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Do Birds Disagree?

The Place of Aesthetic Value in Advocacy for the Humanities

Helen Small

Late in the narrative of Kazuo Ishiguro's most recent novel, *Klara and the Sun* (2021), his android narrator takes a walk into the countryside and describes for us a scene replete with significance for her:

> The Sun's rays coming from the back of the barn were too intense to face directly, so though it might seem rude, I turned my gaze once more to the drifting shapes to my right, perhaps hoping to glimpse Rosa . . . But now the Sun's pattern had fallen across the front alcove, momentarily illuminating it, and I saw there not an AF, but a large oval-shaped photograph fixed to the wall. It showed a green field on a sunny day, dotted with sheep, and in the foreground, I recognized the four special sheep I'd glimpsed from the Mother's car returning from Morgan's Falls. They seemed even more gentle than I'd remembered, lined up as they were in a neat row, their heads lowered to partake of the grass. These creatures had filled me with happiness that day, . . . and I was pleased to see them again, if only in this oval photograph. But something was wrong: although the four sheep were positioned in a line in just the same formation I'd seen from the car, here they'd become oddly suspended, so they no longer appeared to stand on the surface of the ground. As a result, when they stretched down to eat, their mouths couldn't reach the grass, giving these creatures, so happy on the day, a mood of sadness.[1]

Klara has been designed for two key competencies: accurate analysis of her physical environment, so that she can navigate it and manipulate objects successfully; and correct assessment of human emotions, enabling her to perform optimally as an Artificial Friend or "AF." An advanced product of robotic engineering, Klara conducts her ordinary tasks efficiently and labors at her higher purpose, alleviating the loneliness of the teenager she is purchased to serve. "Robot," as

[1] London: Faber and Faber Ltd, p. 274.

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cultural critics like to remind us, derives from the Czech *robota*: *serf* or *enforced laborer* designating "high-powered laborers" (as the first English translators of Karel Čapek's *R.U.R. expressed* it): "automats . . . good for nothing but work."[2] Klara, on the contrary, is good for a great deal. In the dystopian near-future America Ishiguro asks us to imagine, the human need of friendship has generated a specialist market in artificial intelligence (AI) for privileged families raising their children in isolation, maximizing their competitive advantages through biogenetic modification that puts their lives at risk and all but erases the conditions for normal social development. Solar-powered, Klara devises a form of magical thinking, as it seems to others, based on the animating power of the sun, offering a rationale for hope in a world that has moved beyond religion. To the extent that she wins over the AI skeptics in her vicinity, she does so by the emotional intelligence with which she works to normalize teenage life and prevent death. A remarkable achievement of Affective Computing, she can interpret the physiological signs of loneliness (complex eye movements, unstable tonalities of voice . . .), detecting sadness even in sheep.

Like many other science fiction writers before him, Ishiguro has largely forfeited a once prized idea that what distinguishes human life from its robotic simulacra is the capacity for emotion. When Klara tells us that she is "filled . . . with happiness," we have no grounds for challenging her semantics though we may want to dispute the quality of experience she lays claim to. If her "happiness" remains under suspicion—just the word generated when a situation meets formal criteria (close, in this case, to those a literary critic would associate with pastoral)—the next thought must be: on what grounds does her linguistic performance disqualify her from authentic experience? Would "genuine" happiness sound qualitatively different? "Filled with happiness" has the thin timbre of automatic diction, but if we are going to require originality of expression as evidence of humanity we are on bad terrain. (What sort of person judges the authenticity of a person's testimony by their capacity to give it eloquent expression?) Besides, Klara is far from bland. Her speech patterns, verbalizing alternative pathways of reasoning, are quaintly askew from ordinary language, generating odd animisms (to turn one's back on daylight "might seem rude," from the Sun's point of view) and retrospectively supplied motives for actions (not least her own: "perhaps" she was "hoping to see Rosa"—an AF in the store where she was purchased, unlikely to be in this remote barn). By affording his narrator a persistently defamiliarizing and to that extent "literary" voice, Ishiguro protects the novel from lapsing into speech the reader would find "robotic," below the aesthetic standard for a work of literature. Klara, on the other hand, has no appreciation of why her patterns of

