15 | What Makes a Work "Great"?

There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

One thing only do I know for certain and that is that man’s judgements of value follow directly his wishes for happiness--that, accordingly, they are an attempt to support his illusions with arguments.

Writing of Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson famously defined the "great" literary work as that which "can please many and please long." Shakespeare pleased the Elizabethans and Jacobeans; he pleased Johnson's eighteenth-century spectators; he pleases today's Broadway and West End audiences; and he even does well in the regional theaters (as in the hilarious stage scenes in *Huckleberry Finn*). Dr. Johnson's definition makes sense like no other. It too has pleased many and pleased long.

Pleasing many and pleasing long

Pleasing, however, we have seen in considering enjoyment and creativity (chs. 12 and 14), is a complicated business. To say that I have enjoyed a work of literature is to say several things. I have come to it with expectations from semantic and procedural memory, among them, to gain pleasure
and not to act. If I enjoy the work, these have been gratified. To enjoy means, too, that I have been able to use the form of the work in combination with my own characteristic pattern of defenses to ward off any unpleasant feelings. I have also been able to project my characteristic wishes and fantasies into the work, adding to its story or imagery. Finally, I have been able to make sense of it in a way that I find satisfying. I have brought it into harmony with my own ongoing relationship with reality. All these conditions depend on some habits quite personal to me, habits ingrained in my SELF circuitry or my identity theme. If I can complete this relationship with a literary work within the processes characteristic for me, I will enjoy the experience. I may even take an additional step and pronounce that literary work "great."

In this process, we have found one necessary but particularly dicey condition for pleasing: the forms of the literary work must cooperate with the defenses of each reader or spectator as embodied in various brain systems. When we are talking (as with Shakespeare) about thousands and hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of people being pleased, how can one work possibly match all those psychological patterns? Yet some works do. Some writers, those we award "greatness" to, create something that matches the psyches of all kinds of people from many different eras and cultures. How can that be? Many thinkers have believed that works that achieve that remarkable trick have certain qualities in common.

Greatness "in" the work?

Many theorists have tried to explain how some literary works "please many and please long" by things "in" the "great" works. The theorists, like most of us when we think about literature, have a simple, A-B-C model in mind. There is A, the artist, B, the work of art, and C, the audience. Artists have something called "talent" or "genius" or "creativity" that enables them to make B, a work of art. B has certain properties--call them, for the time being, "beauty." Then this "beauty" in the object evokes a certain aesthetic appreciation from us, its audience. A causes B which causes C. The artist's creativity causes the artistic object and the artistic object causes our response. Q.E.D.--sort of.
There are some problems with this picture. Chief among them is the annoying fact that, although we have been working with this simple, clear-cut A-B-C model at least since Aristotle, that is, for over two thousand years, it has yielded rather limited results. We've not been able to settle on those properties in literary works that lead us to call them "great."

A famous formula for literature was that of the philosopher Monroe Beardsley: unity, complexity, intensity.¹ That is to say, there should be a wholeness, an integrity, a unity, to a work, at the same time that it is sufficiently various or intricate or complicated to hold our interest. Then there is intensity. Beardsley apparently meant a certain passion or emotion or arousal. But literary works do not have passions, people do. I suppose by “intensity,” he meant something like the ability to make us feel passionately. But can we locate that in a literary work, or any artistic work for that matter?

Psychologist Ellen Winner in her thoroughgoing survey of psychological research in the arts suggests three slightly different criteria for artistic merit: repleteness, expression, and composition.² Repleteness is an extremely interesting idea that she gets, I gather, from the philosopher Nelson Goodman.³ Consider a zigzag line like the kind you see on stock charts. If we are concerned just with it as representing stock prices, then we will only be concerned with the numerical values represented by the line. We can, however, look at such a line as a work of art. Thus, I once saw a show of tapestries by Jan Groth that looked very like white stock market lines on a black background. If we look at such a line as a work of art, we will be concerned with many more aspects of the line than some numerical values it might represent: its varying thickness, its darkness, its size relative to the objects around it, and its placement on the page.

