumlocution Office. Its finger was in the largest public pie, and in the smallest public tart. It was equally impossible to do the plainest right and to undo the plainest wrong without the express authority of the Circumlocution Office. If another Gunpowder Plot had been discovered half an hour before the lighting of the match, nobody would have been justified in saving the parliament until there had been half a score of boards, half a bushel of minutes, several sacks of official memoranda, and a family-vault full of ungrammatical correspondence, on the part of the Circumlocution Office.

This glorious establishment had been early in the field, when the one sublime principle involving the difficult art of governing a country, was first distinctly revealed to statesmen. It had been foremost to study that bright revelation and to carry its shining influence through the whole of the official proceedings. Whatever was required to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving — HOW NOT TO DO IT.

Through this delicate perception, through the tact with which it invariably seized it, and through the genius with which it always acted on it, the Circumlocution Office had risen to overtop all the public departments; and the public condition had risen to be — what it was.

It is true that How not to do it was the great study and object of all public departments and professional politicians all round the Circumlocution Office. It is true that every new premier and every new government, coming in because they had upheld a certain thing as necessary to be done, were no sooner come in than they applied their utmost faculties to discovering How not to do it. It is true that from the moment when a general election was over, every returned man who had been raving on hustings because it hadn't been done, and who had been asking the friends of the honourable gentleman in the opposite interest on pain of impeachment to tell him why it hadn't been done, and who had been asserting that it must be done, and who had been pledging himself that it should be done, began to devise, How it was not to be done. It is true that the debates of both Houses of Parliament the whole session through, uniformly tended to the protracted deliberation, How not to do it. It is true that the royal speech at the opening of such session virtually said, My lords and gentlemen, you have a considerable stroke of work to do, and you will please to retire to your respective chambers, and discuss, How not to do it. It is true that the royal speech, at the close of such session, virtually said, My lords and gentlemen, you have through several laborious months been considering with great loyalty and patriotism, How not to do it, and you have found out; and with the blessing of Providence upon the harvest (natural, not political), I now dismiss you. All this is true, but the Circumlocution Office went beyond it.

Because the Circumlocution Office went on mechanically, every day, keeping this wonderful, all-sufficient wheel of statesmanship, How not to do it, in motion. Because the Circumlocution Office was down upon any ill-advised public servant who was going to do it, or who appeared to be by any surprising accident in remote danger of doing it, with a minute, and a memorandum, and a letter of instructions that extinguished him. It was this spirit of national efficiency in the Circumlocution Office that had gradually led to its having something to do with everything. Mechanics, natural philosophers, soldiers, sailors, petitioners, memorialists, people with grievances, people who wanted to prevent grievances, people who wanted to redress grievances, jobbing people, jobbed people, people who couldn't get rewarded for merit, and people who couldn't get punished for demerit, were all indiscriminately tucked up under the foolscap paper of the Circumlocution Office.

Numbers of people were lost in the Circumlocution Office. Unfortunates with wrongs, or with projects for the general welfare (and they had better have had wrongs at first, than have taken that bitter English recipe for certainly getting them), who in slow lapse of time and agony had passed safely through other public departments; who, according to rule, had been bullied in this, over-reached by that, and evaded by the other; got referred at last to the Circumlocution Office, and never reappeared in the light of day. Boards sat upon them, secretaries minuted upon them, commissioners gabbled about them, clerks registered, entered, checked, and ticked them off, and they melted away. In short, all the business of the country went through the Circumlocution Office, except the business that never came out of it; and its name was Legion.

Sometimes, angry spirits attacked the Circumlocution Office. Sometimes, parliamentary questions were asked about it, and even parliamentary motions made or threatened about it by demagogues so low and ignorant as to hold that the real recipe of government was, How to do it. Then would the noble lord, or right honourable gentleman, in whose department it was to defend the Circumlocution Office, put an orange in his pocket, and make a regular field-day of the occasion. Then would he come down to that house with a slap upon the table, and meet the honourable gentleman foot to foot. Then would he be there to tell that honourable gentleman that the Circumlocution Office not only was blameless in this matter, but was commendable in this matter, was extollable to the skies in this matter. Then would he be there to tell that honourable gentleman that, although the Circumlocution Office was invariably right and wholly right, it never was so right as in this matter. Then would he be there to tell that honourable gentleman that it would have been more to his honour, more to his credit, more to his good taste, more to his good sense, more to half the dictionary of commonplaces, if he had left the Circumlocution Office alone, and never approached this matter. Then would he keep one eye upon a coach or crammer from the Circumlocution Office sitting below the bar, and smash the honourable gentleman with the Circumlocution Office account of this matter. And although one of two things always happened; namely, either that the Circumlocution Office had nothing to say and said it, or that it had something to say of which the noble lord, or right honourable gentleman, blundered one half and forgot the other; the Circumlocution Office was always voted immaculate by an accommodating majority.

From *Little Dorrit*, by Charles Dickens





What Hamlet's thinking illustrates is that reason is not always a virtue; sometimes, it can be a kind of forlorn idiocy. Hamlet's world only seems small because he is not actually interested in the world. He is interested only in himself.

From *Thy Kingdom for a Couch: On the Character and Personality of Hamlet*, by Atticus Prescott



*Barnaby has returned from his vacation, looking none too pleased. I could see at a glance that he had not enjoyed his trip to Brighton. I thought about giving him the line about pleasing prospects being let down by vile man, but I couldn't remember it; and besides, he had already stormed off.*

§

If someone happened to send him a few coppers by post, the Chancellor of the Exchequer would squint his eyes and examine the envelope very closely. He would say it did not make any sense to him; the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Pony would say it did not make any sense to him either. The Chancellor of the Exchequer did not know why anyone should want to give him an envelope; the Pony did not know why the Chancellor of the Exchequer thought a pony would be able to shed any light on the matter.

Between them, it was decided that the envelope and the coppers should be gotten rid of as quickly as possible. The Pony's method of getting rid of things was to eat them; the Chancellor of the Exchequer's method was the same as the Pony's. It was not very long before they both discovered that a new method would have to be tried. The Chancellor of the Exchequer's Pony said that the coppers had hurt his teeth. The Chancellor of the Exchequer was worried that an envelope tree would begin to grow in his stomach.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer sat down and thought. Chancellor of the Exchequer's Pony preferred to stand, but he thought about the matter too. It was a very long time before they came up with a solution. Eventually, they decided that the best course would be to post the letter and the coppers to themselves. Since the postal service was very bad, and hardly a service at all, that was the only way of ensuring that the envelopes and the coppers would never be returned to them. The Chancellor of the Exchequer and his Pony did not want to have anything to do with envelopes. They certainly did not want anything to do with any money. At least, that is what they claimed.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings

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*Wuthering Heights* is a vision of stunning, savage beauty. It is realistic only in the sense that, like the world, it is mysterious and dynamic. Like the world, it is beguiling and irresistible.

From *Alone on the Wild Moors: How Literary Criticism Lost Its Way*, by Vivienne Everleigh

## Ω

The anxiety of influence is not an anxiety about the father, real or literary, but an anxiety achieved by and in the poem, novel, or play. Any strong literary work creatively misreads and therefore misinterprets a precursor text or texts. An authentic canonical writer may or may not internalize her or his work's anxiety, but that scarcely matters: the strongly achieved work is the anxiety.

From *The Western Canon*, by Harold Bloom



*Barnaby and the Porter have been discussing the visual arts again. The Porter says that the portrait of 'The Duchess of Clarence at Sunset' is a masterpiece of Pre-Raphaelite art; Barnaby maintains that Her Grace looks like an oversaturated pincushion.*

*Opinion in the hall continues divided on the matter. Barnaby has won the approbation of the Head Table; the Porter enjoys the support of the by-the-hour staff.*

*It seems to me that the Duchess, much like a weekend holidaymaker, did not favor long stays, but otherwise, the thing is a complete mystery to me. I cannot distinguish a Duchamp from a circumstantial dustbin.*

Δ

Old Mrs. Dodgson had been on her hands and knees, dusting the bottom part of the frame containing a portrait of a youngish woman, dressed in black robes. The young woman had ink stains on the fingers of her right hand, and in her left hand, she held a scroll that seemed to contain a secret that no one could quite read.

Old Mrs. Dodgson was very fond of the portrait of the woman with the black robes and the writing material. She dusted it every day. In the winter time, when it was very cold, Old Mrs Dodgson covered the portrait with a woolen blanket in order to prevent it taking a chill.

The Prince looked at Old Mrs. Dodgson. He thought she might be a witch who had presented herself at the castle in order to turn him into a salamander, or a bit of stone. Old Mrs Dodgson replied that she was simply an old woman who liked to look at, and look after, paintings. The Prince did not like this answer; he did not like it at all. He felt that it would not do to be always tripping over ancient art enthusiasts. The castle guards were immediately called for, and Old Mrs. Dodgson was led away to the dungeons.

From *King Wilfred the Wise, and Why He Wasn't: A Fairytale*, by  
Clementine Blythe

†

Conflict itself is ineluctable. We are as insufficiently equipped to handle our lives as our ancestors were to handle theirs. The question is whether it is possible to regard joy and sorrow as intonations rather than absolute states of being that we must either strive for or try to escape. As authors of our own lives, we ‘write’, in the words of Montaigne, ‘intolerably ill’. But it may be that there are alternatives to the forms of writing we think we know; it may be that there are alternatives to defending our corner.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.



£

A survey course in art appreciation will not teach us to love art, though it may cause us to resign ourselves to a condition of perpetual dizziness. Nor will such an education help us to get on in the world. Unless we have first learned to appreciate one thing, we will be unable to love the next thing, and the multitude. The best sort of learning always starts small.

From *Art Appreciation in the Aftermath of Universities*, by Griffin Brownrigg

Ψ

*'Art is a matter of dressing for dinner. Life is the fact of chasing after one's hat'.*

*Discuss.*

≈

Then the snow came, and after the snow came the frost. The streets looked as if they were made of silver, they were so bright and glistening; long icicles like crystal daggers hung down from the eaves of the houses, everybody went about in furs, and the little boys wore scarlet caps and skated on the ice.

The poor little Swallow grew colder and colder, but he would not leave the Prince, he loved him too well. He picked up crumbs outside the baker's door when the baker was not looking, and tried to keep himself warm by flapping his wings.

But at last he knew that he was going to die. He had just strength to fly up to the Prince's shoulder once more. 'Good-bye, dear Prince!' he murmured, 'will you let me kiss your hand?'

'I am glad that you are going to Egypt at last, little Swallow,' said the Prince, 'you have stayed too long here; but you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you.'

'It is not to Egypt that I am going,' said the Swallow. 'I am going to the House of Death. Death is the brother of Sleep, is he not?'

And he kissed the Happy Prince on the lips, and fell down dead at his feet.

At that moment a curious crack sounded inside the statue, as if something had broken. The fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two. It certainly was a dreadfully hard frost.

Early the next morning the Mayor was walking in the square below in company with the Town Councillors. As they passed the column he looked up at the statue: 'Dear me! how shabby the Happy Prince looks!' he said.

'How shabby, indeed!' cried the Town Councillors, who always agreed with the Mayor; and they went up to look at it.

'The ruby has fallen out of his sword, his eyes are gone, and he is golden no longer,' said the Mayor; 'in fact, he is little better than a beggar!'

'Little better than a beggar,' said the Town Councillors.

'And here is actually a dead bird at his feet!' continued the Mayor. 'We must really issue a proclamation that birds are not to be allowed to die here.' And the Town Clerk made a note of the suggestion.

So they pulled down the statue of the Happy Prince. 'As he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful,' said the Art Professor at the University.

Then they melted the statue in a furnace, and the Mayor held a meeting of the Corporation to decide what was to be done with the metal. 'We must have another statue, of course,' he said, 'and it shall be a statue of myself.'

'Of myself,' said each of the Town Councillors, and they quarrelled. When I last heard of them they were quarrelling still.

'What a strange thing!' said the overseer of the workmen at the foundry. 'This broken lead heart will not melt in the furnace. We must throw it away.' So they threw it on a dust-heap where the dead Swallow was also lying.

'Bring me the two most precious things in the city,' said God to one of His Angels; and the Angel brought Him the leaden heart and the dead bird.

'You have rightly chosen,' said God, 'for in my garden of Paradise this little bird shall sing for evermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me.'

From 'The Happy Prince', in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, by Oscar Wilde



*Last year, Pickering won a cactus at the village fete. His friend Pilkins also received a prize. Pickering was very happy with his cactus. I am not convinced that Pilkins was wholly pleased with her tarantula exoskeleton.*

*Barnaby says her attitude is illustrative of the ingratitude of the younger generation, but I can't help but think that Pilkins may have a point. Pickering certainly does: several. And I am sure he will find some use for them. There is a fixed, spiritual look in his eye which seems to suggest that he is about to strike a blow for the cause; either that, or he is about to sit down to a nice vegetarian dinner. Only time will tell.*

Our stories provide a respite from the whirlwind of existence. ‘We read a good novel’, G.K. Chesterton tells us, ‘not in order to know more people, but in order to know fewer’. But what we take as a cure is also part of the disease; the absence of buffeting winds does not mean that we are in safe harbors. If art can seem to make life more bearable, it also beguiles us into the belief that real life is not as pleasurable as it might be; it is, perhaps, not as pleasurable as it *should* be. Art, in that sense, is soothing, but it is also self-serving. Under the guise of telling us the truth, it can trick us into a condition of dependency. It may cause us to feel worse than the circumstances of our life seem to require. When Hazlitt declared ‘It is *we* who are Hamlet’, he drew attention to something about Shakespeare’s universality that is worth considering: Hamlet does not just give voice to fears and anxieties we hold in common, he also calls them into being. Affect, that is to say, carries with it the potential for influence; whatever moves us can change us.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

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‘Elementary, my dear Watson, elementary,’ murmured  
Psmith.

From ‘Psmith Journalist’, by P.G. Wodehouse

\*

The Home Secretary was not accustomed to whistling bright, breezy tunes and blowing wherever the inspired world might wish to take him. The sights and sounds of King's Cross station did not please him. Standing in the ticketing office of the National Express, he had the look of one who has recently been made aware that a cactus is clinging to his caboose and is thinking what to do about it.

Ours is a rich and varied world, and so it is just possible there are people in it who think that order Caryophyllales, felt up close, is a source of soothing satisfaction. But if there are, The Home Secretary was not among their number. His face revealed him to be a staunch traditionalist when it came to the matter of defining the proper distance that should be maintained between the pricklier flora and the spiritual center of his preferred pair of pantaloons.

The Home Secretary felt that quick action was what the doctor ordered. The ticket agent smiled. If that sort of service was what he wanted, then Sir had certainly come to the wrong place.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



\*

*I must remember to tell Davenport to knock off the dead fish routine. His parents and well-wishers do not send him to one of England's preeminent places of learning in order that he may copy the mannerisms of a thing that is admitted into polite society only when it is served on a plate.*

£

We weigh the pros and cons evenly only where the outcome does not matter to us. It is only unimportant issues where we are willing to fight fair.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by  
Hermione Digby



If words are not always what they seem, and they can (and do) communicate more than we always care to acknowledge, it may be that our aesthetic principles rather than our words are what is principally holding us back and making us feel so ill at ease with the stories we are able to tell (and not tell) about ourselves. It may be that if our principles were more inquisitive than condemnatory, then even bad writing might be of interest.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.



The optimist is a better reformer than the pessimist; and the man who believes life to be excellent is the man who alters it most. It seems a paradox, yet the reason of it is very plain. The pessimist can be enraged at evil. But only the optimist can be surprised at it. From the reformer is required a simplicity of surprise. He must have the faculty of a violent and virgin astonishment. It is not enough that he should think injustice distressing; he must think injustice *absurd*, an anomaly in existence, a matter less for tears than for a shattering laughter.

From *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, by G.K. Chesterton

Ψ

*'The man who takes the road less traveled sometimes finds that he has ventured onto private property. It is likewise true that we are apt to take poetry much too seriously.'*

*Discuss, with reference to Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken' and one other poem of your choosing.*

≅

*Mr. Next Door is a man of industry, and therefore much given to spouting. Last week, he complained loudly and at length about a row of parsley that did not come up to his standards (it was actually sage); and this week, he has made a number of bitter, disparaging remarks about a hammer which reached out and struck him, though he had always regarded it as a pal.*

*Mrs. Next Door has done her best to get him to see that the accused will only go where it is led (and is therefore more to be pitied than blamed), but Mr. Next Door will not climb down from his position.*

*Mrs. Braintree thinks the stepladder will shortly join the defendant in the dock, and I feel she may be right. Mr. Next Door is a high-flyer in the city, but here in the village, Gravity tends to get her way.*

≈

The Foreign Secretary's Father was rather proud of his walnut-colored waistcoat, and he wore it everywhere he went: he wore it at work, he wore it at home, he wore it at the beach as part of his swimming costume, and he even wore it when we went on holiday to America.

Customs officials in America used to look at him and ask if he was one of the Prince Edwards. And the Foreign Secretary's Father, being, like all fathers, unable to resist any opportunity to make himself interesting and agreeable, would draw himself up and reply with his customary sporting spirit: 'Why yes, yes I am!'

Then, because he could never be prevailed upon to do things by half-measures, he would allow his photo to be taken by anyone and everyone. The Foreign Secretary estimated that between Bangor and Santa Barbara, there are at least a quarter of a million framed photos of his practical-joker parent.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings

§

We crowded round, and over Miss Cathy's head I had a peep at a dirty, ragged, black-haired child; big enough both to walk and talk: indeed, its face looked older than Catherine's; yet when it was set on its feet, it only stared round, and repeated over and over again some gibberish that nobody could understand. I was frightened, and Mrs. Earnshaw was ready to fling it out of doors: she did fly up, asking how he could fashion to bring that gipsy brat into the house, when they had their own bairns to feed and fend for? What he meant to do with it, and whether he were mad? The master tried to explain the matter; but he was really half dead with fatigue, and all that I could make out, amongst her scolding, was a tale of his seeing it starving, and houseless, and as good as dumb, in the streets of Liverpool, where he picked it up and inquired for its owner. Not a soul knew to whom it belonged, he said; and his money and time being both limited, he thought it better to take it home with him at once, than run into vain expenses there: because he was determined he would not leave it as he found it. Well, the conclusion was, that my mistress grumbled herself calm; and Mr. Earnshaw told me to wash it, and give it clean things, and let it sleep with the children.

From *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Brontë



△

If we sometimes value art over life, it is only because we are simple creatures, and art is easier to understand.

From *Do You Mind?: Literary Criticism and the Mental Map*, by Mungo Home

## Ω

*I told the police constable that he seemed to me to be a man of arresting personality, but he remained resolute. Compliment or no compliment, I could see that he was not a police constable who would soften his view of a fellow who had been discovered reciting 'The Hunting of the Snark' at the top of his voice, in the early hours of the morning.*

*My remark about the 'gravity of the force' was also a miss.*

## II

What made the Prime Minister sad was the whole business of being Prime Minister. It gave him a headache. About the only bit of the job he liked was sitting in the royal box at Wimbledon. The Prime Minister enjoyed his tennis. He was a keen tennis player. There was even a time when the Prime Minister had thought of turning professional. What stopped him turning professional was the fact that he was not very good. The Prime Minister lost his very first competitive match. His opponent, he had been forced to admit, was really very good.

‘That’, said the chair umpire, ‘is not an opponent. What you have been hitting all afternoon is a parked car; my car, in point of fact’.

That had been enough to put an end to the Prime Minister’s playing career. It is difficult to be taken seriously on the tennis circuit when you lose your first match to a modest two-seater.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



There were four of us — George, and William Samuel Harris, and myself, and Montmorency. We were sitting in my room, smoking, and talking about how bad we were — bad from a medical point of view I mean, of course.

From *Three Men in a Boat*, by Jerome. K. Jerome

Degradation in Wilde's writing is a matter of form, not a matter of flesh. 'What Art really reveals to us', according to Vivian, is 'Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition'. Degradation is really a process of uncluttering: it is the artist's efforts to rise above the raw materials that life has given him.

From *Through a Country Wilde: The Artistic Landscape of Oscar Wilde*, by Charlotte Cornish



*In works of literature from an earlier age, words like 'supine' were common currency. Today, they are indicative of a writer who has opened a thesaurus and thrown caution to the wind. The word 'supine' is therefore both descriptive and accusatory.*

£

No sooner had his mind been made up, then King Wilfred set out. It did not matter to him that it was already very late at night. It did not matter to him that it was very dark. Alfred the Alchemist had said that was he was looking for might be found in Clifton-upon-Sea, so it was to Clifton-upon-Sea that King Wilfred was determined to go.

Such was his hurry that King Wilfred did not trouble to wake anyone. He made all the preparations himself. He packed an extra crown and a change of signet rings, and he closed the castle door behind him. Then, he made his way down to the stable. He saddled his favorite horse, and very soon after that, King Wilfred rode out of the stable, and into the night.

He rode and he rode. He rode for hours on end. Every once in a while, it occurred to King Wilfred that he was not quite sure if they were travelling in the right direction. It really was very difficult to see without any lights. There were no lampposts or lane markers to guide him. There was not a single bank or a petrol station where he could stop and ask for directions. King Wilfred, however, was undeterred. He continued to ride. At some point in the night, King Wilfred lost his way and rode off a cliff. At that point, he stopped riding.

From *King Wilfred the Wise, and Why He Wasn't: A Fairytale*, by Clementine Blythe



I am rather inclined to the belief that we treat aesthetic interpretation too much like an act of consecration. Interpretation is, first and foremost, the fact of taking an interest. But what else it can be, or must be, is perhaps a question we have been too quick to answer. It seems that even the academic criticism has been elevated to something like an article of faith. The critic and his work seem to say that if words are expressed and recounted in a particular sort of way, a truth will be revealed. The practice of criticism makes claims to objectivity, but it isn't at all clear that we really know what objectivity is, or how exactly we can achieve it. The fact of something we call the unconscious throws into question whether, and to what extent, it is possible to be objective at all. It may be that the spirit of inquiry is best expressed by an approach to art and life that is more curious than knowing. It may be that knowledge is advanced as much by trying as by arguing.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.