[2] *R.U.R.: (Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti)* (1921); *R.U.R.: (Rossum's Universal Robots): A Fantastic Melodrama in Three Acts and an Epilogue*, trans. Paul Selver (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1923), p. 3.

speech might interest others. Even so sophisticated an artificial intelligence has, to borrow terms from Isobel Armstrong (this volume, Chapter 5, p. 125), no way of apprehending the "excitement of words" as it can arise from "the interaction of cognitive and aesthetic experience."

Having a functional vocabulary for pleasure and displeasure but none for beauty makes Klara an appropriate avatar, as much as technological fix, for a society well on the way to forgetting why a qualitatively rich idiom ever mattered. The word *beauty* is used in her presence, and she can process the grammar of its articulation, but she experiences neither aesthetic pleasure nor disgust, and makes no aesthetic judgments beyond observing degrees of mimetic accuracy in art. She decodes visual scenes much as a digital lens arranges what comes within its frame, adjusting the resolution in ways that generate brief fantastic interludes for the reader, but not for her. A delay in focus-stacking, for example, causes a momentary image-processing error: a "large creature with numerous limbs and eyes" develops "a crack . . . down its centre" then settles into "two separate people—a runner and a dog walk woman . . . who for an instant happened to be passing one another" (217). The visual processing challenges of the barn interior are less cleanly resolved. We can't be sure whether Klara is correct in identifying "a large oval-shaped photograph fixed to the wall." Possibly this is a window; more likely (given the location) a cheap poster, picture, advertisement, or calendar, and a drawing not a photograph (which would explain the free-floating appearance of the sheep). For attuned readers, the reference to Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) will carry more significance. Worrying over the appropriate registration of mood if sheep may no longer safely graze—an updated Rick Dekkard no longer demoralized by electronic sheep—Klara is the object, not the author, of an intertextual joke. She falls short of presumptive criteria for being human not because she is cognitively imperfect but because she has been designed (by Ishiguro, and within a long literary tradition) as the vehicle for a cultural conversation, ongoing, about what it means to be human.[3]

In offering a feeling and language for the aesthetic, rather than a capacity for empathy, as the final ground of our human difference from machines, *Klara and the Sun* offers an apt provocation from which to begin responding to these essays on *The Question of the Aesthetic*. In his introduction, George Levine identifies two larger ends for this volume beyond the opportunity to grapple, again, with the appeal and the limitations of Kant's "purposeless purpose." Those ends are:

[3] Klara has been programmed to detect jokes—for example, suspecting humorous intent when a higher-grade robot initiates an aggressive line of conversation—but she is signally without the capacity for humor. It is of course the case that Ishiguro might have made Klara more "human" still, but the distinction between her position within the artwork of fiction and ours as its aesthetic interpreters would remain. I discuss below the potential role of comedy in adjudicating claims to human-like agency.

- "resistance" to the idea that "concern for the aesthetic" in literary criticism is somehow in contention with the purpose of serious moral, political and social engagement;
- insistence on the importance of "attention to the aesthetic" in our efforts to explain why critical study of the arts and humanities deserves economic and political support.

A third claim, important to the volume's framing but (tellingly and, as I see it, quite properly) attracting different levels of agreement and engagement from the contributors, is that

- we have much to learn from "Darwin's 'aesthetic' view of life, the view that across the animal kingdom the work of the aesthetic is fundamental and consequential."

In adopting the first two purposes, and contemplating, locally, the purchase of the third, Levine and his fellow contributors offer to refine our terms of critical debate for something we are not, it seems, as adept at doing as we might be. With the practically and emotionally hyper-competent and yet aesthetically incompetent Klara in view, it is worth asking "why not?": why, with at least three centuries of argument over the importance of aesthetic judgments behind us, are we not better—or more confident—at incorporating into the work of the Humanities the feeling for beauty and, to borrow a term from the philosopher Mary Mothersill, the work of "commending" it? ("Commending" in its widest sense: not only promoting beauty, "present[ing it] as worthy of favourable acceptance," but "direct[ing] attention" to it, showing it to be "worthy of notice or regard."[4]) Specifically, why in a professional context where most Humanities scholars are unembarrassed about expressing "serious moral, political and social engagement[s]," should the claims of Beauty—and the basis of those claims—seem so difficult to commend?