Such a line’s having these many different aspects is “repleteness,” as Goodman and Winner define it. “Repleteness,” writes Winner, “refers to the fact that in a work of art, relatively more aspects of the symbol ‘count’ than in a nonart object. And expression [another of her criteria] refers to the psychological states and sensory qualities metaphorically conveyed by a work of art.”⁴ By her

¹ Beardsley 1958, chs. 10-11.
² Winner 1982, 7-8.
⁴ Winner 1982, 170.
third criterion, “composition,” Winner means structure, arrangement, including, perhaps, patterns of theme and variation. Perhaps she means what literary critics talk about as the combination of unity and complexity.

All of these, however, the psychologist’s entities or the critic’s, are difficult to measure, difficult to isolate, and difficult to replicate. That is, if you use a still life painting to illustrate structure, how do you isolate the effect of structure from the effect of subject matter? Most important, these qualities ostensibly "in" the work of art itself blur into the way we look at the work of art. Repleteness, for example. Is repleteness a property of an artistic imitation of a stock chart? Or is repleteness an idea that we bring to bear on that chart when we decide we shall look at it as a work of art? In other words, is repleteness a stance we take and not a property of the object at all?

A formula like Beardsley’s or Winner’s, merit equals this plus that plus the other, presents another problem. What happens if you turn it around? For example, I can easily create an object that has unity and complexity. Perhaps I could copy out a complicated Chinese ideogram and repeat it over and over. I would have made something unified but complex. I could then make it "replete," perhaps by using different thicknesses of brush. Would that be a "good" work of art? Probably not, not without some je ne sais quoi that my artist and writer friends can produce and I cannot. My point is that one can make something with these properties: unity, complexity, intensity, repleteness, expression, composition, but it may very well not be at all pleasing. And people will not pronounce it "good" or "great."

The return of the reader

Some of the experiments with children that Howard Gardner and Winner have carried out at Project Zero raise a question about the whole idea of "effect."5 That is, does a certain "repleteness" or "complexity" in the work "effect" a certain response in the viewer? No, say Winner and Gardner, not unless the individual is mature enough or sophisticated enough to recognize and enjoy those features. Not unless the individual has acquired the internal systems necessary to do the right kind of

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5 Gardner, 1982.
perceiving for that work of art (through college courses, for example). The simple A-causes-B-and-B-causes-C model, in which the artist puts in unity and unity causes pleasure, needs to be complicated to take into account the differing skills of different members of the audience. The reader, like the repressed, returns.

There is, for example, great variability in our responses from culture to culture. For example, do you like Chinese opera? Most Westerners don’t, for that music is not part of our “interpretive community,” as Stanley Fish calls it.6 Picasso’s Guernica looks unified to us, but it outraged many of the people who first saw the painting. In my graduate school days, we looked down on Byron and Shelley and revered Donne and Herbert. Nowadays, I think, the opposite would be true. The Waste Land provoked consternation and dismay when a reading public was first perplexed by it. Nowadays, we teach it to first-year students.

Even within a given culture, there is great variation. For example, when I collected responses to stories from a group of graduate students in English at one university, that was surely a very narrowly defined culture or “interpretive community.” Yet even they showed a tremendous variability.7

To give you a brief sample of the variability among those students, here is a sentence from a much-anthologized short story of Faulkner’s, “A Rose for Emily”:

> We had long thought of them as a tableau, Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip, the two of them framed by the back-flung front door.

One of my student readers, Sam, read it this way:

> The father was very domineering. One of the most striking images in the book is that of the townsfolk looking through the door as her father stands there with a horsewhip in his hands, feet spread apart and between or through him you see a picture of Emily standing in the background, and that pretty much sums up exactly the kind of relationship they had.

Sam saw a dominating, tyrannical father. By contrast, a second reader, Saul, read that same sentence this way:

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6 Fish 1980.
7 Holland 1975.
The father ‘a spraddled silhouette.’ He’s no longer stern and erect. He’s spraddled across the door. And Saul took the image to be one of the father’s decline and impotency.8

Their readings stemmed ultimately from differences in personality that expressed themselves in different wish-fulfilling fantasies that led to different "content." Sam wanted to see masculine strength and power. Saul feared that a superior power would get from him what he did not want to give. He wanted to see power weakened.