Ψ

*'A man who is loose in his handling of his umbrella must be either a very careless assassin or an enthusiastic amateur spearfisherman'.*

*What might cause the writer to make such a claim? How else might a person with an umbrella be described? Come up with three or four sentences of your own.*

\*

Daniel Pennac's inspirational work, *The Rights Of The Reader* is a book about living well in the company of other people. The rights it confers to readers are reminders of the interest that we should take in other people. They are also expressions of hope about the kind of interest other people will take in us.

From *Art Appreciation in the Aftermath of Universities*, by Griffin Brownrigg

≥

Wilde was sometimes right, but he was never more right than when he was wrong. Wilde understood that truth and falsehood are merely the playthings of the artist.

From *Sentries of the Stage: A Review of Theater Criticism From Ancient Times to the Present*, by Horace Budd

## Ω

*Barnaby, as well as being a fearsome footballer, is also a keen cricketer. I would not, however, go so far as to say that he is an accomplished cricketer. It seems to my trained eye that what his technique wants is some consistency. He begins by flapping his arms wildly, like an overwrought and emotional goose, but no sooner does one feel that this is an athlete who is all brute energy, then Barnaby goes and approaches the thing from an entirely different angle. It isn't quite 'methodical', but it is about as close to it as a fellow like Barnaby can manage. By the time he scoops up the cargo, he is wearing the sort of look of trepidation that one is used to seeing on the faces of junior bomb disposal officers. Barnaby assures me that his innovative technique will one day be the toast of all the forty-eight counties, but personally, I do not think it will catch on.*

\*

In his essay 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' Dr. Freud gives an account of art as an autobiography of repressed desires, in which creativity functions as a coping mechanism: it enables the artist to bear the trauma of living with childhood pleasures that he is forced to disavow, but which he cannot quite escape. For Dr. Freud, creative writing is, in that sense, a continuation of childhood play into adulthood; 'every child at play', he wrote, 'behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him'.

Both the child and the creative writer, in Dr. Freud's view, invest significant emotion in their activities: the child 'takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it. The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real'. 'The creative writer', Dr. Freud went on to say, 'does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously – that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion'. Both the child and the creative writer know that their creations are creations; neither confuses what has been created with what is real.

What distinguishes the experience of the creative writer from the experience of the child is the matter of pleasure, and the publicity of that pleasure. The child enjoys his play. He does not trouble to be secretive about it: 'The child, it is true, plays by himself or forms a closed psychical system with other children for the purposes of a game; but even though he may not play his game in front of the grown-ups, he does not, on the other hand, conceal it from them'.

The creative writer desires to recapture the pleasure of his childhood: "As people grow up, then, they cease to play, and they seem to give up the yield of pleasure which they gained from playing. But whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure which he has once experienced'.

Key to Dr. Freud's way of thinking is the idea that we never truly leave any aspect of our personal history behind; we carry our childhood with us into adulthood. 'Actually', he writes, 'we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another. What appears to be a renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or surrogate. In the same way, the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects; instead of *playing*, he now *phantasies*. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called *day-dreams*'.

These phantasies, in other words, are not replications of past pleasures; we do not get very far with Dr. Freud if we mistake memory for mere retrieval. Dr. Freud is very clear in his belief that the past is not a fixed place. The past is fundamentally linked both to the present, and to the future. It is also affected by that link. The past, that is to say, is modified by contact with present experience. Dr. Freud tells us:

We must not suppose that the products of this imaginative activity—the various phantasies, castles in the air and day-dreams—are stereotyped or unalterable. On the contrary, they fit themselves in to the subject's shifting impressions of life, change with every change in his situation, and receive from every fresh active impression what might be called a "date-mark." The relation of a phantasy to time is in general very important. We may say that it hovers, as it were, between three times—the three moments of time which our ideation involves. Mental work is linked to some current impression, some provoking occasion in the present which has been able to arouse one of the subject's major wishes. From there it harks back to a memory of an earlier experience (usually an infantile one) in which this wish was fulfilled; and it now creates a situation relating to the future which represents a fulfillment of the wish. What it thus creates is a day-dream or phantasy, which carries about it traces of its origin from the occasion which provoked it and from the memory. Thus past, present and future are strung together, as it were, on the thread of the wish that runs through them.

In common with other adults, the creative writer is ashamed of his desires. He 'is ashamed of his phantasies and hides them from other people. He cherishes his phantasies as his most intimate possessions, and as a rule he would rather confess his misdeeds than tell anyone his phantasies'.

Phantasies signify discontent: 'a happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one. The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfillment of a wish, a correlation of unsatisfying reality'. Creative work then is catalyzed by experience: 'A strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfillment in the creative work. The work itself exhibits elements of the recent provoking occasion as well as of the old memory'.

What distinguishes the creative writer from other adults is his ability to translate his phantasies into a form that he can share with other people. Works of creative writing are, therefore, phantasies that have been made public, and in such a way as permits them to be received and experienced as pleasure.

Creative writing is therefore a mode of autobiography. What it records are the very secrets the writer's unconscious mind conceals from his conscious self. The practice

of psychoanalysis is, in that sense, similar to the practice of literary criticism. Both assume that the representation that has been provided is incomplete. The critic believes that something important has been hidden in the pages of the text. The psychoanalyst believes that something has been repressed in the human person. Both apply themselves to the task of uncovering the material that has been concealed.

The critic reads the literary text. The psychoanalyst attempts to read the human patient. The human person does not form an exact equivalency with a literary text, of course. But what they share is a sense of the potentiality of seemingly minor details: a close reader sees significance in the fact that the rose is red; a psychoanalyst is interested in the fragments of memory that a patient gains access to in his dreams and tries to suppress in his waking life.

Dr. Freud accepted that 'all the material composing the content of a dream is somehow derived from experience, that it is reproduced or remembered in the dream'; but the most remarkable discoveries of dream study, he felt, had to do as much with the material of reproduction as the fact of reproduction itself: 'The third, most remarkable, and at the same time most incomprehensible, peculiarity of memory in dreams is shown in the selection of the material reproduced; for here it is not, as in the waking state, only the most significant things that are held to be worth remembering, but also the most indifferent and insignificant details'.

The materials of dreams are better understood as artefacts, rather than symbols. Symbolism reduces dream work to mere equation; what memory actually does is release us into a world of imagination. In that sense, the analyst, like the critic, is also a creative writer.

From *The Character of Inner Fiction*, by L.P. Cleary

§

‘Just the place for a Snark!’ the Bellman cried,  
As he landed his crew with care;  
Supporting each man on the top of the tide  
By a finger entwined in his hair.

‘Just the place for a Snark! I have said it twice:  
That alone should encourage the crew.  
Just the place for a Snark! I have said it thrice:  
What I tell you three times is true.’  
The crew was complete: it included a Boots—  
A maker of Bonnets and Hoods—  
A Barrister, brought to arrange their disputes—  
And a Broker, to value their goods.

A Billiard-marker, whose skill was immense,  
Might perhaps have won more than his share—  
But a Banker, engaged at enormous expense,  
Had the whole of their cash in his care.

There was also a Beaver, that paced on the deck,  
Or would sit making lace in the bow:  
And had often (the Bellman said) saved them from wreck,  
Though none of the sailors knew how.

There was one who was famed for the number of things  
He forgot when he entered the ship:  
His umbrella, his watch, all his jewels and rings,  
And the clothes he had bought for the trip.

He had forty-two boxes, all carefully packed,  
With his name painted clearly on each:  
But, since he omitted to mention the fact,  
They were all left behind on the beach.

The loss of his clothes hardly mattered, because  
He had seven coats on when he came,



With three pair of boots—but the worst of it was,  
He had wholly forgotten his name.

He would answer to ‘Hi!’ or to any loud cry,  
Such as ‘Fry me!’ or ‘Fritter my wig!’  
To ‘What-you-may-call-um!’ or ‘What-was-his-name!’  
But especially ‘Thing-um-a-jig!’

While, for those who preferred a more forcible word,  
He had different names from these:  
His intimate friends called him ‘Candle-ends,’  
And his enemies ‘Toasted-cheese.’

‘His form is ungainly—his intellect small—’  
(So the Bellman would often remark)  
‘But his courage is perfect! And that, after all,  
Is the thing that one needs with a Snark.’

He would joke with hænas, returning their stare  
With an impudent wag of the head:  
And he once went a walk, paw-in-paw, with a bear,  
‘Just to keep up its spirits,’ he said.

He came as a Baker: but owned, when too late—  
And it drove the poor Bellman half-mad—  
He could only bake Bride-cake—for which, I may state,  
No materials were to be had.

The last of the crew needs especial remark,  
Though he looked an incredible dunce:  
He had just one idea—but, that one being ‘Snark,’  
The good Bellman engaged him at once.

He came as a Butcher: but gravely declared,  
When the ship had been sailing a week,  
He could only kill Beavers. The Bellman looked scared,  
And was almost too frightened to speak:

But at length he explained, in a tremulous tone,  
There was only one Beaver on board;  
And that was a tame one he had of his own,  
Whose death would be deeply deplored.

The Beaver, who happened to hear the remark,  
Protested, with tears in its eyes,  
That not even the rapture of hunting the Snark  
Could atone for that dismal surprise!

It strongly advised that the Butcher should be  
Conveyed in a separate ship:  
But the Bellman declared that would never agree  
With the plans he had made for the trip:

Navigation was always a difficult art,  
Though with only one ship and one bell:  
And he feared he must really decline, for his part,  
Undertaking another as well.

The Beaver's best course was, no doubt, to procure  
A second-hand dagger-proof coat—  
So the Baker advised it—and next, to insure  
Its life in some Office of note:

This the Banker suggested, and offered for hire  
(On moderate terms), or for sale,  
Two excellent Policies, one Against Fire,  
And one Against Damage From Hail.

Yet still, ever after that sorrowful day,  
Whenever the Butcher was by,  
The Beaver kept looking the opposite way,  
And appeared unaccountably shy.

From 'Fit the First: The Landing', in *The Hunting of the Snark*, by  
Lewis Carroll

≈

The house at 43 Cheltenham Road was a detached sort of residence. It never took the welfare and wishes of its residents into account. It fell down regularly, and often. There were other problems too: on Thursdays, it allowed faulty pipes to flood the study. On Wednesdays and every second Friday, it allowed the roof to be lifted off and taken away, sometimes as far as Staffordshire. More than once, Mr. and Mrs. 43 Cheltenham Road have woken in the morning to discover that an entire room, eager to travel and see what the world has to offer, had simply detached itself from the main structure and slipped away sometime during the night.

‘We are not so much losing a room as gaining a bit more garden’ Mrs. 43 Cheltenham Road would say, philosophically.

The Local Council, however, saw matters differently, and it urged the Home Secretary to take action. The Home Secretary, who resented being told what to do by local authorities, advised the Local Council to mind its own business.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



*A heavy storm blew in during the night. Part of Next Door's shed detached itself from the main structure and disappeared. Drawing material from one of the livelier books I happen to be reading, I remarked to Mrs. Braintree that Next Door was 'not so much losing a shed as gaining a bit of garden'.*

*When it was time for me to leave for work, Mrs. Braintree walked with me to the end of the road. She said she wanted to make sure that I would have no opportunity to speak with Mr. and Mrs. Next Door before 'time, the great healer', had had an opportunity to do its work.*

*I do not know what time's reputation is as a restorer, but I was glad enough for the company.*



One of the freedoms that art affords is that it does not have to be right.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by  
Hermione Digby

\*

One of the great thrills Freud describes in *The Interpretation of Dreams* is the discovery that the material of dreams is drawn even from the ‘most indifferent and insignificant’ details. Dream-study, therefore, is partly a recognition that everything is interesting, not least because anything might prove to be important. It is a method of treatment very much like close reading. It is, in other words, an invitation to renewal, a call to look at the world (and ourselves) with fresh eyes. If we are not always what we would wish to be, we are, at least, always more than we seem. Our words have value even when they seem to come out wrong. Perhaps especially when they seem to come out wrong.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.



In his book, *How To Read And Why*, Harold Bloom described the practice of historicism as ‘a kind of idolatry, an obsessive worship of things in time’. It might be more accurate to say that historicism means a worship of our preferred dictates and dogmas, applied to times other than our own. The problem is not one of worship; it is not even a problem of idolatry. The problem of historicism is that it feels with great intensity, but it doesn’t quite know what it is worshipping.

From *The Corpse of Criticism: The Death of Historicism, and Why It Won't Be Missed*, by Prudence B. Wayfair

Ψ

*'A dog is a man's best friend, whereas, to a cat, a man is merely a maturing dinner'.*

*Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? If not, be sure to account for that cold, fixed look that seems to come upon a cat when in the presence of a person settling down to sleep.*



△

*Attitudes, like fashion, are forever in a state of flux. This year, passion is worn 'up', and Professor Kimberley-Kent is by way of being the College chic. It had been my intention to make a record of his remarks on the subject of 'declining admissions standards', only, I did not happen to have a pen, and Barnaby didn't happen to have one either. Barnaby had a piece of cheese and a pocket handkerchief, but these were not much use to anyone.*

## Ω

From the first, the Home Secretary showed himself to be an exceptionally bright little boy. Those who were lucky enough to know the Home Secretary in his early years recall that ‘Even as an infant, his brain was a formidable instrument. It needed only the addition of a shovel, and there was nothing he could not unearth’.

A school report extant from the period contains a catalogue of just some of his many memorable finds. These include: no fewer than twenty-seven pieces of discarded chewing gum, a number of broken crayons (ranging in hue from ‘Sour Grape’ to ‘Macaroni and Cheese Yellow’), and an unexploded bomb that was very likely left by an extremely careless Luftwaffe pilot, sometime during that highly interesting period between 1939 and 1945, which our German friends refer to simply as ‘Ze Great Oopzies’.

Such an inventory of remarkable discoveries might have been enough to satisfy the appetites of his young schoolmates (all of whom seemed to think that a special-pack crayon was a kind of complex carbohydrate), but the Home Secretary, even then, had set his sights on bigger and better things. High-yield explosives and miscellaneous art supplies were good as far as they went, but what especially fascinated young Endwell were the contents of his personal nose. To this day, he cannot say for certain when that particular spark first gained a foothold on his imagination, but having gripped him, it has never let go, and likely never will.

From *That Confounded Cabinet*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings

‘Now, you see, Rokesmith,’ he went on, ‘a literary man – *with* a wooden leg – is liable to jealousy. I shall therefore cast about for comfortable ways and means of not calling up Wegg’s jealousy, but of keeping you in your department, and keeping him in his.’

‘Lor!’ cried Mrs Boffin. ‘What I say is, the world’s wide enough for all of us!’

‘So it is, my dear,’ said Mr Boffin, ‘when not literary.’

From *Our Mutual Friend*, by Charles Dickens

## II

If 'knowledge' is the term we use for things we think we understand, it is also a way of signaling when and how our thirst has been satisfied. Knowledge, in other words, tells us something about the sorts of stories we find compelling. But it also tells us something about the ways we are beguiled by ignorance.

From *Do You Mind?: Literary Criticism and the Mental Map*, by Mungo Home

£

*'Accord tends to bind rather than liberate; we should therefore beware too much agreement'. I told Barnaby that I was thinking of making that statement the basis of my next book, and Barnaby, laughing, replied that I was an ass. We then adjourned for an early lunch.*



Every day, the Prime Minister was forced to perform all sorts of unpleasant duties. He had to speak and shake hands. He had to smile at babies and he had to coo at the members of the Shadow Cabinet. He had to open hospitals and he had to cut ribbons. He had to listen and pretend to laugh when people said he should really be cutting unemployment instead of ribbons. He really did not care for that joke. He really did not care for any of his official duties; he hated every bit of the daily grind. The part of his job that he hated the most was having to listen to his fellow Members of Parliament. They were a rather beastly lot, particularly the Opposition Members. The Opposition Members were, the Prime Minister was very sorry to have to say, fools and villains. They disagreed with everything the Prime Minister said; worse, they hissed and made faces whenever he spoke. The Opposition said the Prime Minister was wrong, even when he was perfectly right. The Prime Minister always was right, and it disappointed him to have to work with people who couldn't see it.

The Prime Minister felt especially unhappy every time the Leader of the Opposition stood up to deliver a speech in the House of Commons. The Leader of the Opposition was not a nice man. He stuck out his tongue and pulled on his ears every time the Prime Minister rose to address the House. It was all very distracting. It did not help matters that the Leader of the Opposition began every speech by saying 'My Honorable Friends'. The Leader of the Opposition knew perfectly well that he had no friends. The Chancellor didn't like him; the Shadow Chancellor didn't like him; the lords didn't like him; The Archbishop of Canterbury didn't like him. Even his own father didn't like him, which was not a good sign, according to the Home Secretary, 'since, the way he walks about the place', the Home Secretary remarked, you would think he was the son of God'.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



Heathcliff, properly understood, is not a colonial subject. He is a changeling, introduced onto the moors under the cover of darkness. Like *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* is a story of collision with the world of fairies. But whereas *Jane Eyre* considers what it might be like to live in a world where fairies are possible, *Wuthering Heights* is a dream about what it might be like to try to become a fairy.

From *Alone on the Wild Moors: How Literary Criticism Lost Its Way*, by Vivienne Everleigh

§

To Lord Henry, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not a tragedy. It is not even a gothic adventure. It is something much more interesting. It is an entertainment. It is an entertainment; and quite wisely, he determines to enjoy it on its own terms. Lord Henry understands that what governs *Dorian Gray* is an intense interrelationship between our desire to know and our inability to find out. One plays it best by dressing properly and never acting entirely in earnest. It would be unwise to judge the merit of his artistic work by the correctness of the ideas they represent. Lord Henry was quite right when he said that 'Nothing is ever quite true'. What he meant is that nothing is ever absolutely complete.

From *Through a Country Wilde: The Artistic Landscape of Oscar Wilde*, by Charlotte Cornish





*Professor Kimberley-Kent was lying in wait when I returned from my luncheon. It struck me as an odd way to spend a period of three hours, but Professor Kimberley-Kent is an odd sort of man. His disposition, I am sorry to say, is invariably gloomy. Before I met him, I would not have believed that anyone alive could so fastidiously copy the style and mannerisms of a drowned mammal. But he manages it somehow. Professor Kimberley-Kent looks like one of those speculators who went in for establishing sea colonies and forgot all the supplies necessary to undertake the job. All the supplies, that is, except the sea. Of the sea, there is rather a sense of surplus, as though Professor Kimberley-Kent still carries the stuff about inside him and lets liters of it off whenever the world seems to be looking and feeling just a little too dry.*

*Which is often.*

≈

The Royal Postman was not quite so lazy as the Chief Tax Collector. He was not quite so lazy as the Chief Tax Collector's pony either. The Royal Postman was only the second laziest person in the kingdom. He was only the third laziest creature. The Royal Postman worried that he might never rise higher in the rankings. The Royal Postman never did rise higher in the rankings. It was a personal weakness that prevented him from challenging for the top spot. That weakness was parcel breaking. The Royal Postman loved to break parcels; he loved it more than anything else in the world.

He was very good at it too. The Royal Postman bent and broke a great many parcels. Sometimes, he threw them onto the ground and jumped on them. Sometimes, he ran over them with his cart. On occasions when the castle was being attacked by enemies, the Royal Postman liked to drop his parcels onto the heads of the invaders. The Royal Postman had an extraordinary imagination. He was always coming up with new and clever ways to destroy parcels. He always felt particularly inspired when he received a package marked: 'Fragile: Handle With Care'. The Royal Postman liked fragile packages best of all. He always gave them his very best effort.

The Royal Postman devoted a good deal of time and energy to package destroying. He told the Chief Tax Collector that it was rewarding and therapeutic. The Royal Postman added that he thought the Chief Tax Collector

should try it some time. The Chief Tax Collector replied that he would rather not. He said it sounded like an awful lot of work. Besides, he did not know what the word 'therapeutic' meant. What was more, he did not think the Royal Postman knew either. The Royal Postman was happy to put the Chief Tax Collector right on that particular point. He said he was sure he knew what the word meant; after all, he had seen it written on a postcard. The Chief Tax Collector thought for a moment. The more he thought, the more he began to doubt. He knew as well as anyone that a postcard was a strong piece of evidence. He asked the Royal Postman if it really was a postcard after all; he said he thought it might have been a sort of notice of complaint. He asked the Royal Postman if what he remembered as 'therapeutic' might actually have read: 'Raving lunatic; in need of serious therapy'. The Royal Postman considered; he admitted that might have been the case.

It was at that point that the Royal Postman suddenly grew very sad. When the Chief Tax Collector asked him what was the matter, the Royal Postman sat down on a parcel and began to sob. He told the Chief Tax Collector that his was a very difficult trade. The Royal Postman repeated that he was very fond of his work, but he did not like to receive notices of complaint. He received a great many notices of complaint; some weeks, the notices outnumbered the packages by a ratio of twelve thousand to one (the Chief Tax Collector did not know what a ratio was any more than he knew the meaning of the other word; he thought it might be a kind of grain or a fruit, but he realized it was best not to interrupt).

From *King Wilfred the Wise, and Why He Wasn't: A Fairytale*, by Clementine Blythe

\*

Negative Capability is not a preference for what is odd above what is ordinary. It means having an eye for both. It means adaptability. It means learning to look at the world in the way that Alice learned to look at Wonderland. It means realizing that when we allow ourselves to begin to see a new place, or to see an old place in a new way, we will sometimes find that our lessons come out wrong. It means we might find ourselves saying that 'London is the capital of Paris, and Paris is the capital of Rome'. And it means that we should not be in a hurry to reject what it is we have just received. Sometimes, what we think we know is actually what we are suffering from. Sometimes, what we think we know is what is holding us back and preventing us from having a new experience.

'We teach people how to remember', Oscar Wilde wrote in 'The Critic as Artist': 'we never teach them how to grow'. Real growth is, in part, an art of forgetting; it begins with learning to place to one side. And that is seldom easy: the desire for growth is in no way a simple idealization. It is an act of conscious risk-taking. Growth means something more agnostic than mere improvement. It means accepting that what is worth knowing may take us beyond the limits of our control. It means willingness to experience the world on someone else's terms.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

Ψ

*'All argument involves censorship'.*

*Rewrite this statement in the form of a question. Your question should be made up of no fewer than twelve words, and no more than fifty-two.*

\*

Art education is not so much a method as a mindset: it is a commitment to the idea that attentiveness is worth trying, because the people who make art, and the people who are affected by it, are worthy of our effort.