In sponsoring to the degree that it does a claim for the natural basis of our concern with beauty, *The Question of the Aesthetic* is pushing against a direction of travel that has, with some prominent exceptions,[5] come to seem very hard to reverse (better pursued as a specialist form of criticism within our disciplines than

[4] Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 217. *OED online*, v. 2.

[5] Among them, see esp. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Michael Wood, *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For a more extended critical reflection of the return to aesthetic value in the early 2000s, see Helen Small, "Caprice: Individual Subjectivity in Literary Criticism," in Rónán McDonald, ed., *The Values of Literary Studies: Critical Institutions, Scholarly Agendas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 27–43.

as a public rationale for their support). In under two hundred years, Jonah Siegel argues trenchantly in this volume, we have gone "from a situation in which Tennyson might fear our humanity is at risk if we allow ourselves to be dominated by a love of beauty" over goodness and knowledge, "to one in which it is *only* a claim of either knowledge or goodness that justifies the presence of beauty at all" (this volume, Chapter 3, p. 73). It is an analysis confirmed and extended into very recent criticism—and reaccented—by Isobel Armstrong's critical account of surface reading and other forms of "depthless immersion" now often recommended in place of critique.

As Siegel and the other contributors to this volume present the problem, the relegation of Beauty from the front line (as it were) of literary and cultural criticism has multiple sources, chief among them modernity's loss of confidence in the aesthetic as a mode of critique. An earlier, in its time widely influential, edited collection of essays, Hal Foster's *The Anti-Aesthetic* (1983)[6] serves as a key text in Siegel's explanation of how, allegorically speaking, we got from a time and place when Beauty seemed powerfully autonomous, sufficient unto herself and intensely desirable, to casting Beauty as the driving force of oppositional critique (Adorno her last-ditch defender in that role), to permitting her to be so thoroughly eclipsed that critics, publicly committed to her sisters, Knowledge and Goodness, have struggled to give a public account of their ongoing relationship to "the most attractive sister, the one who puts the other affections at risk" (p. 72). Pivoting the occasion of this volume against the "anti-aesthetic" moment of Foster's collection, Siegel asks pointedly "How is that working out for us? Has the anti-aesthetic in fact fostered a practice of resistance" that is having any good political effect on the culture around us? The implied answer is, plainly, no: rejecting the power of the aesthetic (both its attractive power and its potential role in critique) has left us politically enfeebled. When power is seen to be at home in Mar-a-Lago or Gelendzhik, a *political* anti-aestheticism, in Siegel's view, no longer looks coherent. Once Beauty no longer associates with Power, what sense is left for a politically motivated critique of Beauty?

Accounting historically for Beauty's reduced presence in the arena of critical debate provides some of the answers for why aesthetic value finds an uncertain reception within advocacy for the Humanities. There are also, no doubt, valid and interesting things a psychologist might have to say on the subject—particularly around the difficulties of critically adjudicating what may or may not be beautiful to any one individual or group. (It is not easy to forget, once read, Bruce Robbins's response to Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*: "Kant's Third Critique defines beauty as a perception that demands to be universalized. Yet when Scarry assumed the universality of her perception of the beauty of a palm tree, I wanted to

[6] *Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press).

scream. 'It is everything I have always loved . . . lustrously in love with air and light.' I have nothing against palm trees, but I found myself viscerally opposed to being told that Scarry's loves would henceforth be mine."[7]) The felt coercion of other people's strongly-affirmed tastes (and aversions) and the potential *exclusivity* of aesthetic experience that this felt coercion alerts us to is a topic to come back to. Before getting to that point, there seem to me some objective difficulties, necessary to consider, in the way of pressing aesthetic value in public debate given the kinds of evaluative claim that find argumentative traction today.