This kind of wide variation in people’s readings is not the exception, but the rule. Nor does it have much to do with the amount of training people have in critical reading. Sam and Saul were graduate students in English, and when I collected responses from forty-four professors of English, they showed equally various responses even to simple grammatical questions.9 As we saw (in ch. 11) with Ellen’s laughing at the cartoons, her sense of humor was her sense of humor: a highly individual thing.

In short, people have styles of reading. Responses and therefore the merit attributed to any given literary work vary tremendously, not only in matters of complex interpretation but just in the reading of a simple word or sentence. This variability gives me a second reason to discount the A-B-C, cause-and-effect idea that an artist’s creativity puts some quality in a work of art which causes a positive response. How can we say that a work of art causes its audience to think it is good, regardless of what its audience brings to it, when the responses are so various? And they are very various indeed.

Yet surely the general direction in which the literary transaction moves is from author to work to audience. When I enjoy a work of literature, it certainly feels as though something like A-causes-B-and-B-causes-C has taken place (as we saw in ch. 3). It feels as though some "goodness" or "greatness" in the work of art has given me the special pleasure we call "aesthetic." What is that goodness or greatness and how does it relate to my feeling??

From "I enjoyed it" to "That is great!"

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8 Holland 1975, ch. 6.
9 Holland 1986.
Notice that the subject of those two sentences has changed from "I" to "That." Therein lies a considerable problem. The branch of philosophy that deals with beauty and the arts, aesthetics, has struggled with it for centuries. On the one hand "I enjoyed," according to traditional aesthetics, refers to an immediate sensory experience. But as we have seen (in ch. 12) our enjoying has an intellectual component. We have to "make sense" of a text. Philosophers find this step a contradiction to the immediate sensory experience, but, from a neuropsychological point of view, "making sense" of a sensory experience simply continues that experience toward completion. We move from wishing or goal-seeking toward a realistic assessment of reality in the manner of everyday thinking. But I see no contradiction between "I enjoyed" and "I made sense of it." Making sense of a work is part of the enjoying, indeed, a condition for it. Otherwise one feels uncomfortably baffled.

Philosophers (starting with Alexander Baumgarten and Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century) have held that when I say, "That is great," I am saying something quite different from "I enjoyed that." I am pronouncing a judgment (an "aesthetic judgment") that quite diverges, as an act of mind, from the immediacy of "I enjoyed."

For that reason, the phrase "aesthetic judgment" (the philosophers point out) involves a contradiction in terms. "Aesthetic" refers to immediate enjoyment, but "judgment" refers to some kind of evaluative thinking that probably happens after the immediate enjoyment and differs from it.

After I have enjoyed some work, after I have found it "literary" or "beautiful," only then do I advance reasons for my judgment. Only then do I single out this or that feature of the object and say that it caused or led me to my appreciation. This is quite a different procedure from simply enjoying a novel or a poem. One is sensory and immediate, the other reasoned and deliberate. One involves, as we have seen, brain systems that reach from brain stem to frontal lobes. The other relies more strictly on frontal and verbal activity.

In my own reading, I often separate "I enjoy" from "That is great." I admire as "great" Spenser's Faerie Queene and Joyce's Finnegans Wake and Bergman's Persona, but I cannot honestly say I "enjoy" any of them. Conversely, I greatly enjoy reading Sherlock Holmes' detections or John
Mortimer’s stories about barrister Horace Rumpole and She Who Must Be Obeyed, but I would not award either the accolade of “great.” The two claims differ.

Making a judgment

According to both Dr. Johnson’s simple formulation and Kant’s weighty “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment,” when we say a work of literature is “great,” we are predicting. We are predicting that many others will feel the delight we felt in the work. (Or perhaps we are predicting they will feel the delight I thought I ought to feel in the case of The Faerie Queen, Persona, or Finnegans Wake.) And we will go on to find reasons for our prediction.