From *Art Appreciation in the Aftermath of Universities*, by Griffin Brownrigg

≥

They [*politicians*] never rise beyond the level of misrepresentation, and actually condescend to prove, to discuss, to argue. How different from the temper of the true liar, with his frank, fearless statements, his superb irresponsibility, his healthy, natural disdain of proof of any kind! After all, what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence. If a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might just as well speak the truth at once.

From 'The Decay of Lying', by Oscar Wilde

Ω

*Barnaby is poorly today. He is never unwell when the weather is good, however, so I am certain that his condition is not serious.*

*We have, after all, been promised a long summer.*





The sort of reading that I want to encourage is one that is committed more to the spirit of adventure than to upholding a particular set of findings. It is committed more to opportunities than to explanations, which is another way of saying that it is committed less to explanations than to nearly anything else.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.



I don't want to wrong anybody, so I won't go so far as to say that she actually wrote poetry, but her conversation, to my mind, was of a nature calculated to excite the liveliest suspicions. Well, I mean to say, when a girl suddenly asks you out of a blue sky if you don't sometimes feel that the stars are God's daisy-chain, you begin to think a bit.

From *Right Ho, Jeeves*, by P.G. Wodehouse

Δ

One does not become Education Secretary unless one has a tragic backstory...and also a bleak future.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



*As a personal favor to Barnaby, I agreed to attend a talk on the state of modern literature. I can't say I learned anything, but the keynote speaker was interesting to listen to: he sounded rather like a disciple of Derrida being processed by an up and at 'em sort of blender.*

\*

Amorality is less a judgement than an effect. The ambivalence of beauty towards suffering is part of beauty's inheritance from art.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by  
Hermione Digby

§

Freud accepted, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, that ‘all the material composing the content of a dream is somehow derived from experience, that it is reproduced or remembered in the dream’; but the most remarkable discoveries of dream study, he felt, had to do as much with the material of reproduction as the fact of reproduction itself: ‘The third, most remarkable, and at the same time most incomprehensible, peculiarity of memory in dreams is shown in the selection of the material reproduced; for here it is not, as in the waking state, only the most significant things that are held to be worth remembering, but also the most indifferent and insignificant details’.

The materials of dreams are better understood as artefacts, rather than symbols. Symbolism reduces dream work to mere equation; what memory actually does is release us into a world of imagination. In that sense, the analyst, like the critic, is also a creative writer.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

## Ω

Real conspiracies are not at all like the kinds of secret clubs that people belong to when they are in school. School secret clubs are really just student councils; they are made up of people who assume a haughty manner and have to be home in time for supper, just like everyone else. Their members say things like ‘Comrades to the barricades, or maybe we’ll just do coffee. Whatever people prefer’.

Real conspirators are not like student council members. They do not meet for coffee. They do not eat cake, nor do they sip from cans full of carbonated drink. Real conspirators are professionals. They keep quiet and they wait; they keep quiet and they wait until the moment is just right. Then they spring into action. They come out of the shadows. They come out and they shout: ‘Down with the tyrants. Treason, treason! Take them; hold them fast! Lock them in the dungeons; cast them away. Cut off their neckties. Bring us their heads!’.

*From Bullish Floors and Flaws Laid Bare: Why the Banks Were Torn At the Seams, by Sophia Barney*

A journey of a thousand words begins with –  
 well, panic really.  
 That fulsome roar of the old self-doubt.  
 Originating somewhere  
 in the middle regions of the small intestine  
 and rising to the lower trachea.  
 Lateral mandible.  
 Whatever that bit is called:  
 the one below the left ear and above  
 the...the...the  
 ephemeral artery.  
 The spiritual compass of *corpus ad humanim*, as it were.  
 A malignant condition. Totally incurable.  
 Demanding resignation –  
 of one kind or the other.  
 Can't go out, so must go on:  
 painfully.  
 Persistently.  
 Perspicaciously –  
 where possible.  
 No use reverting to the old gag, of course:  
 the 'mutability of all flesh' – and all that.  
 'From though art dust to art returnest'  
 is the placard pasted above HQ,  
 signifying – in deed, as in effect –  
 that the boss won't abide the slightest drop  
 of the poesy when it's solid column inches  
 that are in want of writing.  
 Reviews and or criticism  
 to put the case plainly before the public.  
 Arguments left and right justified,  
 with absolutely no margin for  
 error.  
 More of the black ink  
 with none of the purple prose.  
 'Waste not, want not'.  
 'It's the economy, stupid':



the *modus operatic*  
of the establishment being  
to state whether a show was good or bad –  
a sturdy staff sergeant, or a willowy  
*Ichabod Crane*.  
Deserving or not deserving a dollop  
of the paying customer's hard-earned dough.  
An immersive and monumental concerto in c-sharp,  
or a very flat chorus of carol-singing  
Methodists.  
Otherwise, Methodical.  
Have to come down on one side or the other.  
Hazard of the profession.  
Can't very well leave the reader hanging:  
was it Miss Scarlet in the library with the revolver,  
or Professor Plum in the confectionery with the –  
no, that's the other thing.  
Dia –  
dia –  
diatribe, that's the word;  
meaning: the fatal entanglement  
of two parties that could not be kept from one another.  
By space or by time.  
Also known as marriage:  
a ceremony consummated by the cutting of a cake,  
and by the hiding of all the knives.  
The happy linking of hands and harts.  
A hare today, and a hog tomorrow.  
One to the pot, the other to the hearth.  
Oftentimes, the reverse way round.  
Contentment and prosperity in all the days of our lives,  
as it were – which is what the public really wants to see:  
it being one of the more extraordinary kinds of fiction  
still available in this grim, 'dog to dine on dog' world.  
Of which we are all a part.  
*De Rigor Mortis*, as the condition of England should be called  
if spoken of in the Roman tongue.  
Which it isn't.  
Not anymore.  
For circulation is now the order of the day.  
Press; Press; Press.  
Press.  
Press.  
Press.  
Ever and on we must go, as it were.  
One bit done, and the next still to do.

No time to let 'I know not what wait upon I think so'.  
For ours is the finger on the pulse in the digital age.  
The probe always reaching out to touch  
against that silent, 'undiscovered country'  
that is the wellspring of all our culture.  
Tracing what may never be grasped fully in hand.  
And all the while, always to be worried  
by the prospect of our own termination.  
The long leap or the sharp boot.  
That final tug under the collar,  
that pitch into the void.  
The final indignity by which we will be brought,  
finally, to understand.  
The work that is our life-blood.  
It was 'ephemeral' after all...

'Criticism to the Sea', by Horatio Barnaby, M.A. Fellow of King's College,  
University of Worcester. Worcestershire.

≈

It may be that a book that deals political life in England must account for the monarch. On the other hand, it may be better to be rid of a character that does not seem to add anything by way of interesting material. Cromwell and his Roundheads certainly thought so, and from an artistic point of view, I cannot help but feel they may have been right.

From *Private Diaries and Collected Correspondences*, by  
Professor Sir Reginald Hastings

**I**

Half a league, half a league,  
 Half a league onward,  
 All in the valley of Death  
 Rode the six hundred.  
 ‘Forward, the Light Brigade!  
 Charge for the guns!’ he said:  
 Into the valley of Death  
 Rode the six hundred.

**II**

‘Forward, the Light Brigade!’  
 Was there a man dismay’d?  
 Not though the soldier knew  
 Some one had blunder’d:  
 Theirs not to make reply,  
 Theirs not to reason why,  
 Theirs but to do and die:  
 Into the valley of Death  
 Rode the six hundred.

**III**

Cannon to right of them,  
 Cannon to left of them,  
 Cannon in front of them  
 Volley’d and thunder’d;  
 Storm’d at with shot and shell,  
 Boldly they rode and well,  
 Into the jaws of Death,  
 Into the mouth of Hell  
 Rode the six hundred.

**IV**

Flash’d all their sabres bare,  
 Flash’d as they turned in air

Sabring the gunners there,  
Charging an army, while  
    All the world wonder'd:  
Plunged in the battery-smoke  
Right thro' the line they broke;  
Cossack and Russian  
Reel'd from the sabre-stroke  
    Shatter'd and sundered.  
Then they rode back, but not,  
    Not the six hundred.

#### V

Cannon to right of them,  
Cannon to left of them,  
Cannon behind them  
    Volley'd and thunder'd;  
Storm'd at with shot and shell,  
While horse and hero fell,  
They that had fought so well  
Came thro' the jaws of Death,  
Back from the mouth of Hell,  
All that was left of them,  
    Left of six hundred.

#### VI

When can their glory fade?  
O the wild charge they made!  
    All the world wonder'd.  
Honour the charge they made!  
Honour the Light Brigade,  
    Noble six hundred!

‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’, by Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

Ψ

*You are stranded on a deserted island and your supply of paper and ink is nearly exhausted. You can write only seven words. What message will you put in the bottle?*

*(Note: if you try to cheat by eliminating the spaces between words, your bottle will be found by an employee of the Royal Mail, with the result that it will never be delivered).*

\*

However much we may wish to think of ourselves as the sort of creatures who can, if properly tutored, withstand and even overcome our own irrational impulses, it may be that we can only ever be the daydreaming vassals of our DNA.

From *Do You Mind?: Literary Criticism and the Mental Map*, by Mungo Home

†

*A parson is very like a professor of letters; the difference is a matter of conviction: parsons make allowances while professors tend to make enemies. Professor Kimberley-Kent has not actually scoffed at a puppy or shouted 'fire' in a crowded building, but you wouldn't know it by the looks he gets whenever he walks by. He does not have the sympathy of the College on his side, and although we here at Worcester do not stoop to the sort of tactics by which the American West was won, Muller once declared his intention to write a scathing review of Professor Kimberley-Kent's most recent publication. What stopped him is the fact that Muller cannot write, and he does not read; but, as they say, it is the thought that counts.*





In 1907, aged just seven and three-quarters, the Home Secretary took his BSS in Snot Scooping from the University of Oxnose. A mere two years later, the Home Secretary was awarded a doctorate, the first ever to be given to a student in that particular field (until that time, doctorates had been given only to students who twirled the dials of microscopes; no one had ever imagined they might one day be given to students who twirled their nose-hairs). the Home Secretary was certainly worthy of the distinction. His name soon became a byword for good scientific practice. While others were content merely to admire and taste, the Home Secretary always made sure to note the size, shape, and sliminess of every sample. His unwavering attention to detail eventually led him to his first extraordinary breakthrough.

In 2010, he published a paper in which he revealed that the Green Comet actually has a seven value on the Mohs scale of mineral hardness. The whole scientific community had been stunned to hear this news. It had always been thought that the Green Comet had a value of only three. But the Home Secretary proved beyond all possibility of doubt that this was an error. What had been thought to be a Green Comet was actually the much softer Yellow Dragon (the Home Secretary, ever the gentleman, acknowledges that the two are easily confused). Immediately, the awards began to pour in. the Home Secretary was made a fellow of the Royal Society, and Chairman of the Horticulturalist Club of Hertfordshire. His name was even mentioned in connection with the Nobel Prize, though no one could quite decide whether his

discovery should be rewarded under the Peace, Chemistry, or Literature category.

Today, the Home Secretary famous Green Comet is on display in the British Museum, along with several other samples collected during the course of his career. We are sorry to say, however, that his work has not escaped controversy. Although beloved by millions, Britain has been and continues to be a nation ill at ease with success, and a wave that carries a person to great heights is sure to bring him crashing down upon the rocks before too long.

Over the years, there have been calls for his work to be removed from public display. the Home Secretary's critics claim that they do not mind that he is a collector; everyone, they acknowledge is entitled to have a hobby. It is alleged, however, that the Home Secretary is sometimes very careless with his collection: 'A bit of it', they say, 'comes off every time he touches something'. They also claim to 'shudder when we think of all the bits and pieces of Britain that that blasted the Home Secretary has turned into displays for his numerous nose items'. We are happy to report that each and every one of these critics has been exposed as a cheat and a liar and a charlatan, and the Home Secretary has emerged from each and every one of these controversies without any stain on his character. All the same, this negative attention could not fail to have an impact upon a man who has given his whole life to his work, and who knows perfectly well that his methods are beyond reproach. It would be too strong to say that the Home Secretary has grown disillusioned with this counterfactual age we now find ourselves in, but it is undeniable that the pace of his work has slackened in recent years. He remains the most dedicated of snot scoopers, but he has added to that passions for face painting, palmistry, and book flicking-through (otherwise known as 'reading', an activity which should not be confused with 'staring off into space, thinking about cheese' which is a common activity in classrooms up and down the country).

From *That Confounded Cabinet*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings

≤

The only way to experience art is to feel it. To experience art in relation to some specialist interest or private concern is to not experience it at all. It is not the object of art to tell the truth about society. It is not the object of art to tell the truth about life. For too long, we have tried to be objective; we have succeeded only in growing tired. For too long, we have tried to diagnose art; we have succeeded only in writing a lot of very bad poetry.

From *Alone on the Wild Moors: How Literary Criticism Lost Its Way*, by Vivienne Everleigh



‘Fair son, I want to give you some advice that you would do very well to heed; and if it pleases you to remember it, great profit can come to you. Before long you’ll be a knight, son, so I believe, if it is God’s will. Should you encounter, near or far, a lady in need of aid, or a maiden in distress, make yourself ready to assist them if they ask for your help, for it is the most honourable thing to do. He who fails to honour ladies finds his own honour dead inside him. Serve ladies and maidens and you will be honoured everywhere. And if you ask any for her love, be careful not to annoy her by doing anything to displease her. He who kisses a maiden gains much; but if she grants you a kiss, I forbid you to go any further, if you’ll refrain for my sake. But if she has a ring on her finger or an alms purse on her belt, and if she gives it to you for love or at your request, I’ll not object to you wearing her ring. I give you leave to take the ring and the alms purse.

‘Fair son, I have something more to tell you: never keep company with anyone for very long, whether at an inn or on the road, without asking his name, Learn his name in full, for by the name one knows the man. Fair son, speak to gentlemen, keep company with gentlemen: gentlemen never lead astray those who keep their company. Above all I want to beg you to pray to our Lord in chapel and church to give you honour in this world and grant that your deeds may ensure that you come to a good end’.

‘Mother, what is a “chapel”?’

From ‘The Story of the Grail (Perceval)’, by Chrétien de Troyes

## II

*Word has reached us Professor Kimberley-Kent would like to see us in his office.*

*I looked at Barnaby; Barnaby looked at me.*

*'Volo non fugia', as Doctor Faustus should have said; 'Whither shall we fly?'*

\*

The Royal Postman was glad to be in the Sage and Thyme. The Sage and Thyme served an excellent roast dinner. He was also glad to be part of a revolution. The Royal Postman did not know a great deal about politics, but he was always happy to see his friends. But the Royal Postman's friends were not quite so happy to see him.

'It is very unfair to have to plan a revolution if people will insist upon playing practical jokes' said Gunther of Grover Regis when he saw the Royal Postman walk in. 'A revolution cannot work where there are too many surprises.

'What Gunther means' said Terrence the Much-Traveled 'is that we are very happy to see you; only, we wish you would go away'.

From *King Wilfred the Wise, and Why He Wasn't: A Fairytale*, by Clementine Blythe



Reading, like listening, is, among other things, a test of what, and how much, we are able to endure. And the test of all expertise is resilience. True knowledge is not rationality above everything else; nor is it principally a body of insight about our emotions. It is that which is able to endure the violence of our passions, the waywardness of our private (and indeed, professional) predilections.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

§

The best way to kill art is to say that it is about something. The best way to stop people appreciating art is to treat it as a set of proofs. If artistic value can be expressed in terms of lessons, then art is not worthy of individual effort. If it is the function of art to communicate truth, then art may seem to be too important to be entrusted to individual experience. It is dull orthodoxy to declare that it is the duty of art to shine a light. Truly poetical people know that light belongs to an oncoming train as much as to a lantern. Thoroughly practical people know it too.

From *Art Appreciation in the Aftermath of Universities*, by Griffin Brownrigg



Ψ

*'This shopping mall may contain alligators'.*

*Identify the key word(s) in this statement.*

≥

KELLY: (Staggering slightly) Half eleven and all's well! Cripes, I'm piss-eyed. Where's me keys? Keys, keys. In me pocket. Fair enough. Proceed to place bags on ground. Beware of bottles. Then extract keys. No, no. No. No – hold bags with both. No, won't do. Jaysus, what a predicament.

From *The Death and Resurrection of Mr Roche*, by Thomas Kilroy



*Pickering, who is an admirer of Mr. Ruskin has volunteered his services as an artist and illustrator. I think, however, that Professor Kimberley-Kent will not object to the purchase of a painting from one of our local galleries. Pickering's enthusiasm is undeniable. His output, however, is so prodigious and uniform that one cannot help wondering whether it is actually art. Professor Kimberley-Kent, whom, I am sorry to say, possesses a merely prosaic mind, objects to Pickering's work on account of its subject matter. He says that there are some things a boy would do well not to draw on a College desk. Pickering, who has imbibed the revolutionary spirit of his hero, is unlikely to take this disappointment sitting down.*

†

In the preface to *The Annotated Alice*, Martin Gardner wrote: ‘The last level of metaphor in the Alice books is this: that life, viewed rationally and without illusion, appears to be a nonsense tale told by an idiot mathematician. At the heart of things science finds only a mad, never-ending quadrille of Mock Turtle Waves and Gryphon Particles.’

He might have added: ‘that cannot, ultimately, give us the answers or experiences we most desire’, only that is a lesson that we must discover for ourselves.

From *Artists Are from Mars, Scientists Are from Wonderland*, by  
Bertram Winterbourne

He thought he saw an Elephant,  
That practiced on a fife:  
He looked again, and found it was  
A letter from his wife.  
'At length I realize,' he said,  
The bitterness of Life!

He thought he saw a Buffalo  
Upon the chimney-piece;  
He looked again, and found it was  
His Sister's Husband's Niece.  
'Unless you leave this house,' he said,  
'I'll send for the Police!'

He thought he saw a Rattlesnake  
That questioned him in Greek:  
He looked again, and found it was  
The Middle of Next Week.  
'The one thing I regret,' he said,  
'Is that it cannot speak!'

He thought he saw a Banker's Clerk  
Descending from the 'bus:  
He looked again, and found it was  
A Hippopotamus.

‘If this should stay to dine,’ he said,  
‘There won’t be much for us!’

He thought he saw a Kangaroo  
That worked a coffee-mill:  
He looked again, and found it was  
A Vegetable-Pill.

‘Were I to swallow this,’ he said,  
‘I should be very ill!’

He thought he saw a Coach-and-Four  
That stood beside his bed:  
He looked again, and found it was  
A Bear without a Head.

‘Poor thing,’ he said, ‘poor silly thing!  
It’s waiting to be fed!’

He thought he saw an Albatross  
That fluttered round the lamp:  
He looked again, and found it was  
A Penny-Postage-Stamp.

‘You’d best be getting home,’ he said:  
‘The nights are very damp!’

He thought he saw a Garden-Door  
That opened with a key:  
He looked again, and found it was  
A Double Rule of Three:

‘And all its mystery,’ he said,  
‘Is clear as day to me!’

He thought he saw an Argument  
That proved he was the Pope:  
He looked again, and found it was  
A Bar of Mottled Soap.  
‘A fact so dread,’ he faintly said,  
‘Extinguishes all hope!’

From ‘The Mad Gardener’s Song’, by Lewis Carroll

Ω

The Prime Minister tried, for many years, to be wise; by the time he was very old, he had very nearly become intelligent. The longer he studied the country, the more he realized that nothing about it made a great deal of sense. As a young man, he had believed that life was rather like a story; now, he was not at all sure that everything really did happen for a reason.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings





Art is not an aspect of deity. Art appreciation is not akin to godliness.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by  
Hermione Digby

Δ

The lesson of *Oedipus* is that that none of us is as clever as we think we are. Like Oedipus, what we sometimes suffer from is not blindness, but myopia.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

\*

It is dull orthodoxy to declare that it is the duty of art to shine a light. Truly poetical people know that light belongs to an oncoming train as much as to a lantern. Thoroughly practical people know it too.

From 'Trains of Thought', by Mungo Carlton

\*

*On his feet, he wore a pair of polka-dotted socks and black Oxfords. I was sure the man must be an escaped lunatic, but Barnaby assured me that he was merely multidisciplinary. He added that the fellow's name was Langston, and he had come to give a talk entitled 'Hermeneutics and the Haphazard Appropriation of Heroes: From Hamlet to Humpty Dumpty'.*

*We did not stay to hear it.*

## Ω

The house at 43 Cheltenham Road was a detached sort of residence. It never took the welfare and wishes of its residents into account. It fell down regularly, and often. There were other problems too: on Thursdays, it allowed faulty pipes to flood the study. On Wednesdays and every second Friday, it allowed the roof to be lifted off and taken away, sometimes as far as Staffordshire. More than once, Mr. and Mrs. 43 Cheltenham Road have woken in the morning to discover that an entire room, eager to travel and see what the world has to offer, had simply detached itself from the main structure and slipped away sometime during the night.

‘We are not so much losing a room as gaining a bit more garden’ Mrs. 43 Cheltenham Road would say, philosophically.

From *Private Diaries and Collected Correspondences*, by  
Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



‘What’s the matter, Wegg?’

‘Why, it comes into my mind, do you know, sir,’ said Wegg with an air of insinuating frankness (having first again looked hard at the book), ‘that you made a little mistake this morning, which I had meant to set you right in, only something put it out of my head. I think you said Rooshan Empire, sir?’

‘It is Rooshan; ain’t it, Wegg?’

‘No, sir. Roman. Roman.’

‘What’s the difference, Wegg?’

‘The difference, sir?’ Mr Wegg was faltering and in danger of breaking down, when a bright thought flashed upon him. ‘The difference, sir? There you place me in a difficulty, Mr Boffin. Suffice it to observe, that the difference is best postponed to some other occasion when Mrs Boffin does not honour us with her company. In Mrs Boffin’s presence, sir, we had better drop it.’