The boldest challenge this volume poses to business-as-usual in advocacy for the Arts and Humanities is George Levine and Richard O. Prum's third claim and what it implies: that aesthetic activity is of value to society because the making of artful things, the experience of desiring them, of being in the aesthetic "event" (as Derek Attridge encourages us to frame our thinking here), and laboring to apprehend, appreciate, and assay the relation of aesthetic experience to other things we value—*all these are activities in our nature and may viably be defended on that ground*. It is bold, because "naturalistic arguments" for the value of the Humanities have not fared well of late. The word does not make discussion easier, given that the adjective "naturalistic" may be used both loosely to dismiss arguments for public goods that appeal to "the natural order of things"[8] (also those that are naturalized, i.e., habituated) and in the more technical sense whereby economists reject would-be normative, empirical claims of the kind usually deemed inadmissible in arguments over rivalrous public goods. When the former UK Minister for Universities and Science David Willetts observes that universities are now "big businesses" set within modern economic and governance cultures where they can "no longer rely upon naturalistic arguments" but must be able to evidence the benefits they return for public investment,[9] he is, I take it, employing the word with a technical leaning.[10] The prohibition almost certainly resonates more loudly in the ears of Humanities advocates than in the ears of scientists or social scientists—though there will be variation by discipline.

[7] "Is Literature a Secular Concept? Three Earthquakes," *Modern Language Quarterly* 72.3 (2011), 293–317 (299).

[8] *OED online*, adj. 4.

[9] Lecture given to the *State of the Arts* debate series hosted by the Ax:son Johnson Foundation at the British Academy, London, March 19, 2014.

[10] For a helpfully succinct economist's account of where art and culture sit in the range of public goods between those few that count as "pure," "non-rivalrous . . . non-excludable" (such as public defense) and the great majority that are at least partly rivalrous and excludable, see Jason Potts, "The Price of Everything," *The Conversation*, August 6, 2014, https://theconversation.com/are-the-arts-and-culture-a-public-good-29939 [last accessed April 29, 2021]. And for a critically pointed assessment of how economic and literary-philosophical conceptions of public goods became gradually "eviscerated" of normative thinking over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries—moving (in "close paralle[l]) toward formalist criteria of operation"—see Regenia Gagnier, "On the Insatiability of Human Wants: Economic and Aesthetic Man," *Victorian Studies* 36.2 (1993), 125–53, and the subsequent book-length articulation of the argument, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), esp. ch. 4.

In this political context it is not hard to see why a naturalistic claim for aesthetic value meets with different levels of enthusiasm (which it is not to say that it may not be right). Banning normative assumptions about the importance of our human investment in the arts, and thus the value of studying, curating, criticizing them, the economistic language of public debates over funding reminds us of a lesson Humanities scholars have already conned well: *Be wary of appeals to nature*. The readiness of many, but by no means all, advocates for the Humanities to accept such a constraint on how we justify the value of our work to public life is not just a sign of hard-acquired economic realism; it owes much to discipline-specific forms of training in distinguishing between culture and nature, and understanding how profoundly our access to the latter goes by way of the former.[11] Nietzsche, an attentive reader of Darwin, remains a figure to be reckoned with, scorning appeals to nature wherever they take on an ethical dimension: "'according to Nature'? . . . what a fraud is this phrase! . . . boundlessly extravagant, boundlessly indifferent, without purpose or consideration, without pity or justice, at once fruitful and barren and uncertain: imagine to yourselves INDIFFERENCE as a power."[12]