Like all primates we have an idea of how the minds of our fellow primates work. We assume that their brains will work much as our own do. Social psychologists call this in humans the “false consensus effect,” and they have observed it many, many times over. People tend to “see their own behavioral choices and judgments as relatively common and appropriate to existing circumstances while viewing alternative responses as uncommon, deviant, or inappropriate.”

If I enjoyed this book or movie or play, than others will, too.

Having enjoyed, we usually will find a reason we did. As we saw in ch. 3, we seek causes for what we experience. Having felt an emotion, pleasure, we will seek reasons for it and we will find them. (One might mention in this connection amnesics’ confabulations or Michael Gazzaniga’s left-brain “interpreter” that gives reasons for experiences that only the split-off right hemisphere had.) Judging literature, we will point to various features and properties of the literary work and assure ourselves and others that those are what led to our enjoyment. (Note the A-B-C model.)

If we wish to award stars like a movie reviewer, value judgments on the work, we are likely to say that those features will cause others to enjoy the work. “You’ll laugh your head off at that scene.” “You’ll find the middle section too long.” We assume that others’ minds will work as ours did.

Evaluation, then, proceeds in stages. 1) I enjoy or I don’t—an immediate experience. 2) Afterward, reflectively, I find things “in” the work to explain that experience. 3) Again later, I predict

that others will respond to those features as I did or, as I thought, on reflection I should have responded. This triad sums up Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment, and it makes clear how paradoxical aesthetic judgment is. It is as strange as our financial judgments of stocks.

Literature and the stock market

It was Marcel Proust, I believe, who first analogized between the stock market and the rise and fall of various composers and novelists in the canon of our admiration. At the time I am writing, for instance, we could say that Wordsworth and Wallace Stevens are up in people’s aesthetic judgments, Tennyson and T. S. Eliot are down.

I too see an analogy between literary value and the price of a share of stock. The problem in what is called pricing theory is, What sets the price of a certain share of stock? It is the same problem as Proust’s with literature: What sets the value of Wordsworth or Tennyson?

With stock pricing as with evaluation, there is a traditional, commonsensical, A-causes-B-and-B-causes-C theory. In the world of stock prices, this established point of view is called “fundamental analysis” and associated with a famous book. Benjamin Graham and David Dodd published Security Analysis in 1934, and it has appeared in edition after edition to this day.

Investors, they counseled, should examine balance sheets, profit and loss statements, sales trends and every piece of information possible about the company behind the stock (its “fundamentals”). That way an investor would arrive at the “true value” of the stock. (In the same way, a literary critic might examine everything about a poem to determine its “true value.”) Then the investor’s winning strategy becomes absurdly simple. Buy stocks that the market has underpriced relative to that true value and sell stocks that the market has overpriced. When the market comes to its senses and gives the stock its true value, the investor is bound to make money.

That is all very commonsensical, and it has a very commonsensical model behind it, just like the commonsensical A-causes-B-and-B-causes-C model we have been considering for the literary process. Your broker might tell you, for example that Behemoth Industries is “undervalued,” and it’s

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13 Graham and Dodd 1934.
time to buy, or that Coolidea.com is “overvalued,” and it’s time to sell. The earnings of your broker, note, depend upon your buying and selling because of his or her forecasting and advising.

When you turn from the securities industry to the professors who teach courses in finance (and who do not profit from your buyings and sellings), you find an altogether different model of stock market pricing. The professors’ research relies on computer studies of historical stock prices over many, many years, even pre-computer years. They compare later stock prices with earlier prices, with market indexes, with earnings and profits, with inflation, with interest rates, with "fundamentals," even with baseball averages or the height of women’s skirts. With a unanimity quite rare among academics, they do not find any correlations--or only the most limited.14

From the professors’ point of view, wisdom in the stock market begins in typically academic fashion, with a Latin quotation. *Res tantum valet quantum vendi potest.*15 A thing is worth as much as it can be sold for. In other words, what determines the price of a stock or anything else, for that matter, your house or your Picasso, is what somebody else will pay you for it. That seems to me undeniable, even a tautology. The management of Coolidea.com can claim all the profits in the world, but if investors believe that Coolidea isn’t so cool or that interest rates will go back up to 15% where they were in the early 1980s or that the "bubble" will burst or that management is lying, the price of a share of Coolidea.com will go down. It is not the profits management has announced nor the "fundamentals" of the company that determines the price. The investor's willingness to pay a certain price does, plus the investor's ability to make that willingness felt in the efficient market of a stock exchange.