Mr Wegg thus came out of his disadvantage with quite a chivalrous air, and not only that, but by dint of repeating with a manly delicacy, ‘In Mrs Boffin’s presence, sir, we had better drop it!’ turned the disadvantage on Boffin, who felt that he had committed himself in a very painful manner.

From *Our Mutual Friend*, by Charles Dickens

\*

Reason, far from being an alternative to impulse and credulity may be something much closer to a genteel co-conspirator. Under the guise of telling us the truth, it shows us what belief is able to endure (or is willing to accept); beneath the fine cloth and bright buttons, it reveals something of our anxiety about the uncertainty we are trying to escape.

From *Do You Mind?: Literary Criticism and the Mental Map*, by Mungo Home

Ψ

*'Putting yourself before others is not always selfish. It is sometimes even commendable, as when the company is in the presence of an angry bear'.*

*Details not infrequently make all the difference. Choose a well-known proverb. What details, if added, might cause us to regard it differently?*



The incident had caused some embarrassment for the government and must not be allowed to happen again. The Prime Minister urged the Home Secretary to remember that Belgium was an important ally, and must, therefore, be treated with respect. It would not do, he had explained, to send Her representatives to a place like Cardiff, unaccompanied.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



The tragedy of literary studies is that it is not really alive. The tragedy of literary studies is that it has to be interested in the world because it cannot be interested in a rock. It has to be interested in convoluted theories and extensive bibliographies because it cannot muster any interest in books. A hundred papers declare that *Wuthering Heights* is important. A hundred papers sheepishly admit that *Wuthering Heights* is not enough.

From *Alone on the Wild Moors: How Literary Criticism Lost Its Way*, by Vivienne Everleigh

≤

The Lord Henry of *Dorian Gray* knows it is possible to be happy, even in a fallen world, just as it is possible to be sad in an idyllic world. Whether one is happy or sad is often simply a matter of emphasis. Lord Henry acknowledges original sin as a matter of form. He does not accept it must be a tragic form. He remarks to Mr. Erskine: ‘Humanity takes itself too seriously. It is the world’s original sin. If the caveman had known how to laugh, history would have been different’.

From *Through a Country Wilde: The Artistic Landscape of Oscar Wilde*, by Charlotte Cornish

\*

*The collective noun for a group of children is, as any parent or teacher will tell you, a 'curiosity'.*

§

Parents are some of the most helpless creatures ever to be equipped with a set of bones and a bit of brain for day to day use. They are constantly running risks and stumbling into dangerous situations. They dive under boulders and they casually attach themselves to passing rockets, little thinking what the upshot might be. They go snorkeling around in active volcanoes, and they cannot approach any cliff without first making sure that their shoes are untied. Sometimes, just for a bit of variety, parents go and get themselves eaten up by exotic, or overlarge beasts.

This last is an outcome that children are very eager to avoid, for children are naturally fond of their parents, and they do not wish to see Mother and Father turned into the centerpiece of another creature's hearty breakfast. It is a very trying thing to be related by birth to the human equivalent of a serving of beans, and a stack of toast. One makes an effort to be dutiful and affectionate, of course, but sentiments stronger than mere politeness are not easy to maintain once it has been shown that a parent may be served on a plate, and with a side of butter.

Love is nurtured and improved by good communication, and it is not a very easy thing to keep in touch with people once they have been gobbled. Phone and internet service providers do not guarantee coverage beyond the esophagus. Traditional forms of communication are not much better. The men and women of the Royal Mail are dedicated to their work, but even they must draw a line somewhere. They draw it below Lancashire and above the small intestines. The Royal Mail is not unsympathetic to difficult family circumstances; still, the fact remains: its team of carriers does not deliver letters addressed to 'Mum and Dad, in the Belly of the Asthmatic Antelope. Cumbria'.

From *King Wilfred the Wise, and Why He Wasn't: A Fairytale*, by  
Clementine Blythe

\*

We are never quite masters of our own experience, and never less than when to be heard is what we most urgently require. A sense of certainty about what we are experiencing can be a dangerous self-deception. There is, in other words, something undeniably tragic about Oedipus' discovery that he is wedded to his mother; there is, however, something quite comical about it too. Both aspects are present in the play and serve to remind us that however well-traveled we may be, we are never quite so far from home as we might think.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

†

An opinion is not an entitlement, it is an expression of the self. To express an opinion is to satisfy an obligation, both to ourselves and to our fellows. The opposite of withholding an opinion is not 'sticking to the facts', it is a stupid and dangerous denial of the very fact of the individual. Opinions do not lose significance because everyone can have one; they are significant precisely because everyone does have one. They are the one form of common currency that allows everyone to participate in the valuation.

From *Art Appreciation in the Aftermath of Universities*, by Griffin Brownrigg

Ψ

*'The drowning man may clutch at a straw, but he is better advised to reach for the lifebuoy'.*

*Explain.*





LORD GORING

My father told me to go to bed an hour ago. I don't see why I shouldn't give you the same advice. I always pass on good advice. It is the only thing to do with it. It is never of any use to oneself.

From *An Ideal Husband*, by Oscar Wilde.



*My parents (Mother and Father, I mean) were always on the lookout for opportunities to nurture and encourage intellectual curiosity in their children. True, they placed a blanket prohibition on any activity that might have caused the living room to go up in smoke. And they did not actually think it advisable to allow the fondue pot to be converted into a home for the neighborhood's amphibians. But other than these residual strains of conservatism, our home was, more or less, a shining example of the best of Enlightenment thought.*

≈

Like the knight Perceval, we are always on the road to discovering that what we think we know can only take us so far, and never quite so far as we would like, that what we call ‘expertise’ is also an illusion of competence that has been stretched beyond its limit. It isn’t that nothing is really true, it is just that nothing is quite as true as we want it to be, isn’t quite as true as we feel we need it to be, that at its best, experience is partly the fact of encountering our own ignorance without being overwhelmed by it. It is the fact of facing new things coupled with the realization that assimilation is not always what is required. Sometimes, it is okay to feel that the story we have been telling ourselves doesn’t seem to make very much sense. Sometimes, what we call the good life is partly an effect of being a very poor artist.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

## II

‘Newts, Jeeves. Mr. Fink-Nottle has a strong newt complex. You must have heard of newts. Those little sort of lizard things that charge about in ponds.’

‘Oh, yes, sir. The aquatic members of the family Salamandridae which constitute the genus Molge.’

‘That's right. Well, Gussie has always been a slave to them. He used to keep them at school.’

‘I believe young gentlemen frequently do, sir.’

‘He kept them in his study in a kind of glass-tank arrangement, and pretty nifty the whole thing was, I recall. I suppose one ought to have been able to see what the end would be even then, but you know what boys are. Careless, heedless, busy about our own affairs, we scarcely gave this kink in Gussie's character a thought. We may have exchanged an occasional remark about it taking all sorts to make a world, but nothing more. You can guess the sequel. The trouble spread.’

‘Indeed, sir?’

‘Absolutely, Jeeves. The craving grew upon him. The newts got him. Arrived at man's estate, he retired to the depths of the country and gave his life up to these dumb chums. I suppose he used to tell himself that he could take them or leave them alone, and then found--too late--that he couldn't.’

‘It is often the way, sir.’

‘Too true, Jeeves. At any rate, for the last five years he has been living at this place of his down in Lincolnshire, as confirmed a species-shunning hermit as ever put fresh water in the tank every second day and refused to see a soul. That's why I was so amazed when you told me he had suddenly risen to the surface like this. I still can't believe it. I am inclined to think that there must be some mistake, and that this bird who has been calling here is some different variety of Fink-Nottle.’

## Ω

The Prime Minister shuddered. It was bad enough to have to listen to the Leader of the Opposition say ‘My Honorable Friends’. He did not think he would be able to bear it if the Leader of the Opposition were to say it with a smile on his face. The Leader of the Opposition was one of those people who always looked smug when he smiled. It was one of the reasons he had no friends. The Prime Minister resolved that if the Leader of the Opposition ever smiled in the House of Commons, he would let the Minister for Defense have the war he so desperately wanted. He knew the Minister for Defense would not care that it was a civil war.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor  
Sir Reginald Hastings

\*

*Floods, I readily accept, are impressive in their own way, but there is no denying that in the county of Cornwall they are about as familiar to the landscape as a fiber-filled perambulating pooch. No sooner do you turn your head than another one is dropping in, leaving in its wake a number of things that it is unpleasant for a homeowner to have to clean up.*

≤

The great freedom that literature affords is that it does not matter.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by  
Hermione Digby



If we cannot quite bring ourselves to believe that the *Oedipus* play might have been a comedy rather than a tragedy, it is at least possible to believe that it did not have to be as tragic as it was. What we come to experience as the fundamental sorrow of the drama is not a sorrow of conflicting, conflictual forms of gratification, of a man who found a guilty sort of affection where the innocence of the child had been denied. The tragedy of Oedipus is, it seems to me, principally a tragedy of interpretation: it is a tragedy brought about by his having only one way of looking at the world. It is the revenge of the riddle upon the man who believes that to master word play is to master mystery itself. It is the exaggerated acting out of a fool's confession. In Oedipus' account of his own life, Wordsworth's line 'The Child is father of the Man' is transformed into a kind of demon shadow that Oedipus will not allow himself to consider escaping. He is overawed by his own interpretation, and so he comes to be dominated by it. He mistakes an idea for the entire truth. Like so many serious-minded people, Oedipus swims in the shallows of his own discoveries, and mistakes them for an ocean. He is an explorer who comes to drown in his own bath.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.





When Diogenes went about with a lantern looking for an honest man, I am afraid he had very little time to be honest himself. And when anybody goes about on his hands and knees looking for a great man to worship, he is making sure that one man at any rate shall not be great. Now, the error of Diogenes is evident. The error of Diogenes lay in the fact that he omitted to notice that every man is both an honest man and a dishonest man. Diogenes looked for his honest man inside every crypt and cavern; but he never thought of looking inside the thief. And that is where the Founder of Christianity found the honest man; He found him on a gibbet and promised him Paradise. Just as Christianity looked for the honest man inside the thief, democracy looked for the wise man inside the fool. It encouraged the fool to be wise. We can call this thing sometimes optimism, sometimes equality; the nearest name for it is encouragement.

From *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, by G.K. Chesterton

☐

*Tea: a kind of refreshment; taken when one is out of spirits.*

£

The Minister for the Interior had no sooner finished writing when he heard a knock upon the door. He bid the knocker enter. A man opened the door and stepped inside the office. It was the Foreign Secretary. The Minister for the Interior asked if he would take a chair. The Foreign Secretary said he would. He added that he could not guarantee that he would give it back. They both chuckled. It was all a part of the routine. The Foreign Secretary never entered a room without making some joke related to the local furniture. The ‘suggestion of theft’ joke was his favorite. The Minister for the Interior had heard it no fewer than a hundred times. Repetition had not improved it.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor  
Sir Reginald Hastings

≈

‘You mocking changeling – fairy-born and human-bred!  
You make me feel as I have not felt these twelve months. If  
Saul could have had you for his David, the evil spirit would  
have been exorcised without the aid of the harp.’

From *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë



The difference between what we want knowledge for and what knowledge is able to provide means that we are forever turning knowledge into a trap for catching ourselves unawares. Like Chrétien de Troyes' Perceval, we are always on the road to discovering that our lessons are also (partly) the things that are about to get us into trouble. Like that hapless knight, we are constantly on the verge of discovering that wisdom is invariably a belated sort of gift, and one that comes to us from a land that is both a place of experience, and also a world of make-believe.

From *Do You Mind?: Literary Criticism and the Mental Map*, by  
Mungo Home

Ψ

*Choose one extract from any work of fiction. Rewrite the extract as an article for a newspaper. The information in your article should be factually correct, and free of supposition. You may report what was said, by whom, and under what circumstances, but if one character says that his companion 'looks like a sunburnt crocodile and smells like an aged sandshoe', your article must not give readers the impression that the description itself is a matter of fact. Crocodiles are not susceptible to sunburn.*

\*

*Mrs. Next Door feels she has a pleasing, soprano voice. Mrs. Braintree is sure that if Mrs. Next Door should ever decide to sing 'The Star-Spangled Banner', a war with the United States of America will be the inevitable upshot.*

*Peace, it seems, is a precarious thing, and we must, like the lonely traveler, 'beware the fearful caterwaul'.*

§

The Prime Minister sighed. He was really very tired of the Home Secretary. He did not like the way the Home Secretary was always bickering with the other members of Her Majesty's Government. He made a note to put the Tower question to the Queen when next he saw her. The Prime Minister wrote all his important notes on the palm of his hand. The Culture Secretary told everyone it was because the Prime Minister was keen to connect with the younger generations. The Home Secretary said it was because the Prime Minister was a simpleton who could not keep track of his notepads. Both were probably correct.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor  
Sir Reginald Hastings



I sat for awhile, frozen with horror; and then, in the listlessness of despair, I again turned over the pages. I came to typhoid fever — read the symptoms — discovered that I had typhoid fever, must have had it for months without knowing it — wondered what else I had got; turned up St. Vitus's Dance — found, as I expected, that I had that too, — began to get interested in my case, and determined to sift it to the bottom, and so started alphabetically — read up ague, and learnt that I was sickening for it, and that the acute stage would commence in about another fortnight. Bright's disease, I was relieved to find, I had only in a modified form, and, so far as that was concerned, I might live for years. Cholera I had, with severe complications; and diphtheria I seemed to have been born with. I plodded conscientiously through the twenty-six letters, and the only malady I could conclude I had not got was housemaid's knee.

I felt rather hurt about this at first; it seemed somehow to be a sort of slight. Why hadn't I got housemaid's knee? Why this invidious reservation? After a while, however, less grasping feelings prevailed. I reflected that I had every other known malady in the pharmacology, and I grew less selfish, and determined to do without housemaid's knee. Gout, in its most malignant stage, it would appear, had seized me without my being aware of it; and zymosis I had evidently been suffering with from boyhood. There were no more diseases after zymosis, so I concluded there was nothing else the matter with me.

From *Three Men in a Boat*, by Jerome K. Jerome

## Ω

It is a matter of artistic form and not a failure of morals that causes Dorian Gray to come to a bitter end. In the novel, Dorian is given a book. Dorian describes it as a ‘poisonous book’. The book itself, however, is not dangerous; Dorian makes it dangerous by trying to put it to use. It is a work of art, but Dorian mistakes it for a manual. He does with it precisely what a reader should not do with a work of art. ‘All art is quite useless’ is therefore a warning to the reader: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not to be treated as a guidebook to the good life. But neither is it a thing to be feared. The novel itself, as Lord Henry says, ‘is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame. That is all’.

From *Through a Country Wilde: The Artistic Landscape of Oscar Wilde*, by Charlotte Cornish



*Whitby wears large woolen sweaters and looks like a cauliflower. I think he might have made the cover of *The English Countryside*, and *Other Rot*, only he decided to go in for medievalism. He has since discovered that it is a dead field, and sometimes, I think thoughts about what might have been weigh heavily on his mind. Still, he is far from being a bad sort.*

≥

‘You know’ said the footrest, who must have been listening, ‘for a boy who complains that he never has any adventures, it is a wonder that you can brush your teeth in the morning without hurting yourself’.

The Prince did not think it was very appropriate for items of castle furniture to make personal remarks about members of the Royal Family, but he was too excited to mind very much.

From *King Wilfred the Wise, and Why He Wasn't: A Fairytale*, by Clementine Blythe



Self-mutilation, in one sense – in the symbolic sense – is a corrective: the breaking up of the self (or some part of the self) is a renunciation of the overbearing model of ourselves that we can only fail to live up to. As readers, we are left to wonder what the Oedipal story might have been like if Oedipus had not been quite so sure who and what the play was about. As critics, we are left to wonder whether Oedipus was more like a semi-literate author or merely a dangerously proficient editor of his experience.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

\*

Reading demands that we make use of what is actually in front of us. It allows us to see what is particular and individual about the experience we are invited to have in *this* book, that we cannot have in any other. Reading in this way helps us to overcome our natural tendency to learn by types and by shortcuts. It reminds us – and it is so easy to forget – that no work is exactly like any other. Every piece of writing is a unique work of art. *The Old Curiosity Shop* is *King Lear* retold, but as anyone who has read both will know, the comparison is of superficial things, only: the things that we cherish about each are the things that we cannot find in the other.

From *Art Appreciation in the Aftermath of Universities*, by Griffin Brownrigg

≈

Oscar Wilde wrote brilliant comedies full of light witticisms. The Scottish playwright Andrew Burgess wrote poor comedies full of deep philosophy. Wilde's comedies work because his cucumber sandwiches are as heavy as cucumber sandwiches. Burgess' comedies do not work because his wardrobe is as light as a feather, and functions like a hotel lobby. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is funny because the cucumber sandwiches behave like sandwiches and the characters behave like sprites and spirits. *The Closet, Contrarian* is not funny because the wardrobe does not behave like a wardrobe and the characters only ricochet.

From *Sentries of the Stage: a Review of Theater Criticism From Ancient Times to the Present*, by Horace Budd

□

*The cycles of history are invariably uniform. Every civilization begins badly and ends bawdy.*



\*

Everyone feels a little sad sometimes. That is nothing to be ashamed about. Sadness is simply a fact of life. It is one of the emotions that helps to make us who we are. It is as natural as happiness and as powerful as love. We cannot always stop ourselves feeling sad, just as we cannot stand on the shore and command the tide not to come in. Whatever we say, the water will rush over our feet, just as sad feelings will sometimes rush over our heart. The fact that we struggle means that we are alive and in the world. It does not mean that we are weak.

From *With Wetted Feet*, by Eloise Marleigh



The Bellman himself they all praised to the skies--  
Such a carriage, such ease and such grace!  
Such solemnity, too! One could see he was wise,  
The moment one looked in his face!

He had bought a large map representing the sea,  
Without the least vestige of land:  
And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be  
A map they could all understand.

‘What’s the good of Mercator’s North Poles and Equators,  
Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?’  
So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply  
“They are merely conventional signs!

‘Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!  
But we’ve got our brave Captain to thank:  
(So the crew would protest) “that he’s bought us the best--  
A perfect and absolute blank!’

This was charming, no doubt; but they shortly found out  
That the Captain they trusted so well  
Had only one notion for crossing the ocean,

And that was to tingle his bell.

He was thoughtful and grave--but the orders he gave  
Were enough to bewilder a crew.  
When he cried 'Steer to starboard, but keep her head larboard!'  
What on earth was the helmsman to do?

Then the bowsprit got mixed with the rudder sometimes:  
A thing, as the Bellman remarked,  
That frequently happens in tropical climes,  
When a vessel is, so to speak, 'snarked.'

But the principal failing occurred in the sailing,  
And the Bellman, perplexed and distressed,  
Said he had hoped, at least, when the wind blew due East,  
That the ship would not travel due West!

From 'Fit the Second: The Bellman's Speech', in *The Hunting of the Snark*, by  
Lewis Carroll

≤

The Home Secretary enjoyed his little jokes. The other Members of the House of Commons enjoyed his jokes too. They all said what a funny man the Home Secretary was. None of them was his friend. Like the Leader of the Opposition, the Home Secretary did not have any friends.

The Home Secretary did not mind this; the Home Secretary did not want any friends. 'A friend', as the Home Secretary understood the word, meant someone whom he would have to occasionally invite to tea. The Home Secretary did not want to share his tea with anyone, nor did he want to listen to what anyone else had to say. The Home Secretary was quite sure that he was the only really interesting person in all the world. The Home Secretary could talk about himself for hours. It did not matter if the other Members happened to be called away from the Chamber while he was speaking. It did not matter if anyone was present to listen to him. The Home Secretary would go on speaking, regardless.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings

Ψ

*Write any twelve words on a piece of paper. Then, write a review of a book you like. Your review should be no longer than half a page in length, and must include your twelve words. These must be integrated, and in such a way that the quality of the review will not be brought into question.*

*'The passion of Catherine Earnshaw in Wuthering Heights is wilder and more powerful, even, than that of a holidaymaker who has missed his flight and eaten a bowl of dodgy couscous in the airport lounge', for example, is an acceptable use of the word 'couscous'; 'Wuthering Heights is a novel about the dangers of couscous' is not.*



*Whitby says that Bolsheviks are not like venture capitalists; what he meant is that they do not gambol.*

£

Good art has to be felt; it cannot be adequately described.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by  
Hermione Digby



Experiments with and questions about authority are one of the ways we learn to make sense of our appetites. If we not infrequently resent demands that are made of us (the authority of others), it is also true that we sometimes seem to revel in our status as object. We find fulfillment in a power that looks very much like powerlessness. When we are not being denied more than we can endure, we seem to be fascinated by the sorts of checks or limits that might be place on our desires. In *Jane Eyre* as in the story of Beauty and the Beast, the drama turns on the recognition that what seems to be weakness is really strength in disguise: the seemingly submissive heroine is really the driving, dominating force in the story.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.



Ω

History has no future. It feels the weight of no moral obligation. Like good art, good history is filled with silences.