Such widespread inhibitions notwithstanding (not least on the part of those unpersuaded by recent work in the field of "literary Darwinism"[13]), if Prum and Levine are right the biological sciences have something important to offer Humanities scholars at this juncture by way of sharpening our understanding of what a naturalistic claim for the value of the aesthetic correctly entails in the early twenty-first century. A *coevolutionary* account of beauty, in the detail and depth with which Prum elaborates it here, asks us to understand our aesthetic cultures within a comprehensive picture of life on earth where we differ from other animals in our formal, technological, and reflective sophistication but not in our fundamental drive to create and curate art objects, and (though there is more dispute here) to evaluate them. The view of the aesthetic that results is lateral, comparative, and very wide indeed. It is set out by Prum in terms of a detailed vocabulary for taking account of the variety of co-existent "artworlds" or "aesthetic communities"—

[11] See especially the clarificatory debate that arose, on the limits of arguments for culture over nature, in response to "the Sokal Affair": John Guillory, "The Sokal Affair and the History of Criticism," *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002), 470–508. Also his subsequent exchange of views with Christopher Newfield: "Critical Response I: The Value of Nonscience," *Critical Inquiry* 29.3 (2003), 508–25; Guillory, "Critical Response II: The Name of Science, the Name of Politics," *Critical Inquiry* 29.3 (2003), 526–41. For discussion of how those arguments impact upon advocacy for the Humanities, see Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ch. 1.

[12] *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), ch. 1, §9, p. 10.

[13] Armstrong's essay touches on some of the marked lines of dissent and disagreement around the work of E.O. Wilson (esp. *On Human Nature*, 1979) and, especially, Joseph Carroll (see this volume, Chapter 5, pp. 121–2 Prum takes an emphatic distance on this line of thinking ("faux profundities" that attempt to "explain away human agency scientifically as the product of a natural process"; "an intellectual dead end" (p. 42)).

sometimes entirely independent, sometimes overlapping, and, when overlapping, sometimes co-operative, sometimes conflicting.

Deeply indebted to Darwin but more keenly alert even than he was to how ubiquitously variation puts pressure on normative descriptions of any species' behavior,[14] this is a perspective that sets human aesthetic impulses and capacities in the richest of comparative contexts. To adopt it is to recognize the profusion of artistic activities and tastes generated from "a currently incalculable number of independent origins in the history of life" and "continu[ing] to diversify into aesthetic radiations among species." Darwinian in its delightful contemplation of variety, it is equally Darwinian in the rebuke it tenders to "the universal narcissism of men" (we are asked to look "*horizontally* at, not down upon, the [. . .] aesthetic agencies [and achievements] of other species" (p. 61)).

There are innumerable cultural contexts today in which the critical challenge of a Darwinian perspective remains potent. Humanity is not free (probably never can be entirely free) of social factors that made evolutionary theory so confronting to nineteenth-century world views: widespread religious faith; desires to ground morality—and life itself—in "precedent Idea," as Gillian Beer puts it[15] (theological or otherwise); the sheer force of conventionality (moral, social, also aesthetic); and (even in the midst of ecological crisis and pandemic) a common *operative* presumption that nature is ours to shape, or break, or mend. On the other hand (such is the variety of human culture and society), Darwinian lessons have been keenly absorbed in many quarters: the calibration of human agency against other agencies, and the predication of all life on principles of variation, transformation, supplementation, amid (ineluctably) loss, (ultimately) extinction, are well understood. Confronting that knowledge, and incorporating it into our philosophy has been part of the business of much art and literature, as well as ethics, for over a century and a half.

Cultural non-alignment of ideas over the ultimate source of the great plurality in aesthetic tastes is, probably, here to stay, and will matter to some, though (in the context of public advocacy) it seems to me among our lesser concerns. What *has* changed is the environmental context and thus the political point of engagement with Darwin in the philosophical framing of what Humanities scholars do—change helpfully highlighted by Myra Jehlen's brief critical meditation on the close of the 1859 *Origin* (this volume, Chapter 9). By broad if not complete agreement, we are heading not, as the penultimate paragraph of the first edition

[14] Not that Darwin wasn't keenly alert, but it is easier for us now to see the blind-spots and inhibitions of a mid-Victorian, privileged Englishman. For, by way of example, a concise summary and response to feminist readings of Darwin, see Elizabeth Grosz, "Darwin and Feminism: Preliminary Investigations for a Possible Alliance," *Australian Feminist Studies* 14.29 (1999), 31–45. Penelope Deutscher gives a fascinating account of Victorian feminist appropriations of Darwinism, in "The Descent of Man and the Evolution of Woman," *Hypatia* 19.2 (2004), 35–55.