“Efficient market” is a term of art among professors of finance. It refers to a special property of a stock exchange, namely, that all the buyers and all the sellers come to the same open place to do business. As a result, any one buyer’s move or any one seller’s move is immediately known to all the other players. If sellers are asking 102 for a share of Coolidea.com, but you are willing to sell for 101,

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14 For a readable summary of these competing points of view, see Cassidy 2003.
15 Granger and Morgenstern 1970.
all the sellers in the stock market will immediately know that. The principle, a thing is worth someone will pay for it, gets translated immediately into a new price. Dealing in an efficient market is altogether from selling your home or your Picasso.

Now what does all this have to do with literature? The literary stock exchange is also an efficient market with a free flow of information. Once I have read a poem by Wordsworth or Tennyson plus the relevant critics, I have all the relevant information. With literature, there is no possibility of insider trading or management's lying, is there? But there is another complication.

John Maynard Keynes, a brilliantly successful investor, described the stock market as like a newspaper beauty-judging contest, but not a beauty contest, a beauty-judging contest. The aim is to select the six prettiest faces out of a hundred photographs, but the prize goes to the person whose selections come closest to those of the rest of the judges. In other words, you don’t judge who is the most beautiful. You judge who the other judges will think is the most beautiful. In effect, Keynes is saying, the only way to make money in the stock market is to predict what the other investors will do.

The clever investor in Coolidea.com is trying to guess, not the price a year from now--no one can do that--and not the earnings a year from now--no one can do that either. Each investor is trying to guess how other investors will value those earnings a year from now or, still more precisely, this investor is trying to guess how other investors will guess other investors will value those earnings a year from now or two years from now or five years from now. The problem is to predict what the average opinion will be of the average opinion. Indeed it is an infinite series: the problem is to predict what the average opinion will be of the average opinion of the average opinion of the average opinion (and so on, for as many stages as you have patience for) of the value of the stock. And that is why "beating" the stock market is the mysterious, difficult, and insoluble thing it is.

Evaluation in literature is like that. When I say T. S. Eliot is a great poet, I am really saying something like, People will be reading Eliot a hundred or two hundred years from now, students will be assigned him in school, and professors will be writing learned articles about him. Note that this is

16 A particularly engaging and readable account of the theories put forward in this and succeeding paragraphs is Malkiel 2000. See also Brealey 1983; Cootner, ed. 1967; Cragg and Malkiel 1982.
the same impossible prediction as trying to say how the investing public will value the earnings of Coolidea.com five or ten years from now. The literary stock market is efficient as well. If you are a publishing critic, and you say Eliot is not as good as Wallace Stevens, your valuation is immediately available to me, like the price of a share of Behemoth Industries.

Further, it seems to me that the literary world has a counterpart to the theoretical tug-of-war between the securities industry’s fundamental analysis and the finance professors’ efficient market theory. In the world of finance, “fundamental” analysis suggests the price is a function of certain properties of the stock itself (the company’s balance sheet, say). That is like saying aesthetic value is a function of certain properties of the poem or the novel or the drama. This is what reviewers of books and movies and plays in the newspapers customarily do. They can wittily point to properties that supposedly tell them whether you will like the item in question or not.

But investors’ expectations will drive up the price of dot-com stocks regardless of fundamental properties (as the pre-release buzz can drive up attendance at some pretty awful movies). It is clear that readers’ and critics’ judgments are what make up greatness. And it must be equally clear that an academic fad for postmodernism or metaphysical wit or projective poetry will change all our evaluations of previous literature. Indeed, in T. S. Eliot’s famous epigram, “The past [is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.”