From 'The Corpse of Criticism: The Death of Historicism, and Why It Won't Be Missed', by Prudence B. Wayfair

All...  
 ‘All the world’s a page’,  
 though ‘Once more unto the breeches’  
 seems an extraordinarily passé way of talking about...  
 well –  
 well, you know.  
 So, I don’t tend to go in much  
 for the theatre these days.  
 Not if I can avoid it.  
 Prefer a quiet night at home:  
 a bit of tea.  
 Buttered crumpet.  
 A quick flick through Madame De Beautemp’s  
 latest literary offering.  
 Usually something involving an old haberdasher  
 who dreams of higher things.  
 Including, but not limited to:  
 a new bonnet for to wear during the day.  
 Short fiddle on the roof in the evening.  
 A life spent in good company.  
 And just a little left over for to enjoy at the end of the week.  
 That kind of a thing.  
 But occasionally,  
 certain obligations *will* obtrude on my private time.  
 Last week, for example,  
 I received an invitation to attend a performance  
 by the local dramatics club.  
*Krapp’s Last Tape*, the thing was called.  
 Written by a fellow named Beckett.  
 Irish. Nominally.  
 Otherwise: aesthetically. Cognitively. Nationally.  
*Naturally.*

Or so it's been said.  
Can't say I was following the thread at all closely.  
Far too many pauses and periods.  
Tedious waffling, not to mention a strong whiff of elitism, if you ask me.  
'If you prick us do we not bleed?'  
A question susceptible to more than one answer –  
certain factors needing to be taken into account.  
Point was that he had written a kind of play –  
and I wasn't terribly keen to see it.  
Wanted to decline, but completely out of the question in this case.  
Invitation had come from my neighbor, Eileen.  
Occasionally a pleasant sort of person.  
Wears flower-patterned dresses.  
Plays bridge on Thursdays.  
Competent in the handling of her suits.  
An excellent partner.  
Firm.  
Not a woman to be crossed or denied.  
Has the steadiness of purpose of a German Panzer division  
hastening to a fall.  
Into a fall. Through a fall?  
Needn't bore you with extraneous details.  
Won't.  
Suffice it to say, she invited me, and I –  
went.  
Determined to pretend to enjoy myself.  
At the very least. As one does.  
Turned out that Eileen's friend  
was appearing in the role of the principal character.  
'An effervescent gentleman', as Eileen describes him.  
Acute sufferer:  
Adult Attention Deficit Disorder, is my own opinion.  
But I held my tongue and we took our seats.  
Stage was arranged in the manner of a bachelor's study.  
Lots of drawers about.  
Answering to the shape of a desk:  
Pine.  
An aspect of sadness pervades.  
Krapp seated.  
Gestures.  
My view obstructed.  
Friend's speech inflected with melancholy.  
Formerly beamish in his old age, now a hapless drinker in his youth:  
the story told the right way round.  
To wit, a surfeit of youth inducing –  
stagnation.

Mental. Spiritual. Digestive.  
Likewise, the case with bananas.  
'Ripeness is all'. As they say.  
The Krapp character is rather more circumscribed:  
an asthmatic dreamer and has been an inadequate lover,  
as a result of which, he can make no meaningful distinction  
between a dog's ball and a lady's –  
but then again, I suppose it just goes to show  
we are not all of us insensitive to the inconveniences of being...  
chased.  
From one place to another, that is to say.  
Left as soon as I was able  
and am disinclined to revisit the theatre in future.  
Invitations from Eileen notwithstanding.

'Criticism Undone', by Horatio Barnaby, M.A. Fellow of King's College,  
University of Worcester. Worcestershire.

## II

The Chancellor thought the Home Secretary had appalling table manners. It was an open secret among members of Her Majesty's government that a very important policy had failed to achieve support because the Head of MI5 was so disgusted by the Home Secretary's method of dispensing turkey. It was the professional opinion of the Head of MI5 that the security services could not trust a Home Secretary with the nation's secrets if the Home Secretary could not be trusted with a carving knife. For that reason, the Head of MI5 decided one day to slip quietly away and give the nation's secrets to somebody else.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings

Ψ

*'A house divided against itself is known as a "row-house'.*

*Why is this? Write three paragraphs on the subject of warring neighbors.*



‘Amy,’ said Mr Dorrit, ‘you have just now been the subject of some conversation between myself and Mrs General. We agree that you scarcely seem at home here. Ha — how is this?’

A pause.

‘I think, father, I require a little time.’

‘Papa is a preferable mode of address,’ observed Mrs General. ‘Father is rather vulgar, my dear. The word Papa, besides, gives a pretty form to the lips. Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes, and prism are all very good words for the lips: especially prunes and prism. You will find it serviceable, in the formation of a demeanour, if you sometimes say to yourself in company — on entering a room, for instance — Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes and prism, prunes and prism.’

‘Pray, my child,’ said Mr Dorrit, ‘attend to the — hum — precepts of Mrs General.’

Poor Little Dorrit, with a rather forlorn glance at that eminent varnisher, promised to try.

‘You say, Amy,’ pursued Mr Dorrit, ‘that you think you require time. Time for what?’ Another pause.

‘To become accustomed to the novelty of my life, was all I meant,’ said Little Dorrit, with her loving eyes upon her father; whom she had very nearly addressed as poultry, if not prunes and prism too, in her desire to submit herself to Mrs General and please him.



Taking an interest in what a child is drawing is far more important than knowing what to say.

From *Do You Mind?: Literary Criticism and the Mental Map*, by Mungo Home



≈

*Barnaby led me into what looked to be the principal gathering place for all the world's beakers and pipettes. The sign on the door stated that it was a laboratory, but Barnaby and I were doubtful. Like all good literary men, we were sure that there must be more to the story.*



The Prime Minister had a sharp mind, but despite all his thinking, he was still no closer to a solution. He resolved to ask his personal secretary. The Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister was respected throughout the Commons. The Principal Secretary was not a bright fellow, but no one doubted his integrity. His solution to every problem was to flip a coin. So long as the Prime Minister could provide him with two alternatives, the Principal Secretary would be able to do the rest.

The Prime Minister said the Principal Secretary must be the only person in government who had no biases. The Chancellor of the Exchequer thought it had to do with his having only the one coin in his pocket. He said that any member of government with a single coin in his pocket was a man who had never been bought. A man with too many coins in his pocket had likely been bought a great many times; as a result, he generally had very little that was still worth selling.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



*Jane Eyre* does not tell us very much about real relationships between men and women. Most men did not lock their wives in attics; most married couples did not even have attics. What the novel tells us about is itself. It tells us that in the world the author has created, contracts (including marriage contracts) are very serious matters. A character who has entered into a contract is bound by certain obligations. Those obligations must be respected, even when they become burdensome. As readers, we have to understand the power of contracts in order to understand why characters think and act in particular ways.

From *Alone on the Wild Moors: How Literary Criticism Lost Its Way*, by Vivienne Everleigh

## E

‘Young man, remember that if you are ever compelled to go into combat with any knight, I want to beg one thing of you: if you gain the upper hand and he is no longer able to defend himself or hold out against you, you must grant him mercy rather than killing outright. And be careful not to be too talkative or prone to gossip. Anyone who is too talkative soon discovers he has said something that brings him reproach; and the wise man says and declares: “He who talks too much commits a sin”. Therefore, young man, I warn you not to talk too much. And I beseech you, if you find a maiden or woman – be she damsel or lady – who is disconsolate in any way, to do right by consoling her if you know how to console her and are able to do so. And do not scorn another lesson I would teach you, for it must not be scorned: go gladly to church and pray to Him who made all things to have mercy on your soul and keep you a true Christian in this earthly life’.

And the youth said to the gentleman: ‘May you be blessed, good sir, by all the popes of Rome, for I heard my mother say the same thing’.

‘You must never again claim, dear brother’, continued the gentleman, ‘that your mother taught or instructed you. I don’t blame you at all for having said it until now; but henceforth, begging your pardon, I urge you to correct yourself. For if you continue to say that, people will take you for a fool. Therefore I urge you to refrain from saying that’.

From ‘The Story of the Grail (Perceval)’, by Chrétien de Troyes

§

*Barnaby made a remark about our position in the university league tables that it would not be polite to repeat. Professor Kimberley-Kent, happening to overhear him, retorted with an opprobrious remark about T.S. Eliot. Eliot has always been a mile or two beyond my horizon, but judging by the look on Barnaby's face, I would say the thing was a draw.*



The Chief Tax Collector was the very laziest of that hopelessly lazy bunch. He was so lazy that he did not manage to collect any money at all. He was so lazy that he did not manage to keep any money either. When money was given to him, it was always taken away again directly. Terrin the Much-Travelled claimed that the Chief Tax Collector was the poorest man in all the kingdom. Whether or not that was true, it certainly was the case that the Chief Tax Collector lived in a house with eight rooms and a detached garage.

In the detached garage, there lived a pony. That fact was known to the Chief Tax Collector. How the pony came to be there was a matter of some dispute. The Chief Tax Collector thought he might have bought him; the pony thought it had only wandered in one night in order to get out of the rain. The arrangement seemed to suit both parties, however. The Chief Tax Collector came into the possession of a wonderful animal; the pony came into possession of as many carrots as it cared to eat. A fondness very quickly developed between the pair. It was not long after that the pony became quite as idle as his master.

It never had to worry about oversleeping; it was never late for work. There was never any work to be done. The pony never made any journeys, because the Chief Tax Collector never went out to collect any taxes. If someone happened to send him a few coppers by post, the Chief Tax

Collector would squint his eyes and examine the envelope very closely. He would say it did not make any sense to him; the Chief Tax Collector's pony would say it did not make any sense to him either. The Chief Tax Collector did not know why anyone should want to give him an envelope; the pony did not know why the Chief Tax Collector thought a pony would be able to shed any light on the matter.

Between them, it was decided that the envelope and the coppers should be gotten rid of as quickly as possible. The pony's method of getting rid of things was to eat them; the Chief Tax Collector's method was the same as the pony's. It was not very long before they both discovered that a new method would have to be tried. The Chief Tax Collector's pony said that the coppers had hurt his teeth. The Chief Tax Collector was worried that an envelope tree would begin to grow in his stomach.

From *King Wilfred the Wise, and Why He Wasn't: A Fairytale*, by Clementine Blythe

≤

It may be that we are more like Creon and Antigone than we are prepared to openly acknowledge: simultaneously king and supplicant, driven and also confused by our desire for authority and for something that is uninhibited, more elemental. We want, simultaneously, to break the world apart, and also hold it together, to be both oppressor and oppressed. We are fascinated by the possibility of being physically and psychologically overpowered, but we want to be able to end the story by declaring, along with Jane Eyre: 'Reader, I married him'.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.



Ψ

*'When in Rome, do as the Roman, unless what the Roman is doing is unlawful'.*

*Write a short travel guide for visitors. Identify places of interests and list twelve laws that visitors must be sure not to break (the emphasis here is on creativity; your laws should not relate to real criminal activity).*

\*

Where we fail in our obligations to our students, we turn out graduates who have been trained to be diagnosticians, but not listeners – advocates, but not observers. The ones who have absorbed their lessons best cannot hear anyone else, because they can no longer hear themselves. They do not know where they begin and end, and so what is left is not insight or imagination, but a grotesque phantasmagoria of second-hand platitudes.

From *Art Appreciation in the Aftermath of Universities*, by Griffin Brownrigg

Ω

In Harold Bloom's literary landscape, the spirit of the writing of Oscar Wilde competes with the reality of the life and death of Oscar Wilde. That we should 'make friends with the necessity of dying' is an idea that recurs often in *The Western Canon*. It is vitality tempered by skepticism. If it is not quite hope, it is at least a realization that death is a matter of detail.

From *Sentries of the Stage: a Review of Theater Criticism From Ancient Times to the Present*, by Horace Budd



*Mrs. Braintree has urged me to be careful with my hot water bottle. 'The carpet', she said, 'though Egyptian, is not insured against flooding'.*

*I saw what she meant: some people just never learn.*



The distinction between these two kinds of needs – between need that looks like a requirement for direction and need that feels like desire, in all the complications that entails – is the distinction between Mr. Rochester and the diagnostician. It is a distinction of authority, but authority of a particular kind. Mr. Rochester says, in effect: ‘This is who I will be, but only if you allow it’; the diagnostician says: ‘This is who you are, and there is no use your trying to deny it’. The one says: ‘This is a game, let us pretend’ (and Mr. Rochester does quite a lot of that in *Jane Eyre*); the other says: ‘This is the truth, so you had better accept it’. One is art, the other is propaganda, and it is propaganda even when it is helpful, perhaps especially when it is helpful (propaganda, after all, is partly a statement about what others find compelling; it would be something else if it did not seem to be working). One is the expression of something that is interesting (and may even be inescapable); the other turns art into something that seems to require a defense. The one is interested in authority as a necessary condition of treatment; the other is interested in how authority makes us feel.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

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Framed in the entrance was a smallish, freckled boy, wearing a pork-pie hat and carrying a bag. On his face was an expression of mingled wrath and astonishment.

Psmith rose courteously from his chair, and moved forward with slow stateliness to do the honors.

‘What the dickens,’ inquired the newcomer, ‘are you doing here?’

‘We were having a little tea,’ said Psmith, ‘to restore our tissues after our journey. Come in and join us. We keep open house, we Psmiths. Let me introduce you to Comrade Jackson. A stout fellow. Homely in appearance, perhaps, but one of us. I am Psmith. Your own name will doubtless come up in the course of general chitchat over the teacups.’

‘My name’s Spiller, and this is my study.’

Psmith leaned against the mantelpiece, put up his eyeglass, and harangued Spiller in a philosophical vein.

‘Of all sad words of tongue or pen,’ said he, ‘the saddest are these: ‘It might have been.’ Too late! That is the bitter cry. If you had torn yourself from the bosom of the Spiller family by an earlier train, all might have been well. But no. Your father held your hand and said huskily, ‘Edwin, don’t leave us!’ Your mother clung to you weeping, and said, ‘Edwin, stay!’ Your sisters--’

‘I want to know what--’

‘Your sisters froze on to your knees like little octopuses (or octopi), and screamed, ‘Don’t go, Edwin!’ And so,’ said Psmith, deeply affected by his recital, ‘you stayed on till the later train; and, on arrival, you find strange faces in the familiar room, a people that know not Spiller.’ Psmith went to the table, and cheered himself with a sip of tea. Spiller’s sad case had moved him greatly.

The victim of Fate seemed in no way consoled.

‘It’s beastly cheek, that’s what I call it. Are you new chaps?’

‘The very latest thing,’ said Psmith.

‘Well, it’s beastly cheek.’

Mike’s outlook on life was of the solid, practical order. He went straight to the root of the matter.

‘What are you going to do about it?’ he asked.

Spiller evaded the question.

‘It’s beastly cheek,’ he repeated. ‘You can’t go about the place bagging studies.’

‘But we do,’ said Psmith. ‘In this life, Comrade Spiller, we must be prepared for every emergency. We must distinguish between the unusual and the impossible. It is unusual for people to go about the place bagging studies, so you have rashly ordered your life on the assumption that it is impossible. Error! Ah, Spiller, Spiller, let this be a lesson to you.’

From *Mike and Psmith* by P.G. Wodehouse

△

The Home Secretary would have liked very much to release an alligator in the Leader of the Opposition's office; the fact that the Defence Secretary actually did release such a beast in such a place caused a rift in the cabinet that nearly brought down the government. The Home Secretary was a man who did not appreciate encroachments on his portfolio. The Culture Secretary, who was a kindly fellow, and much respected, said he was very sorry to hear what the alligator had been put through; many in the Commons seemed to share his sentiment.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



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*We are a funny bunch, the lot of us. The whole apparatus – all the bits of energy and star dust – has been working away for billions of years in order to place a human brain inside a man who doesn't realize that he's put his sweater on backwards. If that fact doesn't make a person smile and skip in the streets, then I don't know what will.*

## E

Genius in art is not principally a matter of intellect. Good art is, first and foremost, a triumph of composition. The form is the thing.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by  
Hermione Digby



If accepting advice feels like an admission that we are actually sick, it can also help us to make life more manageable when we are feeling too overwhelmed; it offers an alternative to seemingly limitless confusion.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

Ψ

*Choose one claim about criticism from this book. Write a short essay, explaining why you agree or disagree with it. Then, write an essay that takes the opposite position. Try to make the second essay better than the first. Can you change your own mind? If not, what chance does another person have?*

≈

The threat posed by potentially conspiratorial custodians is only one cause of bankers' sadness. Another has to do with the customers who come into the banks. On any given day, as many as four hundred and thirty-two customers (and around a dozen stray cats) take a journey to their local bank branch. They arrive on foot. They arrive by cart and by carriage. A few arrive on flying broomsticks. Some days they arrive one at a time, and some days they arrive all at once. Sometimes, they form orderly queues and say 'Please'. Sometimes, they stamp, and they snarl: 'You took my place'; 'You jumped the queue'. 'You trod on my foot'. 'Back, fool, or I will get you. I will hex you, I will hamper you, if it is the last thing I do!'

The nice customers push on the door that says 'Push'. The mean customers do the same. A few very foolish customers pull, and do not seem to notice that in life, doors do not always come with two or more options. They pull and they pull, but they are unable to figure out where and how they are going wrong. For some reason, they seem to think that what is wrong can always be righted if only a bit more force is used. It does not seem to occur to them that what is needed is only a very little energy, used in the opposite direction.

Still, the people persist. They pull and they push. They bump and they brawl, but they all make their entrance in the end. They go in to the bank for different reasons. Some go in order to put money into the bank; some go

because they want to take money out of the bank, and some go into the bank because they are lost and they want the banker to give them directions (the stray cats go in because they are hoping to receive saucers of milk). It is the second set of customers that are the real troublemakers, according to the bankers.

It is the view among bankers that customers should only be allowed to put money into the banks. It is not the view among bankers that customers should be able to take money out again. 'Nothing good will come of this' they say to one another when a customer steps forward to make a withdrawal. They look each customer up, and they look each customer down. They make a number of mental notes, but no matter how clean the customer's collar and no matter how shiny the customer's shoes, the opinion of the bankers is always the same: 'The people are not to be trusted with their pounds and pence. Given the chance, they would spend all that they have on a great many things they do not need: sweets and Samsung televisions and the like'.

Bankers do not like the to think about all those pounds and pence being exchanged for sweets and Samsung televisions. The slightest mention of surround sound and liquorice allsorts has been known to bring a great many poor bankers to tears. They cry and they cry, and nothing will console them. 'What use is it to be very powerful' they exclaim, 'if power cannot prevent people throwing away all that good money for the sake of a few more pixels and a handful of poxy treats?'

*From Bullish Floors and Flaws Laid Bare: Why the Banks Were Torn At the Seams, by Sophia Barney*

§

*'Philosophy is an art of derivation, not divination', Barnaby said to me. I think he thought it made him seem intelligent, but I know better. It is just his way of passing the time.*

## Ω

The Home Secretary did not care for anything that had to do with health and safety. Every week, he received countless notices telling him that he must do one thing, and he mustn't do another. He had warned the Prime Minister that if he should ever receive a summons to a health and safety training seminar, he would see to it that the country was thrown into a recession. The Chancellor of the Exchequer owed the Home Secretary a favor. The Prime Minister knew it was not an idle threat. He had said he would see what could be done.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



Ω

There was a Young Lady of Clare,  
Who was madly pursued by a bear;  
When she found she was tired,  
She abruptly expired,  
That unfortunate Lady of Clare.

From *The Complete Nonsense Book*, by Edward Lear

\*

Democracy at its best is a framework for discussing and describing both the authority we want for ourselves (autonomy), and the sort of authority we are able to live without: the authority we are willing to grant when the party we support is not in office. It is not exactly an alternative to judgement, but it may be part of a useful postponement. It is a reminder that we cannot know a person in advance of our meeting them, that we cannot really know them (or know ourselves) even after that.

From *Do You Mind?: Literary Criticism and the Mental Map*, by Mungo Home

≡

*Barnaby asked if I liked his new hat. I said I did: it made him look like a slightly smarter-than-average rhododendron.*

†

The Education Secretary liked to upset the public. He looked on it as a kind of sport. The Education Secretary felt his week had been wasted if he was not the cause of at least one protest in Parliament Square. He liked to see that people were taking an interest in politics. He did not mind when they called him a 'slimy knave'. The Education Secretary liked to hear that people were expressing their views, so long as mature people in government saw to it that the public did not get its way.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings

\*

The ghosts of little girls do not scratch at windows in order to teach men like Mr. Lockwood the importance of home security. Likewise, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is not undone by the fact that young dandies do not really enter into binding contracts with canvases and paints.

From *Alone on the Wild Moors: How Literary Criticism Lost Its Way*, by Vivienne Everleigh

\*

Beauty is an effect of the process of dissolution. Dissolution, however, is not held up as a prescription for living; neither is it represented as a guarantee of Paradise. The Happy Prince was not ugly because he was golden, just as he was not made beautiful by his being reduced to lead. Beauty is descriptive of a relationship between things and people. A thing is made ugly or beautiful by how people relate to it. The function of dissolution in the story is to change the nature of the relationship between the statue and the other characters. The Happy Prince was ugly because he was used. His leaden heart is beautiful because God admires it but does not use it.

From *Through a Country Wilde: The Artistic Landscape of Oscar Wilde*, by Charlotte Cornish

## II

*The poet-scholar of Dundee  
Was a dismal-sad fellow to see  
For a fetching young gerund  
Whom he sent on an errand  
Was returned, an old noun, to Dundee.*

*'A Poem', by Archibald Braintree, M.A. Fellow of King's College,  
University of Worcester.  
Worcestershire.*

§

The Prince was a stickler for good hygiene. He never wore the same pair of pants for more than a month at a time. All the Master Carpenters in the land said what a pleasure and a privilege it was to be ruled by a king who knew the value of having a good supply of high-quality drawers.

From *King Wilfred the Wise, and Why He Wasn't: A Fairytale*, by Clementine Blythe



≥

But if authority is something that we cannot entirely live without (and possibly should not want to), it is also one of the things that makes life difficult. When authority is not telling us what we must do, or cannot do, it is not infrequently trying to convince us that authority itself is wholly authoritative, that what it sees and knows is all there is, that the life we lead is all the life there is. At its worst, it is the story of the child who, like Eve, is punished for breaking the first rule, the only rule she cannot possibly obey, and it is the story of the man who, like Adam, grows up to believe that he is a god, or rather: that he is the God.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

Ψ

*'It may be that life would be a mistake without music, but that does not signify. Life is already so full of errors that one more probably won't make any difference. Besides, we soon grow to love our imperfections. A world without the song of birds may take time to adjust to, but a world without trombones and Frank Sinatra tribute acts might even seem like an improvement'.*

*Discuss.*

Literary criticism as a practice is predicated on the assumption that the words the author has provided are not sufficient, and that the intervention of the critic is required to mediate the reader's experience. There is an expectation, therefore, that the critic must be seen to reveal something about the work; otherwise, the reader might begin to entertain the idea that he does not need critics at all.

From *Art Appreciation in the Aftermath of Universities*, by Griffin Brownrigg

£

In the wild struggle for existence, we want to have something that endures, and so we fill our minds with rubbish and facts, in the silly hope of keeping our place. The thoroughly well-informed man – that is the modern ideal. And the mind of the thoroughly well-informed man is a dreadful thing. It is like a bric-à-brac shop, all monsters and dust, with everything priced above its proper value.

From *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, by Oscar Wilde

≈

*Mr. Next Door walked down the street with grim determination. Noël Coward might have said he looked, at that moment, like a glacier in search of another English county to flatten, and I think he might have been right.*

§

‘Privilege’ is not a term that should ever be applied to children, except when it is applied to all children as a way of expressing something of the joy of being alive.

From *With Wetted Feet*, by Eloise Marleigh

△

'They told me you had been to her,  
And mentioned me to him:  
She gave me a good character,  
But said I could not swim.

He sent them word I had not gone  
(We know it to be true):  
If she should push the matter on,  
What would become of you?

I gave her one, they gave him two,  
You gave us three or more;  
They all returned from him to you,  
Though they were mine before.

If I or she should chance to be  
Involved in this affair,  
He trusts to you to set them free,

Exactly as we were.

My notion was that you had been

(Before she had this fit)

An obstacle that came between

Him, and ourselves, and it.

Don't let him know she liked them best,

For this must ever be

A secret, kept from all the rest,

Between yourself and me.'

'That's the most important piece of evidence we've heard yet,' said the King, rubbing his hands; 'so now let the jury--'

'If any one of them can explain it,' said Alice, (she had grown so large in the last few minutes that she wasn't a bit afraid of interrupting him,) 'I'll give him sixpence. *I* don't believe there's an atom of meaning in it.'

The jury all wrote down on their slates, 'She doesn't believe there's an atom of meaning in it,' but none of them attempted to explain the paper.

'If there's no meaning in it,' said the King, 'that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we needn't try to find any. And yet I don't know,' he went on, spreading out the verses on his knee, and looking at them with one eye; 'I seem to see some meaning in them, after all.'

From *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll





The Minister for Sport was handsome and healthy. He had a fine, neatly trimmed beard, and his calf was considered to be finest calf ever to be attached to a human leg (the contour of a person's calf was thought to be very important: more important, even, than the firmness and definition of the abdominal muscles). All the ladies and gentlemen of the Commons tried to copy the Minister for Sport, but none succeeded. The Shadow Transport Secretary took to walking around on the tips of his toes, but instead of making his calf shapelier, he succeeded only in bumping his head every time he entered a room.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



*Barnaby's 'Dear Sir, It is with great disappointment that I...' correspondences can easily be adapted for address to a perpetually troublesome Chair.*

*Professor Kimberley-Kent, knowing this, accepts that he can push Barnaby only so far.*

≤

In poetry, phrasal oddity is permitted when the significance of the sentiment or idea being communicated is greater than the value that would otherwise be obtained by adhering to conventions of form.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by  
Hermione Digby

†

It may be that the great works of psychoanalysis – including *Hamlet*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Little Dorrit* – were written before *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and that what Dr. Freud's work represents is, among other things, an effort to describe a particular kind of relationship between art and criticism, between the artist as patient and the critic as artist.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.



In Wonderland, Alice discovered that what we think we know does not always bring us relief. Sometimes, what we think we know is actually part of the problem. It is what is preventing us from learning something new. It is what is keeping us from having a new experience.

From *Artists Are from Mars, Scientists Are from Wonderland*, by Bertram Winterbourne

Ψ

*'The pen is mightier than the sword, but only at very close quarters and distances longer than half a dozen meters'.*

*Discuss. When you have done that, address the following: 'If all property is theft, then the confiscation and redistribution of college pens is both a virtue and an act of arms dealing'.*



*Optimists, I think, enjoy conversation; pessimists require only an audience.*

≈

The Leader of the Opposition sometimes thought that the Home Secretary must be a sort of fairy godmother. This did not seem to please the Home Secretary. He said it was not his job always to be watching what other people were doing. The Home Secretary had a notion that a fairy godmother was something like an earlier, slightly kindlier version of the surveillance state.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



## §

The Home Secretary was always very critical of the Chancellor's work. When he was feeling particularly spiteful, he made disparaging remarks about his colleague's skill at bingo. The Home Secretary said he was very surprised that a person of the Chancellor's meagre abilities should have been given the task of managing the economy.

The Chancellor thought the Home Secretary had no business acting surprised. The Chancellor knew perfectly well that it was the Home Secretary who was responsible for his appointment to a job that he did not enjoy. It had nothing to do with him. No one had asked the Chancellor for his views on the matter. The whole business had been finished before he even knew it had gotten started.

The Chancellor had not wanted to be Chancellor of the Exchequer. The Chancellor would have been very happy to be the Foreign Secretary. It was the job of the Foreign Secretary to travel and try out a great many local customs. The Last Foreign Secretary had visited a great many places and had done all sorts of fun things. The Chancellor had wanted to do fun things too. Doing fun things was entirely in keeping with his desire to live a life full of entertainments.

The Chancellor's dreams of foreign travel were not to be realized, however. He had been in the process of renewing his passport when the Home Secretary stepped in and started causing trouble. Before he knew what had happened, the Chancellor found himself addressing Parliament, and promising to 'undo the damage caused by the last government and bring the nation's finances to account'.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings

Mr F.'s Aunt, who had eaten her pie with great solemnity, and who had been elaborating some grievous scheme of injury in her mind since her first assumption of that public position on the Marshal's steps, took the present opportunity of addressing the following Sibyllic apostrophe to the relict of her late nephew. 'Bring him for'ard, and I'll chuck him out o' winder!' Flora tried in vain to soothe the excellent woman by explaining that they were going home to dinner. Mr F.'s Aunt persisted in replying, 'Bring him for'ard and I'll chuck him out o' winder!' Having reiterated this demand an immense number of times, with a sustained glare of defiance at Little Dorrit, Mr F.'s Aunt folded her arms, and sat down in the corner of the pie-shop parlour; steadfastly refusing to budge until such time as 'he' should have been 'brought for'ard,' and the chucking portion of his destiny accomplished. In this condition of things, Flora confided to Little Dorrit that she had not seen Mr F.'s Aunt so full of life and character for weeks; that she would find it necessary to remain there 'hours perhaps,' until the inexorable old lady could be softened; and that she could manage her best alone. They parted, therefore, in the friendliest manner, and with the kindest feeling on both sides.

Mr F.'s Aunt holding out like a grim fortress, and Flora becoming in need of refreshment, a messenger was despatched to the hotel for the tumbler already glanced at, which was afterwards replenished. With the aid of its content, a newspaper, and some skimming of the cream of the pie-stock, Flora got through the remainder of the day in perfect good humour; though occasionally embarrassed by the consequences of an idle rumour which circulated among the credulous infants of the neighbourhood, to the effect that an old lady had sold herself to the pie-shop to be made up, and was then sitting in the pie-shop parlour, declining to complete her contract. This attracted so many young persons of both sexes, and, when the shades of evening began to fall, occasioned so much interruption to

the business, that the merchant became very pressing in his proposals that Mr F.'s Aunt should be removed. A conveyance was accordingly brought to the door, which, by the joint efforts of the merchant and Flora, this remarkable woman was at last induced to enter; though not without even then putting her head out of the window, and demanding to have him 'brought for'ard' for the purpose originally mentioned. As she was observed at this time to direct baleful glances towards the Marshalsea, it has been supposed that this admirably consistent female intended by 'him,' Arthur Clennam. This, however, is mere speculation; who the person was, who, for the satisfaction of Mr F.'s Aunt's mind, ought to have been brought forward and never was brought forward, will never be positively known.

From *Little Dorrit*, by Charles Dickens

Ω

We are both sovereign and subjects of an uncertain, restive dominion. Like Canute in Henry of Huntingdon's *History of England*, we are, for better and for worse, both king and supplicant. We can choose to accept or reject what it means to stand before the waves, but we cannot stop our feet getting wet.

From *Do You Mind?: Literary Criticism and the Mental Map*, by Mungo Home

Ψ

*'Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will return, cold and despondent, and carrying only an old shoe'.*

*Discuss.*



*Mrs. Braintree believes that the tomato is a highly incongruous vegetable; I happen to agree.*



After more than twenty years in the top chair, the Speaker of the House had come to the realization that he did not actually know who ran the country. Sometimes, he thought the Chancellor of the Exchequer was the person who was actually in charge of everything; at other times, he felt almost certain that it must be the Home Secretary who made all the important decisions. On one occasion, a visiting dignitary had suggested that the real power might be in the hands of the Prime Minister. The Speaker has laughed a good deal at this. Everyone in England knew perfectly well that the Prime Minister was merely a poop.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings

\*

In his influential essay 'The Archetypes of Literature', Northrop Frye argued that 'criticism as we find it in learned journals and scholarly monographs has every characteristic of a science'. For Frye, what criticism shares with science is the potential for systemization: we may not be able to teach literature, Frye argues but we can teach the methods and systems by which it is examined and organized. The methods of science and the methods of criticism are quite so similar as Frye makes them out to be, however. The essay posits a fundamental division between nature and science, and between art and criticism as a basis for describing criticism as a coherent body of knowledge that can be studied systematically.

It is an interesting idea; it may even be a useful idea: whether or not it is true, it may seem to inspire new modes of expression and new ways of situating ourselves relative to literature. The trouble, however, is that the essay offers no evidence in support of that first claim. That is a peculiar omission, given that Frye is about to go on to argue that his kind of criticism is scientific. Instead, the essay relies upon a word substitution that is incongruous with standard usage. Frye writes that 'Physics is an organized body of knowledge about nature, and a student of it says that he is learning physics, not that he is learning nature'. The use of the word 'learning' in place of the word 'studying' is an effective, affective device: instead of a proof, it offers us feeling as a form of persuasion. The oddness of the pairing entices the reader to accept the proposition: 'learning' does not seem to be harmonious with 'nature'; therefore, we cannot engage with nature directly. If we replace 'learning' with 'studying', however, the statement no longer sounds odd: students study physics, and physicists study nature.

The ability to replace one word with another does not, of course, in itself, provide a satisfactory resolution of the question that Frye's essay has served to introduce. Oddness is not a reliable standard for measuring correctness. The counter-proposed statement may be no truer than Frye's original proposition. Alternatively, Frye's proposition may be true, despite its being based on a trick, rather than a body of evidence. If we were to examine the matter scientifically, we would be forced to admit that we do not have enough evidence to make a determination one way or the other. All that can really be said based on the data that has been provided is that the tools and techniques that are being employed seem to belong more to the creative writer than to the scientist. It seems that what Frye understands as 'science' is really a kind of modeling: it is an inherently retrospective exercise that begins by taking a set of framing assumptions (a critical theory) and then proceeds to demonstrate the application of those assumptions relative to a particular piece or body of literature.

From *The Lesser Angels and Our DNA: Why Some Literary Critics Can't Help Thinking They're Scientists*, by Bartholomew Graeme



## II

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is finely balanced: the dialogue is quick and everything else is very nearly still. The play would be a disaster if a stiff collar did not prevent Algernon from reaching too quickly for the cucumber sandwiches

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a fairy tale. It is a fairy tale in the sense that it involves the discovery that the world is other than what it was understood and expected to be. It is both a revelation, and a mystery. Its effect is to stir what Mr. GK Chesterton calls the 'nerve of the ancient instinct of astonishment'.

'[W]hen we are very young children', Mr. Chesterton writes, 'we do not need fairy tales: we only need tales. Mere life is interesting enough. A child of seven, is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door and saw a dragon. But a child of three is excited by being told that Tommy opened a door'.

The lesson of every fairy tale is that we cannot put the world into a box and stand above it; but, if we are imaginative enough, we might be small enough to live comfortably and conveniently, in a shoe.

From *Through a Country Wilde: The Artistic Landscape of Oscar Wilde*, by Charlotte Cornish

£

*Professor Kimberley-Kent was wearing his usual expression. Barnaby, who had just emerged from a hedge, was wearing a suit and a tie and some spare bits of shrubbery.*

## E

The people of the kingdom were very disappointed when they learned that the Chief Tax Collector had been thrown into prison. It is a very difficult thing to lead the revolution when you have been thrown into prison, and leading the revolution is exactly what the people were rather hoping the Chief Tax Collector would do. The people had met specifically to discuss the matter. Hands had been raised. Questions had been asked and answered. Everyone had agreed that the Chief Tax Collector (and his pony) were the men who were wanted.

From *King Wilfred the Wise, and Why He Wasn't: A Fairytale*, by Clementine Blythe

§

When Ernest Jones, Dr. Freud's colleague and biographer, wrote that Hamlet's inability to avenge his father was a consequence of 'that intellectual cowardice, that reluctance to dare the exploration of his inner mind, which Hamlet shares with the rest of the human race', Jones was, in a sense, drawing attention both to the possibilities and the limitations of the psychoanalytic practice. He told us both that we are cowards, and that we may have good reason to be cowardly. If some 'ground which he dare not or cannot avow to himself', some 'long "repressed" desire to take his father's place in his mother's affection', prevented Hamlet from carrying out his duty, it isn't entirely clear whether a more aware Hamlet would necessarily be less inhibited, nor is it obvious that such a Hamlet would actually be desirable.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

Ψ

*'I am fond of learning and I admire teachers, but I have never yet met an 'educator' whom I did not wish to throw out of a window. A teacher is one who wishes to share the joys of discovery, whereas an educator is merely a third-rate sort of dictator'.*

*Discuss.*



To be a scientist is to be a student of aesthetics, because what life and art share is a profound reverence for the order that has been observed, and an irresistible yearning for the mystery that remains to be experienced. Art reminds us that some of our very best ideas often come to us in the form of a wild dream.

From *Sloshing About in the Primordial Soup: What Literary Critics Still Don't Understand About Science*, by William Stansfield

≈

My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky:  
So was it when my life began;  
So is it now I am a man;  
So be it when I shall grow old,  
Or let me die!  
The Child is father of the Man;  
And I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.

‘My heart leaps up when I behold’, by William Wordsworth

£

*Off in the distance, a bright little bell calls the local yogi to their morning exercises. The day always begins with 'Tangled Turtle'; this is followed in the afternoon by 'Flummoxed Flamingo'. Sometimes, 'Contorted Kangaroo' is added as a special treat, as a reward for good behavior.*



Ω

For better and for worse, the psychoanalyst, like the artist, doesn't quite know what to do about the matter of narrative form. The story is the thing that, whether because it is too painful or too familiar, needs to be broken up, but a story is what the activity of breaking up is always trying to return to: for better and for worse, stories are what we seem to require, and also what we suffer from.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

I eyed the jug. Uncle Tom's photograph had fallen into the fender, and it was standing there right out in the open, where Gussie couldn't have helped seeing it. Mercifully, it was empty now.

'It was a most prudent act on your part, if I may say so, sir, to dispose of the orange juice.'

I stared at the man.

'What? Didn't you?'

'No, sir.'

'Jeeves, let us get this clear. Was it not you who threw away that o.j.?'

'No, sir. I assumed, when I entered the room and found the pitcher empty, that you had done so.'

We looked at each other, awed. Two minds with but a single thought.

'I very much fear, sir —'

'So do I, Jeeves.'

'It would seem almost certain —'

'Quite certain. Weigh the facts. Sift the evidence. The jug was standing on the mantelpiece, for all eyes to behold. Gussie had been complaining of thirst. You found him in here, laughing heartily. I think that there can be little doubt, Jeeves, that the entire contents of that jug are at this moment reposing on top of the existing cargo in that already brilliantly lit man's interior. Disturbing, Jeeves.'

'Most disturbing, sir.'

'Let us face the position, forcing ourselves to be calm. You inserted in that jug — shall we say a tumblerful of the right stuff?'

‘Fully a tumblerful, sir.’

‘And I added of my plenty about the same amount.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And in two shakes of a duck's tail Gussie, with all that lapping about inside him, will be distributing the prizes at Market Snodsbury Grammar School before an audience of all that is fairest and most refined in the county.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘It seems to me, Jeeves, that the ceremony may be one fraught with considerable interest.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘What, in your opinion, will the harvest be?’

‘One finds it difficult to hazard a conjecture, sir.’

‘You mean imagination boggles?’

‘Yes, sir.’

I inspected my imagination. He was right. It boggled.

From *Right Ho, Jeeves*, by P.G. Wodehouse



The Education Secretary was not a poet. He preferred the Anglo-Saxon dialect: he thought that it lent color to life. It pleased him to remark that his ministerial colleagues were all ‘snot-swilling, slug-slurping low-down, no-good penny-pinchers’. The Education Secretary’s ministerial colleagues expressed themselves through the medium of direct action: they stole his favorite garden gnome statuette (the one he kept on his desk) and replaced it with a facsimile picture of the Grand Old Duke of York.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings

\*

*In the little square in the center of the village, there is a nice little bench and a nice little fountain. The fountain is for pennies, and the bench is for back pockets. Every morning, the pennies come to rest their tails in the fountain, and every evening, the pockets are folded and placed in neat little stacks.*



'About' is the epitaph under which the remains of art are buried.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by  
Hermione Digby

§

If the critic is a person (or the sort of person) who understands that each of us is an artist, and an artist does not always tell the truth, the critic is also the person who apprehends the danger of his own insight: criticism, to the extent that it claims to be authoritative, is always in danger of turning the critic into the person whose claim to have a cure is really a symptom of disease, is always in danger of turning the expert into the most ignorant person in the room.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.



Walter Pater said that we were all under sentence of death, and the only course was to enjoy exquisite moments simply for those moments' sake. The same lesson was taught by the very powerful and very desolate philosophy of Oscar Wilde. It is the *carpe diem* religion; but the *carpe diem* religion is not the religion of happy people, but of very unhappy people. Great joy does, not gather the rosebuds while it may; its eyes are fixed on the immortal rose which Dante saw. Great joy has in it the sense of immortality; the very splendour of youth is the sense that it has all space to stretch its legs in.

From *Heretics*, by G.K. Chesterton



Ψ

*Invent fifteen new words. Include a definition for each. Be sure to indicate the part of speech. 'Beginning', 'middle', 'end', and 'adverb' are unacceptable.*

≈

*Professor Kimberley-Kent has asked me to consider discussing the matter of verisimilitude in the great works of literature. He said he thought it would show the College that our department is in step with all the latest developments. I could not follow the train of his thoughts, however. Modernity is Barnaby's area of expertise. I am merely an enthusiastic amateur.*

## Ω

One evening, the Prime Minister confided in the Minister for the Interior that he had, that very day, committed himself to working work harder than any prime minister has ever worked before. The Minister for the Interior nodded and immediately leaked the information to his friend, who worked in the press. That evening, a number of guests were invited to speak on the television. They all said there were ‘worrying signs coming from Number 10’. What they meant was that they did not want the Prime Minister to work so hard and hold so many meetings. Hardworking government officials, in their experience, were always up to something. The people on the television said that it was not the job of Her Majesty’s government to be up to something. The role of Her Majesty’s government was simply to ‘start a conversation’. Once started, it should fall to the people on the television to say what should be done. The guests in the studio all agreed that the government should be investigated for corruption and gross incompetence.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



The horse followed, – a tall steed, and on its back a rider. The man, the human being, broke the spell at once. Nothing ever rode the Gytrash: it was always alone; and goblins, to my notions, though they might tenant the dumb carcasses of beasts, could scarce covet shelter in the commonplace human form. No Gytrash was this, – only a traveller taking the short cut to Millcote. He passed, and I went on; a few steps, and I turned: a sliding sound and an exclamation of ‘What the deuce is to do now?’ and a clattering tumble, arrested my attention. Man and horse were down; they had slipped on the sheet of ice which glazed the causeway. The dog came bounding back, and seeing his master in a predicament, and hearing the horse groan, barked till the evening hills echoed the sound, which was deep in proportion to his magnitude. He snuffed round the prostrate group, and then he ran up to me; it was all he could do, -- there was no other help at hand to summon. I obeyed him, and walked down to the traveller, by this time struggling himself free of his steed. His efforts were so vigorous, I thought he could not be much hurt; but I asked him the question -

‘Are you injured, sir?’

From *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë

≥

If we cannot help being quick to acknowledge that words have power, it may be that there is cause to wonder what sort of power words actually have, and what power we want them to have (or fear they might have). We want to speak in our own way and describe life in our own terms, but in the course of living our lives, we frequently find that words seem to abandon us. And what they abandon us to may be as uncertain as what they abandon us for. It may be that what we think of as the unconscious is made more or less appealing, seems more or less persuasive, because the alternative interpretations we have seem somehow inadequate. Instead of a complex, it may be that what we really have is a desire for more capable words.

From *Do You Mind?: Literary Criticism and the Mental Map*, by Mungo Home

Ω

*The Big Bad Wolf has today announced that he has given up granny-gobbling for good. Mr. Wolf has long complained that they are served with too much bone and too much brooch. Requests for comment were not returned by the restaurants where Mr. Wolf was known to dine.*

\*

In truth, the Home Secretary was not a proud person. In public life, it was his job to grimace and gesture. He owed it to the government to show that any idea that was not the government's idea could not possibly be the right idea. It was not the responsibility of the government's ministers to know things; ministers in her Her Majesty's government were expected only to put on a good show. The Home Secretary had been a politician for more than thirty years; whether in government or out of it, the Chief Whip always put on a good performance. He could stamp his foot and shout in a way that reminded people of the actor, Laurence Olivier, who once played the role of Oedipus to such great acclaim.

But the Home Secretary was careful never to take things too far. In his time in politics, the Home Secretary had seen a number of very promising careers ruined, all because otherwise intelligent people began to believe that the show was actually something like the truth. It was one thing to get caught up in a role; it was quite another thing (an inexcusable thing) to forget that it was all just an act. The Home Secretary was a fool, but he had wisdom enough to know that he was really an ignorant man.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



George and I were for camping out. We said it would be so wild and free, so patriarchal like.

Slowly the golden memory of the dead sun fades from the hearts of the cold, sad clouds. Silent, like sorrowing children, the birds have ceased their song, and only the moorhen's plaintive cry and the harsh croak of the corncrake stirs the awed hush around the couch of waters, where the dying day breathes out her last.