On the literary stock market as I write, Wordsworth is up and Tennyson is down. Why? Not because of any properties intrinsic to Wordsworth or Tennyson. What they wrote has not changed since it was published. Rather, we academics no longer value rhyme very highly, and we therefore prefer Wordsworth’s rather eccentric blank verse to Tennyson’s rhyme and stricter form. We no longer value philosophical rumination or dramatic monologue, Tennyson’s favorite forms. We do value a study of childhood like Wordsworth’s Prelude.

So with T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. Their writings have not changed, but academics’ tastes have. Critics are no longer so interested in literary references or conservative political and social

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18 Eliot 1919, 5.
commentary like Eliot’s. The professoriate tends to value more Stevens’ playing with philosophical paradoxes and his deconstructing the questions of perception and knowledge. Hence Stevens and Wordsworth go up on the stock exchange and Tennyson and Eliot go down, not as a result of what they wrote, but as a result of the way readers and critics value what they wrote. "Greatness" is not "in" the work but in people's estimations of the work, just as in the stock market.

From literary theory to life

Notice that this stock market analogy applies to many other phenomena. I am simply updating for the dot-com era the old saying, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." For example, why is a best seller a best seller? Publishers say such a book “has legs,” that is, it walks right out of the stores. But surely it isn’t the book that has legs, but the people who buy it. We are not talking about a property in the book that makes it a best-seller. If we were, writers would all be millionaires. All the writer would have to do is to examine a number of best sellers, find out what quality they have in common, and write a book with that quality. Would it were so easy. Rather, what happens is that readers find they can do something they want to do with a certain book. When enough readers find that they can use a given book to their own satisfaction, then enough people buy the book to make it a best-seller.

So with advertising. The test of an advertisement is not the ingenuity of the so-called “creative” group that composed it. The test of an advertisement is whether or not it sells the product. The advertiser paying the bills wants to know how real people really respond to the ad. The advertiser places the ad in a test market area and sees whether sales of the product go up.

The same argument applies to movie stars. Traditionally, we say that a Gwyneth Paltrow “has something” that brings in audiences and sells tickets. She has "sex appeal" or “box office” or “star quality.” We locate the cause of the transaction in the stimulus. But again, isn’t there an alternative model that turns the transaction the other way around? Isn’t it a matter of what we are able to do for ourselves with a Gwyneth Paltrow? If enough moviegoers can satisfy their psychological needs with Gwyneth Paltrow, Gwyneth Paltrow becomes a star.
As long as we are speaking of movie stars, doesn’t the same model apply to a political leader? At least the modern blow-dried political leader with TV-5 make-up and a speech and media coach. That is, we speak of something called charisma, which once meant a grace or talent that was a gift from the gods. In recent centuries, we have secularized it, as in my American Heritage Dictionary: “A rare quality or power attributed to those persons who have demonstrated an exceptional ability for leadership and for securing the devotion of large numbers of people.” But like price in the stock market, political charisma really—and here I am applying behaviorist rigor—rests on the fact that many people give devotion to a certain leader or consent to be led by him or her. The question really is, What were people able to do for themselves with a Roosevelt, a Hitler, a Gandhi, or a Reagan? To study charisma, we need to ask the citizenry rather than look into the biography of the leader.

The same issue applies in psychotherapy. Meaning is not “in” the symptom, dream, verbal slip, or association. That was the kind of dream interpretation in “ancient times” from which Freud so sharply distinguished his own methods. Rather, the patient says something about the symptom, dream, verbal slip, or association, and only then an act of interpretation and evaluation by patient or therapist completes the transaction. By our subsequent actions, we or our therapist endow our words about a symptom, dream, slip, or association with meaning.

The reason I have gone from the stock market to literary value to political charisma to psychotherapy is not that I am scatterbrained, although that is a possibility not to be lost sight of. The reason is that when we try to understand these so very different processes, we begin to recognize that our understanding of literature and the arts and our evaluations in life rest on one of two fundamentally different ways we think about human beings.

You can hardly make any statement about human activities without assuming some sort of model of the human being. It is well to be aware of what your model is and, if need be, to question it.¹⁹

Two models of the human being

¹⁹ Holland 1985.
Here I have tried to point out something about the words "good" or "great," when applied to a literary work, but it applies to a whole lot of other words--"pizzazz," "glamor," "charisma," "charm," "sex appeal," "beauty," "box office," "oomph," "attraction," "magnetism," "allure," "symbolism," "structure." We could go on and on. Most of our judgments of value rest on a stimulus-response model of the human. They base response on a certain property in the stimulus, be it Ronald Reagan's charisma or the unity of a poem by William Wordsworth. A certain property evokes a certain response.

Throughout this book, I am proposing what I think is a more complex but a more realistic model. In this newer model, any given judgment of value is not simply a result of a stimulus poking from outside into the psyche or from bottom-level sensation causing top-level thoughts and emotions. Rather, any given response combines some human action on the world with the world's response to that human action. Any given response involves the interaction of top down and bottom up, inside out and outside in. We can arrive at this more realistic model through psychoanalytic identity theory (as in ch. 13), but also through such newer versions of psychology as "cognitive science" but especially "neuro-psychoanalysis."

Are human beings passive creatures manipulated by various stimuli ranging from advertisements and political speeches to the poems of Milton and Shakespeare? Or are human beings active creatures who use advertisements and movie stars and political figures and poems to form and to satisfy their own psychological needs?

In talking about evaluating literature, then, I am asking which of these two fundamental models of the human being we find more telling. These are large questions, and they lead us, naturally, to those who are the professional evaluators in our culture, the academic critics, the intellectuals who populate our literature departments and teach our children.

Being a critic

When I was just beginning my career as a teacher of literature and a critic and theorist writing about literature, a senior professor, whose attitudes toward our profession I admired, informed me
solemnly that what we critics and professors were supposed to do was evaluate. We were to teach our students to tell the good and great from the mediocre and bad. That was our primary business. Certainly that was the position taken by F. R. Leavis whose ideas dominated two generations of critics and professors in the United Kingdom. But evaluation, we have seen in this chapter, is quite paradoxical, indeed, something of an illusion.

In any case, critics nowadays don't do much evaluating, leaving that puzzling task to reviewers in newspapers and magazines. Today's critic is more likely to find some linguistic contradiction or "cultural" effect. Even so, the critic is likely to proceed by the A-B-C model like the traditional evaluator. Today's critic tends to assume, as yesterday's did, that something "in" the text causes some result in the reader or spectator. A-B-C. Today's critic is likely to pay as little attention to the role of the reader or spectator as yesterday's.\(^{20}\)

In an eloquent statement of the value of literature and criticism, J. Hillis Miller contrasts two ways of reading that correspond to the two stances literary critics take toward a work of literature. Sometimes we read simply for the sheer pleasure of it, and usually we begin the critical process by reading just for pleasure. I enjoy. At other times, we are professional. I judge. We critics interrogate, demystify, or interpret as we prepare to make some statement about the work in question.\(^{21}\)

As critics from time immemorial have pointed out, we humans have two kinds of response to a text we are looking at literarily. In one, we are absorbed or rapt, simply enjoying (as we noted in chs. 4-7 and 12). We respond to situations or words or characters emotionally without much thinking about ourselves reacting.\(^{22}\) We may respond (as described in ch. 6) with emotions appropriate to a literary work's representations of human situations, with fear or disgust or anger. We would be responding, often, as other humans, indeed, as other primates might if they had language.

In the other mode, as Miller points out, we analyze, we interpret, we theorize the literary work. We respond intellectually, suppressing or ignoring our emotional response. We are distinctively

\(^{21}\) Miller 2002.
human. We become *homo sapiens sapiens* sapienting away.