From the dim woods on either bank, Night's ghostly army, the grey shadows, creep out with noiseless tread to chase away the lingering rear-guard of the light, and pass, with noiseless, unseen feet, above the waving river-grass, and through the sighing rushes; and Night, upon her sombre throne, folds her black wings above the darkening world, and, from her phantom palace, lit by the pale stars, reigns in stillness.

Then we run our little boat into some quiet nook, and the tent is pitched, and the frugal supper cooked and eaten. Then the big pipes are filled and lighted, and the pleasant chat goes round in musical undertone; while, in the pauses of our talk, the river, playing round the boat, prattles strange old tales and secrets, sings low the old child's song that it has sung so many thousand years — will sing so many thousand years to come, before its voice grows harsh and old — a song that we, who have learnt to love its changing face, who have so often nestled on its yielding



bosom, think, somehow, we understand, though we could not tell you in mere words the story that we listen to.

And we sit there, by its margin, while the moon, who loves it too, stoops down to kiss it with a sister's kiss, and throws her silver arms around it clingingly; and we watch it as it flows, ever singing, ever whispering, out to meet its king, the sea — till our voices die away in silence, and the pipes go out — till we, common-place, everyday young men enough, feel strangely full of thoughts, half sad, half sweet, and do not care or want to speak — till we laugh, and, rising, knock the ashes from our burnt-out pipes, and say "Good-night," and, lulled by the lapping water and the rustling trees, we fall asleep beneath the great, still stars, and dream that the world is young again — young and sweet as she used to be ere the centuries of fret and care had furrowed her fair face, ere her children's sins and follies had made old her loving heart — sweet as she was in those bygone days when, a new-made mother, she nursed us, her children, upon her own deep breast — ere the wiles of painted civilization had lured us away from her fond arms, and the poisoned sneers of artificiality had made us ashamed of the simple life we led with her, and the simple, stately home where mankind was born so many thousands years ago.

Harris said:

"How about when it rained?"

You can never rouse Harris. There is no poetry about Harris — no wild yearning for the unattainable. Harris never "weeps, he knows not why." If Harris's eyes fill with tears, you can bet it is because Harris has been eating raw onions, or has put too much Worcester over his chop.

If you were to stand at night by the sea-shore with Harris, and say:

"Hark! do you not hear? Is it but the mermaids singing deep below the waving waters; or sad spirits, chanting dirges for white corpses, held by seaweed?" Harris would take you by the arm, and say:

“I know what it is, old man; you’ve got a chill. Now, you come along with me. I know a place round the corner here, where you can get a drop of the finest Scotch whisky you ever tasted — put you right in less than no time.”

Harris always does know a place round the corner where you can get something brilliant in the drinking line. I believe that if you met Harris up in Paradise (supposing such a thing likely), he would immediately greet you with:

“So glad you’ve come, old fellow; I’ve found a nice place round the corner here, where you can get some really first-class nectar.”

In the present instance, however, as regarded the camping out, his practical view of the matter came as a very timely hint. Camping out in rainy weather is not pleasant.

From *Three Men in a Boat*, by Jerome K. Jerome

Ψ

*'Democracy, at its best, does not give us the government we want;  
it gives us the government we are best able to live with'.*

*Discuss.*



Laughter, Lord Henry knows, is the triumph of pleasure over any principle of pleasure-seeking. Lord Henry understands that what governs *Dorian Gray* is an intense interrelationship between our desire to know and our inability to find out. He knows that he is in a work of art, and he knows that a work of art is intended to be experienced and enjoyed. He doesn't try to use it; nor does he make uselessness itself into a precept. To Lord Henry, *Dorian Gray* is not a tragedy. It is not even a gothic horror; it is something much more interesting. It is a work of art; and quite wisely, he determines to enjoy it on its own terms. He invites the reader to do the same.

From *Through a Country Wilde: The Artistic Landscape of Oscar Wilde*, by Charlotte Cornish

§

*On the outskirts of our little village, a pretty marble statue waves a cheery, welcoming hand. On her head, she wears a neat little traffic cone that was given to her by some secret admirer, many years ago.*

## Ω

Nigel of the Worried Nape was the ruler of a desert kingdom, far away. The work, he said, did not suit him. Despite the plentiful supply of sun and sand, Nigel felt that his was not such an easy job as it ought to be. Palm trees and poolside lounge chairs are all very good, but they go only so far. For Nigel, they did not go nearly far enough. The trouble was that everyone thought that Nigel's kingdom ought to be a rich place, full of sweetness and honey. It was not a rich place. It was not a sweet place. There was not so much as a single drop of honey to be found anywhere in the kingdom.

None of that was Nigel's fault, but one wanted to listen to what Nigel had to say. 'All my subjects want to cut my head off', moaned Nigel of the Worried Nape, to one of his friends. 'They keep going on about liberty and rights and it is really very tiresome to be shouted at all the time. They don't think of my feelings at all. They don't seem to understand that it worries a chap to be told that he is going to be taken out of his castle and torn limb from limb. It does not help me to sleep at night when the people are always breaking into my chambers and setting fire to my curtains and my nice velvet hat. I have asked them to see things from my side, but they refuse. They do not respond to my concerns at all; they say only that they are going to boil me and bake me and serve me in a stew. It is a very confounding thing to be threatened with stew'.

From *King Wilfred the Wise, and Why He Wasn't: A Fairytale*, by Clementine Blythe

≈

What we call listening is all too often something much closer to interpretation, which is, itself, a sort of ventriloquism, but a ventriloquism that has forgotten what a doll is, and that a doll is what it is holding. At its best, the practice of literary criticism is really a practice of learning to listen; first and foremost, it is an art of silences. As an art, it values availability over authority, which means, among other things, that the critic is the kind of person who takes an interest in other people but isn't entirely sure that he knows what a person is. Like a player in a Dickensian adventure, the critic extolls humanity precisely because, like Pancks, 'that dingy little craft', humanity itself does not seem quite human; it is something much more unexpected, much more mysterious.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

≤

It is one of the great fallacies of literary studies that science has been equated with systemization. Science certainly involves systemization, but systemization and science are not the same thing. Nor does systematized thinking necessarily enable us to reach 'better' conclusions. If a man should steal an apple and a short time later be struck by a bolt of lightning, his religion may cause him to believe that being struck by the bolt of lightning was a direct consequence of his stealing the apple. Science will not support him in his conclusion. It cannot be denied, however, that the man's thinking is systematic. Religion is not averse to systematic thinking; on the contrary, it is systematic thinking that makes organized religion possible. The difference between science and mere credulity is not a matter of systemization, it is a matter of evidence. Good conclusions are made possible by our having good evidence, and by our also having the willingness to test and act upon evidence, regardless of personal belief or preference. What prevents the practice of literary criticism from being a scientific practice is its inability to escape its essential subjectivity. In that sense, 'science' may really be an element of style.

From *Sloshing About in the Primordial Soup: What Literary Critics Still Don't Understand About Science*, by William Stansfield



\*

Intelligent boys seldom go on great adventures. When an intelligent boy hears of a giant who is in the market for English bones to grind into bread, he realizes immediately that the giant is unlikely to be satisfied by the goods on sale in the village market. He takes care, therefore, to remove himself from the giant's sphere of influence. If he happens to be in the giant's home, he seeks out the nearest door or window and quietly makes his exit. Only idiot boys linger long enough to receive their reward.

Fairy tales are full of foolish boys and witless adults.

From *Loco Parentis: Literature and Adult Foolishness*, by Egbert Brandon

Ψ

*Read 'Ozymandias' by Percy Shelley. Then, write a poem about the decay of a monument (of your choosing), and the transience of all worldly fame.*

*Do not bother selecting any of the statues in Tumbleford town center.*

*They are already in such a state that their downfall does not need to be imagined.*

The major characteristics discoverable by the stranger in Mr F.'s Aunt, were extreme severity and grim taciturnity; sometimes interrupted by a propensity to offer remarks in a deep warning voice, which, being totally uncalled for by anything said by anybody, and traceable to no association of ideas, confounded and terrified the Mind. Mr F.'s Aunt may have thrown in these observations on some system of her own, and it may have been ingenious, or even subtle: but the key to it was wanted.

From *Little Dorrit*, by Charles Dickens



The historian is at home amidst the flap and churn of the wild moors, the student of literature is at home when she is seated at her kitchen table.

From 'The Corpse of Criticism: The Death of Historicism, and Why It Won't Be Missed', by Prudence B. Wayfair

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A thorough understanding of the business of government is not required for the artist to feel that, from an aesthetic point of view, the proper place for a politician is in Hell.

From *The Stones of Menace: The Art of Politics*, by Bartholomew Garrick

## II

*Consummatum est*, this bill is ended,  
And Faustus hath bequeathed his soul to Lucifer.  
But what is this inscription on mine arm?  
*Homo fuge*. Whither should I fly?  
If unto God, he'll throw thee down to hell;  
My senses are deceived, here's nothing writ;  
I see it plain, here in this place is writ,  
*Homo fuge!* Yet shall not Faustus fly.

From Scene 5 of *Dr Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe

≈

Everyone was happy, and because everyone was happy and wanted for nothing, no one seemed to notice or care that there was a wild bird waddling around the room, dressed in the standard uniform issued to all employees of the Royal Mail.

The Culture Secretary supposed that with everything else that was going on at the same time, it just didn't seem important enough to mention. He therefore resigned himself to the necessity of accepting that parcel-post penguins must be regarded as another of life's many extraneous details.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings

## Ω

The floors of a bank are often very slippery. Bankers live in fear of falling and splitting their expensive trousers. They live in fear of the sewing costs that will follow. Trouser repair is not as cheap as it used to be. Bankers feel that the invention of pockets is to blame: the deeper the pockets, the more expensive the damage. Bankers have very deep pockets; they need deep pockets in order to hold their keys and their personalised business cards. So, when a banker sees a slippery spot or a spill in his path, the banker will shiver and shake. He will feel that someone has left the thing there on purpose. He fears that someone has set him a trap. This may seem terribly silly, but it is nonetheless what they think. There is a strong suspicion among some bankers that custodial staff are secret revolutionaries who mean to bring down the bankers and the banks, one slick spot at a time.

*From Bullish Floors and Flaws Laid Bare: Why the Banks Were Torn At the Seams, by Sophia Barney*



§

As they were speaking of one thing and another, a squire came forth from a chamber carrying a white lance by the middle of its shaft; he passed between the fire and those seated upon the bed. Everyone in the hall saw the white lance with its white point from whose tip there issued a drop of blood, and this red drop flowed down to the squire's hand. The youth who had come there that knight observed this marvel but refrained from asking how it came about, for he recalled the admonishment given by the gentleman who had knighted him, who taught and instructed him not to talk too much; he was afraid that if he asked they would consider him uncouth, and therefore he did not ask.

Then two other squires entered holding in their hands candelabra of pure gold, crafted with enamel inlays. The young men carrying the candelabra were extremely handsome. In each of the candelabra there were at least ten candles burning. A maiden accompanying the two young men was carrying a grail with her two hands, she was beautiful, noble, and richly attired. After she had entered the hall carrying the grail the room was so brightly illuminated that the candles lost their brilliance like stars and the moon when the sun rises. After her came another maiden, carrying a silver carving platter. The grail, which was introduced first, was of fine pure gold. Set in the grail were precious stones of many kinds, the best and costliest, to be found in earth or sea: the grail's stones were finer than any others in the world, without any doubt. The grail passed by like the lance; they passed in front of the bed and into another chamber. The young knight watched them pass by but did not dare ask who was served from the grail, for in his heart he always held the wise gentleman's advice. Yet I fear that this may be to his misfortune, for I have heard it said that at times it is just as wrong to keep too silent as to talk too much. Whether for good or for ill he did not ask or inquire anything of them.

From 'The Story of the Grail (Perceval)', by Chrétien de Troyes

Ψ

*Explain the function of a semicolon. Your response should take the form of a myth.*



When criticism is written down – when it isn't or cannot be a conversation, or a drama – it is something like the fact of strolling down a street or floating down a river, combined with an uncertainty – even an easiness – about where that might take us, and what might happen along the way. It is the fact of wearing a white tie coupled with the very real prospect of having, shortly, to run after one's hat.

The critic, that is to say, is both entertainer and entertained. Like a player in a farcical comedy, what the critic really knows is that honest conviction is always on the verge of turning into an almighty fall; like the survivor of some great courtly intrigue, he understands that aspiration is always in danger of turning into Macbeth, or worse, Oliver Cromwell, that inside every self-help book is the story of Cain's descent into Hell.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

\*

‘The Prince will probably not be very happy when he learns that we mean to overthrow him’, observed Ranulf the Rude. ‘Whether our plans succeed or not in the end, the person we nominate to lead us is very likely to be executed’.

Gunther raised his hand to speak. Gunther said that he was very sorry, but he would have to rule himself out of the running. ‘Regretfully I have what you might call a pre-existing condition’ he said. ‘The thing is: I am allergic to execution. I hope you will forgive my not going into details, but the subject is a painful one. What I will say is that execution does not agree with me’.

At first this information was not well-received. There were grumbles of dissatisfaction, and Gunther was in danger of becoming unpopular.

‘Cowardly is what I call it’ said Helmut the Hard-Headed with disgust. ‘It is a good thing that some people here are made of sterner stuff’.

The crowd cheered. Everyone assumed that Helmut was speaking about himself. They felt sure they had finally found their champion. Helmut turned pale and quickly put them right.

‘What I mean is that other people suffer from the same condition, only we do not go on about it in order to win sympathy from our friends and companions’.

The crowd groaned. Did this mean that Helmut was allergic to execution also? It did; Helmut was very sorry, but he felt he must follow his doctor’s orders. The others were not slow in withdrawing their own candidacy. It seemed that they were all allergic to execution.

‘That is very peculiar’ said Gunther. ‘I do not believe there is any kingdom in all the world where the people are so allergic to execution as we are’.

This remark cheered everyone up. It felt good to be special.

From *King Wilfred the Wise, and Why He Wasn't: A Fairytale*, by Clementine Blythe

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If we think of the overbearing teacher as being the sort of person who interrupts what a child is saying in order to tell the child what she really means, then criticism is both a curiosity about what is being said, and also a wariness about the possibility of being taken in. It is both a celebration of the individual and also a suspicion that we may be deceiving ourselves when we claim to know who we really are. It is, in that sense, the very opposite of an idealization.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

## Ω

Like Oedipus, what we suffer from is not so much self-estrangement as a certain kind of over-familiarity. The inner voice is not infrequently overbearing. Like a parasite, its appetite is voracious. It confuses authenticity with autocracy and turns truthfulness into an anemic sort of constancy.

From *Oedipus and the Problem of the Inner "I"*, by Meredith Badger

Is it his face that has recommended him?

It may be his face. He is a most remarkable likeness, on a large scale, of the great Napoleon. His features have Napoleon's magnificent regularity: his expression recalls the grandly calm, immovable power of the Great Soldier's face. This striking resemblance certainly impressed me, to begin with; but there is something in him besides the resemblance, which has impressed me more. I think the influence I am now trying to find is in his eyes. They are the most unfathomable grey eyes I ever saw: and they have at times a cold, clear, beautiful, irresistible glitter in them which forces me to look at him, and yet causes me sensations, when I do look, which I would rather not feel. Other parts of his face and head have their strange peculiarities. His complexion, for instance, has a singular sallow-fairness, so much at variance with the dark-brown colour of his hair, that I suspect the hair of being a wig, and his face, closely shaven all over, is smoother and freer from all marks and wrinkles than mine, though (according to Sir Percival's account of him) he is close on sixty years of age. But these are not the prominent personal characteristics which distinguish him, to my mind, from all the other men I have ever seen. The marked peculiarity which singles him out from the rank and file of humanity lies entirely, so far as I can tell at present, in the extraordinary expression and extraordinary power of his eyes.

From *The Woman in White*, by Wilkie Collins

Ψ

*'We do not form our opinions from the facts; as with a necktie or a set of earrings, we select facts to suit our opinions'.*

*Discuss.*





The practice of criticism is not for everyone; at least, it is not for everyone all of the time. Written criticism, at its best, should be available to everyone; but the practice of criticism is really for people who are comfortable with uncertainty (or who think they might be). It is also for people who feel so let down by the stories they have about their lives and about the world that they are willing to see where uncertainty might take them. It is not really suitable to be practiced by people whose lives are already so chaotic that more uncertainty is the last thing they need, and nor should it be entrusted into the hands of people who find satisfaction in the clarity that their worldview seems to give them. I do not mean that such people would not benefit from uncertainty; I mean only that they will probably neither like nor welcome it, and they are very likely to do quite a lot of mischief as a result.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

≈

Painting, like all other forms of art, is an imperfect medium. Basil Hallward struggles with a realization that came very easily to Gilbert. In 'The Critic as Artist', Gilbert says to Ernest: 'The painter is so far limited that it is only through the mask of the body that he can show us the mystery of the soul; only through conventional images that he can handle ideas; only through its physical equivalents that he can deal with psychology'. The fact that Basil Hallward holds two quite opposing views at different points in the novel is not the cause of his anxiety. Neither does it diminish or call into question the value of his painting. At the moment each remark is made, there is a perfect unity between what he is saying, and how he is saying it.

From *Through a Country Wilde: The Artistic Landscape of Oscar Wilde*, by Charlotte Cornish



Macbeth is no less a demon, but his is not a private hell. Unlike Hamlet, Macbeth is fully aware of the existence of other people. More than that, he is interested in them. His interest is not a matter of altruism; nor is it a matter of idle curiosity. Macbeth is interested in people because he wants what they possess. We may say that he pays Duncan an equivocal sort of compliment by killing him, but there is no doubt that Macbeth fully understood he was taking a life, in a way that Hamlet, it seems, did not.

From *Thy Kingdom for a Couch: On the Character and Personality of Hamlet*, by Atticus Prescott



Young Toby Tiernan was not a young gentleman who was used to spending the bitter winter afternoons climbing fences, pulling up plants, and generally being exorcised from patches of private property by the adult homeowners of the area.

It has long been the claim of his friends and supporters that Master Tiernan's is a 'sober' and 'contemplative' disposition, better suited to the exercises of the mind than to those of the open air.

The dissenting view, held by Toby's critics, is that his character and conduct are suggestive of a ferret recovering in a darkened sickroom after a long night out. It has even been asserted that Toby Tiernan is a closet vegetarian, though this latter charge is generally dismissed as a gross fabrication, intended only to injure Master Toby's standing in the community.

It is agreed by all who know him, however, that a spirited run over a distance of many meters would be alien to his character, and entirely without precedent in his nine-year career upon this earth.

From *Sent Down: Stories from a University Town*, by Philip Sherwood

≈

Amy Dorrit threw back the shadow of the Marshalsea because she chose the Marshalsea; in the end, it may be that it is only by our being reconciled to our past that we can learn to live with it. If there is such a thing as ‘happily ever after’, it may be in the realization that we have not become, like Mrs. Clennam, the victims of our own authority, immobilized in a chair of our own crafting. If, at its worst, criticism involves the realization that some walls resist all efforts at removal, that despite the benefit of sunlight and a country to stretch our legs in, we may nevertheless come to declare, along with Miss Wade, ‘I have the misfortune of not being a fool’, then at its best, criticism is the fact of not being trammelled by what we demand of others, and by what we cannot quite bring ourselves to say. It is an acceptance, even, that a fool may be what we really are, that if we cannot absolutely be cured, we might, at least, not be quite so badly off as we are sometimes disposed to believe.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

Ψ

*'A child is necessarily a creative artist, though his choice of canvas is often questionable'.*

*Discuss.*

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was a loyal man. He was also a dedicated man. He was especially dedicated to all matters that had to do with his personal entertainment. The Chancellor of the Exchequer devoted a lot of time and energy to every sort of pleasurable pursuit. He took the waters at Bath, and he went camping in Cornwall. As a special treat, he would sometimes play a game or two of bingo.

The Chancellor was seldom in his office. He was seldom in his office because he believed in a laissez faire approach to the economy. The Chancellor thought it was his job simply to see to it that things were left alone. This was not easy to do when he was at his desk. When he was at his desk, a great many Members came in to talk to him. They asked him questions about markets and forecasts. It was all very upsetting. The whole point of a modern economy, as the Chancellor had tried several times to explain (and never with any success) is that no one really does know.

A note was posted on the Chancellor's door, whenever he was away. Sometimes, it stayed up for several weeks at a time. Once, he was gone so long that the Prime Minister feared that the Chancellor might have retired without telling anyone. The Prime Minister's second guess was that the Chancellor's return was delayed on account of his having fallen into quicksand, or his having been eaten by a shark. When he finally did appear again, the Chancellor had assured the Prime Minister that his fears had been unfounded. He had not been eaten by a shark, nor had he fallen into any quicksand. He certainly had not retired.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings



‘Please, sir’, said Gunther.

The Prince looked angry. ‘You will address me by my proper title, or I shall have you executed’.

‘What is more’, said the New Lord High Chamberlain, who was very eager to make a positive impression, ‘you should lie on the ground with your face to the floor when you address the prince’.

Gunther did as he was told. ‘Argumpf’, he said. It was not easy to make himself understood when his face was pressed to the carpet.

‘What did he say?’, demanded the Prince. ‘What title did he address me by?’

The New Lord High Chamberlain thought for a moment. He thought Gunther might have said: ‘Essence of earwax, nougat of nose’. But that could just have been his imagination. ‘I think he said: “Your Excellency”, Your Excellency’, replied the New Lord High Chamberlain, at last.

From *King Wilfred the Wise, and Why He Wasn't: A Fairytale*, by  
Clementine Blythe



§

Inconsistency itself is a form of truth. It is a faithfulness to authentic feeling. Mabel Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband* understands that truth is a messy, complex business, and there is value in never being entirely right. In ‘The Decay of Lying’, Vivian likewise warns against testing the value of his ideas according to their constancy. ‘Who wants to be consistent?’, he asks Cyril. ‘The dullard and the doctrinaire, the tedious people who carry out their principles to the bitter end of action, to the *reductio ad absurdum* of practice. Not I. Like Emerson, I write over the door of my library the word “Whim”’.

From *Through a Country Wilde: The Artistic Landscape of Oscar Wilde*, by Charlotte Cornish

Ω

In the modern era, John Calvin might have been a geneticist.

From *Sloshing About in the Primordial Soup: What Literary Critics Still Don't Understand About Science*, by William Stansfield

Ω

If we cannot help knowing that a churchyard is full of stones, it is also worth remembering that one of these once contained a sword, that within every person is contained the spirit of the man or woman who would be king, that a king may be what we really are, even when we are not at our best.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

£

The Prime Minister did not like to hear his friend insulted. He wished there was something he could do about that most troublesome of his cabinet ministers. The Prime Minister wanted very much to send the Home Secretary to the Tower of London. He knew that prime ministers no longer had the authority to incarcerate annoying ministers in the dungeons, but he was sure the Home Secretary would not like to spend the day in the company of so many tourists.

The Home Secretary was not fond of tourists. Nor was he fond of local customs; he hated the local customs of his own country most of all. He said he did not want to sit in any circle and wave wet socks in the air. He said he considered such practices to be 'backwards holdovers of a bygone era'. The Education Secretary said he wished the Home Secretary would not talk so much nonsense. Sitting in circles and twirling manky toe coverings was not a proper custom at all, and he, for his part, did not care to know what the Home Secretary got up to in his spare time.

From *The Adventures of the Baroque Backbencher*, by Professor Sir Reginald Hastings

## II

Andrew Burgess' *The Closet, Contrarian* asks us to consider what it means to want to feel complete.

From 'Wooden, and Not Wonderful', Thomas Finchbury's review of *The Closet, Contrarian*, a play by Andrew Burgess



The essential drama of *Hamlet* can be understood by any schoolchild who has been given a difficult assignment that he must do, but no definite timeframe within which to do it. Like a schoolchild, Hamlet worried and fretted and put the thing off as long as he could.

From *Thy Kingdom for a Couch: On the Character and Personality of Hamlet*, by Atticus Prescott



The truth might not set us free, but it does not have to drive us mad. If Camelot, like the court of Oedipus, seemed to fall because the truth was something too terrible to face and too traumatic to survive, then it is worth remembering that the story of Arthur ends with the prospect of a new beginning, that tribulation can be turned into triumph, that if what we experience is sometimes overpowering, it may be that how we experience – the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves – is also important, that we might feel differently if we had a different story to tell, or were not quite so sure we knew what story we were reading.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

Ψ

*Describe a piece of classical music.*



≈

Art appreciation does not confer special status. A great many people do not enjoy good art. A great many intelligent people do not enjoy it either.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by  
Hermione Digby

§

Science endeavors to understand something as it is, regardless of self-interest; literary criticism expresses a desire for meaning. Our interest in arrangement and order arises not because we are necessarily interested in science, but because we are interested in stories. And the story that seems to interest us most is the story of ourselves: the story of who we are, how we relate to those who are not us.

From *Sloshing About in the Primordial Soup: What Literary Critics Still Don't Understand About Science*, by William Stansfield



‘I might have known! My best friends would have warned me what would come of letting a lunatic like you loose in the place. I ought to have guessed that the first thing you would do – before so much as unpacking – would be to set the whole damned premises ablaze’.

‘Not me’, I said, wishing to give credit where credit was due. ‘Edwin’.

‘Edwin? My son?’

‘Yes, I know’, I said sympathetically. ‘Too bad. Yes, he’s your son, all right. He’s been tidying up’.

‘You can’t start a fire by tidying up’.

‘You can if you use gunpowder’.

‘Gunpowder?’

‘He appears to have touched off a keg or two in the kitchen chimney, to correct a disposition on its part to harbor soot’.

Well, I had naturally supposed, as anyone would have supposed, that this frank explanation would have set me right, causing him to dismiss me without a stain on my character, and that the rather personal note which had crept into his remarks would instantly have been switched off. What I had anticipated was that he would issue an apology for that crack of his about lunatics, which I would gracefully accept, and that we would then get together like two old buddies and shake our heads over the impulsiveness of the younger generation.

Not a bit of it, however. He continued to bend upon me the accusing gaze which I had disliked so much from the start.

‘Why the devil did you give the boy gunpowder?’

I saw that he had still got the wrong angle.

‘I didn’t give the boy gunpowder’.

‘Only a congenital idiot would give a boy gunpowder. There’s not a man in England, except you, who wouldn’t know what would happen if you gave a boy gunpowder. Do you realize what you have done? The sole reason for your coming here was that I should have a place where I could meet an old friend and discuss certain matters of interest, and now look at it. I ask you. Look at it’.

‘Not too good’, I was forced to concede, as the roof fell in, sending up a shower of sparks and causing a genial glow to play about our cheeks.

‘I suppose it never occurred to you to throw water on the flames?’

‘It did to Edwin. Only he used paraffin’.

He started, staring at me incredulously.

‘You tried to put out the fire with paraffin? You ought to be certified, and as soon as I collect a couple of doctors, I’ll have it seen to’.

What was making this conversation so difficult was, as you have probably spotted, the apparent impossibility of getting the old ass to sort out the principals in the affair and assign to each his respective role. He was one of those men you meet sometimes who only listen to about two words of any observation addressed to them. I suppose he had got that way through presiding at board meetings and constantly chipping in and squelching shareholders in the middle of sentences.

Once more, I tried to drive it home to him that it was Edwin who had done all the what you might call heavy work, Bertram having been throughout merely an innocent bystander, but it didn’t penetrate. He was left with the settled conviction that I and the child had got together, forming a quorum, and after touching off the place with gunpowder had nursed the conflagration along with careful injections of paraffin, each encouraging each, as you might say, on the principle that it is team-work that tells.

≥

If a stranger happens to tread on our toes, we can assure ourselves that it isn't our fault, that the stranger is a person of dubious character and doubtful parentage, or we can tell ourselves that we are the sort of person who deserves to be stepped on, that we went unnoticed because we are not worth noticing. When we think of criticism as being a quest for understanding, we sometimes find ourselves believing that life is the sort of thing that really can be decoded and understood. From there, it is but a short step to believing that if a person is not improved by our intervention, the failing is with the other person, and not with our prescription.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.

## II

Readiness is, first and foremost, a surrender of certainty. It means, among other things, receptiveness to all that lies beyond the limits of rationality. It is also a prerequisite of insight, which goes some way toward illuminating its significance in the story of Hamlet.

From *Thy Kingdom for a Couch: On the Character and Personality of Hamlet*, by Atticus Prescott

Ψ

*'When fellows used to ask me "What makes a good book?", I used to reply: "A spine, two covers, and a stack of paper, covered in text". Now, I'm not so sure'.*

*Make a list of your favorite books. Are there things they seem to have in common? When you are choosing a new book to read, what considerations inform your selection?*

≈

Now I'm not suggesting  
that you should actually court serious illness or injury.  
But sometimes it does a body good.  
Vis a vis lists, at least.  
Priorities, like.  
Knowing where you are and what things mean,  
if you catch my drift.  
What is important and what isn't.  
In life.  
And in other pursuits.  
The metaphysical machinery, in other words:  
being within being, and all that.  
Take, um – well,  
take whatchamacallit by way of example.  
Now that's what you may call a serious condition:  
Deep.  
'Grade-A potential for catastrophe',  
to use the medical lingo.  
Like, one minute you're fit as a bolt in a hole,  
and the next – flat on your back and feeling  
them stars above are a bit close for the liking.  
The things down below too.  
The dust mites 'rising like the blowing  
of your own hot air  
was the second coming of the sacred lord'.  
Whatever that means, if anything.  
Eternity – creeping up on you from all sides.  
Whispering in your ear.  
Otherwise, ears – in the more extreme cases.  
But always pressing –  
going straight for the tender spots.  
And no shortage of them, to be sure.  
The whatchamacallit makes certain  
you're not wanting for anything by way of hurts.  
Aches and pains a plenty.  
'Shivers and spits and the loosening of wits',  
as the poets say.  
And also, other bits.  
Discrete excretions unsuitable for capture in poetical form.  
Lots of loose pipes, if you catch my drift.  
Rather a tough fixture, to be sure.  
For all concerned, and also those who are in any way connected.  
With and to and from the invalid – to cover all the necessary bases.



And parties.  
Of which, there are relatively few.  
Parties, that is. Present in our hours of trial.  
Yours and mine.  
Usually no more than one or two:  
'the maudlin inheritance of the nuclear family'.  
Whatever that means, if anything.  
A mourner or a celebrant –  
and us,  
whatever the total of that comes to.  
Waiting, just waiting.  
Waiting to go on living,  
and waiting to go on dying.  
Will and codicil –  
though, no one knows which is which.  
Or who is who. Or what is what.  
Uncertainty intensified by the offer of a beverage.  
Tea: symbolic of a state or condition of being in junction.  
Into which we occasionally dip  
when we are parched for want of parting.  
Absent any prospect of satisfaction.  
Likewise, delivery.  
Therefore, occasionally mistaken for an article of faith.  
The – interregnum, as it were.  
And ever shall be.  
God and the atom sitting side by side.  
In silence.  
A mendicant and an ombudsman.  
Neither knowing who is winning and who is losing (or what is being  
loosed)  
Nor what score is to be settled, and by what means.  
If you listen closely, you can hear a pin drop.  
And maybe that's the point:  
Maybe, you never really can get ahead in the end.  
Maybe, for all the listing and the tilting  
we're never closer together or further apart than we ever were.  
Or ever will be.  
Maybe, after four and a half billion years,  
it's still one-one between the Spurs and the Villa.  
And Southampton, there – just waiting in the wings.  
Now wouldn't that be something?

From 'Criticism Restored', by Horatio Barnaby, M.A. Fellow of King's College,  
University of Worcester. Worcestershire.

≤

If art has only testimony to offer, a work of art may be set aside as soon as its evidence has been taken.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by Hermione Digby

Δ

It is, alas, all too easy to lose a friend; it is not such an easy thing to admit that we have lost an argument.

From *The Art of Art of Argument*, by Roderick Churchill

§

Those who are experienced in the art of public speaking will know that there are a number of recognized methods for getting an address underway. Some speakers like to ease into their subject gradually. They might begin, for example, by talking about the weather, and then, when everyone is nicely settled, they begin to tiptoe gradually in the general direction of the main idea, which might have to do with magic beans, magic carpets, the grinding of magic beans into magic carpets by people who will not watch where they are walking, or the decline and fall of global capitalism.

Americans and ministers of the Church of England like to begin on a more personal note. They say things like ‘Dearly Beloved’ and ‘This one goes out to all my favorite fatheads in the audience’. Americans are a kindly, but informal people. Vicars are kindlier, and even more informal than our transatlantic cousins, though their frankness is not universally admired. The Ladies’ Knitting Club of Devon and Somerset does not like it; the Rugby Club of Kidderminster does not like it either.

From *Speak and Scoot: Lessons from a University Lectern*, by Montague Camden



Children do not climb beanstalks or fall into worlds far below the ground if they have responsible adults in their life to tell them to stay indoors and do their chores. It is responsible parents who are to blame, therefore, if a child does not find any hidden worlds.

From *Loco Parentis: Literature and Adult Foolishness*, by Egbert Brandon



‘You are old, Father William,’ the young man said,  
‘And your hair has become very white;  
And yet you incessantly stand on your head –  
Do you think, at your age, it is right?’

‘In my youth,’ Father William replied to his son,  
‘I feared it might injure the brain;  
But, now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,  
Why, I do it again and again.’

‘You are old,’ said the youth, ‘as I mentioned before,  
And have grown most uncommonly fat;  
Yet you turned a back-somersault in at the door --  
Pray, what is the reason for that?’

‘In my youth,’ said the sage, as he shook his grey locks,  
‘I kept all my limbs very supple  
By the use of this ointment -- one shilling a box --

Allow me to sell you a couple?’

‘You are old,’ said the youth, ‘and your jaws are too weak  
For anything tougher than suet;  
Yet you finished the goose, with the bones and the beak --  
Pray, how did you manage to do it?’

‘In my youth,’ said his father, ‘I took to the law,  
And argued each case with my wife;  
And the muscular strength, which it gave to my jaw,  
Has lasted the rest of my life.’

‘You are old,’ said the youth, ‘one would hardly suppose  
That your eye was as steady as ever;  
Yet you balanced an eel on the end of your nose --  
What made you so awfully clever?’

‘I have answered three questions, and that is enough,’  
Said his father. ‘Don't give yourself airs!  
Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff?  
Be off, or I'll kick you down stairs.’

From *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll



Miss Amber Ross, aged seven and three-quarter, is a regular and frequent contributor to the 'Letters to the Editor' section of *The Guardian* newspaper, as well as other, similarly earnest publications. When she is not commenting on the news of the day, Miss Ross is generally to be found indulging the other of her life's passions.

Mrs. Ross, who is a much-respected member of the community, does not mind that her daughter kicks the neighbors' shins. She does hope, however, that Amber will one day grow out of the habit of writing letters to *The Guardian*.

From *Sent Down: Stories from a University Town*, by Philip Sherwood



\*

What principally distinguishes reviewers from other writers – and all readers – is their obvious preference for bad writing over good writing. Every reviewer who lives by his pen lives on the strength of his point. Reviewing a novel or a piece of drama is not dissimilar to fighting a duel. Wise reviewers do not trade barbs with their betters because they are certain to get the worst of the exchange. Good writing causes reviewers to retire early and quietly to bed.

From *To Hunt and To Quill*, by Montgomery Carlisle

Ψ

*'Art is long, but science is cheating'.*

*Discuss.*

≤

At its worst, criticism can make it difficult to bear the reality of other people. Like the activist who knows that ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are not sufficiently comprehensive terms for describing the lives we want to lead, the critic is always in danger of essentializing by over-defining, is always in danger of turning a possibility into a prison. If art is most like life when we are turning the material of a life into a story, it may be that the practice of criticism, whatever else it is, is partly a feeling that no story is ever complete, but that every story is at least slightly misleading: like a good guide, it is always just a little too willing to show us what we want to see.

From the preface of *What to Do About Authority: Towards an Alternative Vision of Literary Criticism*, by Rupert Kimberley-Kent.



The aesthetes touched the last insane limits of language in their eulogy on lovely things. The thistledown made them weep; a burnished beetle brought them to their knees. Yet their emotion never impressed me for an instant, for this reason, that it never occurred to them to pay for their pleasure in any sort of symbolic sacrifice. Men (I felt) might fast forty days for the sake of hearing a blackbird sing. Men might go through fire to find a cowslip. Yet these lovers of beauty could not even keep sober for the blackbird. They would not go through common Christian marriage by way of recompense to the cowslip. Surely one might pay for extraordinary joy in ordinary morals. Oscar Wilde said that sunsets were not valued because we could not pay for sunsets. But Oscar Wilde was wrong; we can pay for sunsets. We can pay for them by not being Oscar Wilde.

From *Orthodoxy*, by G.K. Chesterton

§

Art does not tell us the truth about wardrobes; it reminds us that we should not take wardrobes for granted.

From 'Living With the Lion: A Return to Narnia', by Lucy Gatesby

Ω

Mr. F's Aunt does not desire that gentlemen callers should be hurled out of windows on account of some early, half-remembered trauma. What makes her so fascinating and inexhaustible is the fact that there is every reason for her unreasonableness, because there is really no reason at all.

From *Loco Parentis: Literature and Adult Foolishness*, by Egbert Brandon



The true critic does not master art; he is mastered by it.

From *Mirror, Mirror, On It All: Reflections of an Art Critic*, by  
Hermione Digby

≈

The last thing that can be said of a lunatic is that his actions are causeless. If any human acts may loosely be called causeless, they are the minor acts of a healthy man; whistling as he walks; slashing the grass with a stick; kicking his heels or rubbing his hands. It is the happy man who does the useless things; the sick man is not strong enough to be idle. It is exactly such careless and causeless actions that the madman could never understand; for the madman (like the determinist) generally sees too much cause in everything. The madman would read a conspiratorial significance into those empty activities. He would think that the lopping of the grass was an attack on private property. He would think that the kicking of the heels was a signal to an accomplice. If the madman could for an instant become careless, he would become sane.

From *Orthodoxy*, by G.K. Chesterton





*The Glockenspiels are made up of a Father, a Mother, a Son, and a Daughter. The Daughter, who is a matriculating first-year student, wants to be a writer of experimental novels. The Father is a ruddy-complexioned hellhound and demands to know how his money is being spent, since it is not being spent teaching finance and accounting. If a compelling case for the merits of our course cannot be prepared in advance of the Monday get-together with this Glockenspiel troupe, I will ask to borrow Barnaby's copy of the Collected Works of Marcel Proust, so that if he tries to pull any funny stuff, Mr. Glockenspiel will at least leave knowing that he has paid a heavy reckoning.*

Ψ

*In The Go-Between, L.P. Hartley wrote: 'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there'. Is it significant that the line occurs at the beginning of the novel, rather than the end? Why or why not? What insight might this give us about the study of history?*

## II

‘Ahem!’ said the Mouse with an important air, ‘are you all ready? This is the driest thing I know. Silence all round, if you please! “William the Conqueror, whose cause was favoured by the pope, was soon submitted to by the English, who wanted leaders, and had been of late much accustomed to usurpation and conquest. Edwin and Morcar, the earls of Mercia and Northumbria—”’

‘Ugh!’ said the Lory, with a shiver.

‘I beg your pardon!’ said the Mouse, frowning, but very politely: ‘Did you speak?’

‘Not I!’ said the Lory hastily.

‘I thought you did,’ said the Mouse. ‘--I proceed. “Edwin and Morcar, the earls of Mercia and Northumbria, declared for him: and even Stigand, the patriotic archbishop of Canterbury, found it advisable--”’

‘Found *what?*’ said the Duck.

‘Found *it,*’ the Mouse replied rather crossly: ‘of course you know what “it” means.’

‘I know what “it” means well enough, when I find a thing,’ said the Duck: ‘it’s generally a frog or a worm. The question is, what did the archbishop find?’

The Mouse did not notice this question, but hurriedly went on, “--found it advisable to go with Edgar Atheling to meet William and offer him the crown. William’s conduct at first was moderate. But the insolence of his Normans--” How are you getting on now, my dear?’ it continued, turning to Alice as it spoke.

‘As wet as ever,’ said Alice in a melancholy tone: ‘it doesn’t seem to dry me at all.’

‘In that case,’ said the Dodo solemnly, rising to its feet, ‘I move that the meeting adjourn, for the immediate adoption of more energetic remedies--’

‘Speak English!’ said the Eaglet. ‘I don’t know the meaning of half those long words, and, what’s more, I don’t believe you do either!’ And the Eaglet bent down its head to hide a smile: some of the other birds tittered audibly.

‘What I was going to say,’ said the Dodo in an offended tone, ‘was, that the best thing to get us dry would be a Caucus-race.’

‘What *is* a Caucus-race?’ said Alice; not that she wanted much to know, but the Dodo had paused as if it thought that *somebody* ought to speak, and no one else seemed inclined to say anything.

‘Why,’ said the Dodo, ‘the best way to explain it is to do it.’ (And, as you might like to try the thing yourself, some winter day, I will tell you how the Dodo managed it.)

First it marked out a race-course, in a sort of circle, (‘the exact shape doesn’t matter,’ it said,) and then all the party were placed along the course, here and there. There was no ‘One, two, three, and away,’ but they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over. However, when they had been running half an hour or so, and were quite dry again, the Dodo suddenly called out ‘The race is over!’ and they all crowded round it, panting, and asking, ‘But who has won?’

This question the Dodo could not answer without a great deal of thought, and it sat for a long time with one finger pressed upon its forehead (the position in which you usually see Shakespeare, in the pictures of him), while the rest waited in silence. At last the Dodo said, ‘*Everybody* has won, and all must have prizes.’

‘But who is to give the prizes?’ quite a chorus of voices asked.

‘Why, *she*, of course,’ said the Dodo, pointing to Alice with one finger; and the whole party at once crowded round her, calling out in a confused way, ‘Prizes! Prizes!’

Alice had no idea what to do, and in despair she put her hand in her pocket, and pulled out a box of comfits,

(luckily the salt water had not got into it), and handed them round as prizes. There was exactly one a-piece all round.

‘But she must have a prize herself, you know,’ said the Mouse.

‘Of course,’ the Dodo replied very gravely. ‘What else have you got in your pocket?’ he went on, turning to Alice.

‘Only a thimble,’ said Alice sadly.

‘Hand it over here,’ said the Dodo.

Then they all crowded round her once more, while the Dodo solemnly presented the thimble, saying ‘We beg your acceptance of this elegant thimble’; and, when it had finished this short speech, they all cheered.

Alice thought the whole thing very absurd, but they all looked so grave that she did not dare to laugh; and, as she could not think of anything to say, she simply bowed, and took the thimble, looking as solemn as she could.

From *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll



*Barnaby, no doubt modelling himself after a singer of popular songs, this afternoon declared: 'You can't understand if you do not read, and you cannot read if you do not understand. Do-be-do-be-do'. I found I could only shake my head. Sometimes, I despair of Barnaby. If Barnaby has a fault, and I think he does, it is that he is never candid. I doubt even the younger generations have any idea what he is saying.*

I set out into the forest, but instead of solitude, I found an old and well-worn path, and as I walked, I found that I was all the better for not being alone.

From *What Matters*, by Lydia Atterton

*You're not a bad sort either, though misunderstood. What others mistake for your 'soulful aspect' is really simple greed. They see the soft smile and they think your thoughts are turned heavenwards, whereas I happen to know perfectly well that you're only thinking of your next dinner, and how you're going to try to get me to pay for it. Still, I do not complain. You are by way of being the last of the real lunatics, and if you will make the college your sanctuary, then it falls to me to be your guardian.*

*Yours,*

*Barnaby*

*P.S. The Flood is looking for you. He wants to see the manuscript. I don't suggest you show it to him, as it isn't any good. 'A good sentence is very like a good spell'? Really, I've never heard so much nonsense in all my life. I don't suppose you can help it, but do at least try not to leave the thing lying around, won't you?*

*Oh, and if you happen to see this note, I have a scheme that I should like to run by you. It involves Muller, a surfeit of ribbon and string, three windup mice, the same number of rubber reptiles, one cutout mask of Her Majesty, the Queen, and as much flour as you can lay your hands on. I'll give you all the details later*

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