As we have seen, these two kinds of response correspond to two different brain states. One is the not acting, the suspension of disbelief, and the yielding to form and content that leads simply to enjoyment and nothing more. We do not act or plan to act, and, as a result, we can become rapt and absorbed. We accept unrealities, we can relate to non-existent people, we can, in short, enjoy. In the other mode, we evaluate or otherwise cogitate about the work. In this mode, our frontal lobes think with an eye to reality. We perform a mental action, namely judgment (or some other critical act), and it is reality-directed just like other frontal lobe processes leading to action.

As a working critic, I know I tend to swing back and forth. I will enjoy and then I will ask myself, Why am I enjoying? Once upon a time, I would have concluded that some feature "in" the text caused my pleasure and that it would (or should) provide pleasure to others. Wiser now (I hope), I would say only that I might derive pleasure from it, but then again, in another mood, I might not. I would expect that my process of enjoying involves far more complex and unconscious processes than any I could arrive at by simply thinking about them or the text. And I could hardly expect that my enjoying would imply someone else’s.

Meeting literature, meeting us

I think these two different responses may come from a distinction we learned to draw very early in life. As we have seen (in ch. 3), the psychologists studying early infancy agree that, very early on, at the age of 27 weeks (perhaps innately therefore), infants distinguish animate from inanimate objects by whether a moving object’s movements are caused internally or externally. Understanding _internally_ caused movements leads via a "naïve psychology" to the social intelligence about such things as motives that we share with our primate kin. Understanding _externally_ caused movements leads to a "naïve physics," including an idea of cause-and-effect. We may be born with these understandings in place, but they surely come into being at least within the first two years of life. They are, as you would therefore expect, hard to overturn.

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In responding to literature, when we respond emotionally, we invoke our special perception of animate objects. We respond to something another human being has said. We bring into play the emotional responses of fear or desire or anger that other primates might feel under similar circumstances. The line between self and other can blur (as in ch. 6.) In a theater, we may introject the behavior of the people around us in an audience, merging their defense mechanisms into our own (as in ch. 9.)

Imagine the situation in a play or a movie, where you are part of an audience. You can be sitting back (as in Brecht’s alienation-effect), thinking about what you are seeing, judging, as if you were dispassionately watching an athletic contest. Or you can be identified with a character and you can be taking in defenses from others in the audience. What happens when you are reading a book? You can be absorbed into the book, or you can be theorizing it, planning a critical article, say.

In other words, our relation to a literary work involves some combination of our relation to animate and inanimate objects. One who is enjoying a work of literature, experiencing it immediately and directly, treats the experience, in a way, as like meeting an animate being with feelings and motives. We relate to the literary work as if it were something said at that moment by another human being. We feel that work of literature “in here” just as we have feelings when we meet other humans. Literature in this mode is part of our primate humanity.

By contrast, someone who is intellectualizing about a literary work, a critic evaluating, for example, takes an analytic stance toward an object “out there,” external to the self. We treat the literary work as inanimate, and we think in terms of cause-and-effect, our “naive physics.” My response is caused. Yours will be caused the same way (as if we were billiard balls).

But this intellectualizing is valuable in another way from simply “meeting” a literary work. In this critical stance, if we keep in mind that we are animate, not inanimate, governed by psychology, not physics, then we can be trying to understand, ultimately, ourselves.

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24 See also Holland 1968, 63-103.
25 See also Holland 1973; 2000.
I asked early in this chapter, "How can some writers, those we award "greatness" to, create something that matches the psyches of all kinds of people from many different eras and cultures?"
The answer to that question consists of three words that every professor dreads to say. I don't know. How some works please many and please long, that, to me, is some ultimate mystery that someday, perhaps, we may have an answer to. Or, more likely, perhaps it is a question that does not admit an answer.

That is why I think criticism cannot really evaluate. Our beliefs that this or that literary work causes some response or other are illusions. Rather, I think, criticism should be thinking about particular works of literature in order to understand ourselves as human beings. How and why, given our biology and psychology, do many of us feel that certain literary works are "great"? How and why, given my biology and psychology, do I feel that this particular literary work is "great"?