[15] Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 12, 79.

has it, "toward perfection," as Darwin (moving up a rhetorical gear) was prepared to venture, but toward a world which confirms and deepens Victorian reasons for skepticism[16]—a world in which reparative action is urgently required if we are not to face global environmental disaster; also (keeping Ishiguro in sight) one in which artificial intelligences will increasingly co-operate with our human intelligence, for better and/or worse. The professional habitus of Prum's writing makes a difference: in asking us to preserve our "humanistic focus on human agency" amid a richer set of agencies, he is providing a "post-humanist" perspective, emanating from a Department of Ecology and Environmental Biology, that is quite unlike the dominant theoretical conceptualization of post-humanism in the Humanities in that it explicitly excludes futuristic visions of overcoming our nature. (Post-humanism is, from this perspective, the last redoubt of Humanism: an "overcoming" rather than a "relinquishment" of priority [Prum, this volume, Chapter 2, p. 43]). Not that Prum cannot credit the possibility of radically altered forms of existence, but utopian and dystopian scenarios alike—projected futures in which Human minds and bodies are for better or worse free of "natural" constraints on our capacities (even our basic life expectancy)—"leave [him] cold" (p. 43).

This is (confessedly) a personal political and aesthetic preference on Prum's part. Drawing attention to it nevertheless helps to flush out some key differences between his position and those of other contributors to a volume in which political terms of agreement are easily stated, philosophical terms less easily so. As I see it, the crucial question is what we critics can agree to mean by "agency."

Consider the bowerbird—as Prum, like Darwin before him, asks us to do (p. 64).[17] And then consider why we are considering him. An "aesthetically extreme" case, the males of the species construct and painstakingly curate their bowers of seduction over several years. Darwin devoted several paragraphs of *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) to them as evidence of a highly evolved avian sense of taste, with marked differences in aesthetic preference between genera. The Satin bowerbirds observed in John Gould's *Handbook to the Birds of Australia*, 1865 (a key source for Darwin) relished "gaily-coloured articles such as the blue tail-feathers of parrakeets"; the Spotted bowerbirds preferred "very profuse" arrangements of tall grasses; the Regent bowerbird "described by Mr. Ramsay, ornament[ed] its short bower with bleached land-shells . . . [and]

[16] See esp. Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

[17] With birds so much to the fore in this volume, it seems important to note that we could vary our examples: octopuses, whales, chimpanzees have all attracted the attention of aestheticians. Equally, it seems important to note how contested these claims are within contemporary evolutionary biology. See esp. Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chs. 1 and 2. Davies takes a strong line against considering bowerbird performances as "art." He also considers, critically, the aesthetic or quasi-aesthetic activities of chimpanzees, elephants, bees, nightingales, whales.

'berries of various colours, blue, red, and black, which give it when fresh a very pretty appearance.'"[18] A quick internet search of nature documentary footage shows that while some bowerbird tastes have remained the same, there has also been change. The New Guinea Vogelkop Bowerbird community has incorporated plastic bottle tops, straws, and the clear nozzles of squeezable bottles into its repertoires, for example. Nature documentaries strengthen the picture of individual differences in taste within genera: one Vogelkop male has "a very appreciative eye for colour . . . favour[ing] red and orange flowers" and pale orange fungus; another prefers a more minimalist palate—"darker colours . . . deer dung and charcoal."[19] The appearance of white sprouting fungus on his dung arrangement is a source of agitation and additional labor for him. He pecks as much as he can away, with evident annoyance. Unsurprisingly, the female bowerbird opts for the more relaxed mate with brighter decor.

Both Darwin and Prum want us to recognize human-like aesthetic agency here (the Satin Bowerbird puts Prum in mind of "a human using an egret plume to decorate a hat," just as the seductive efforts of birds, generally, put Darwin in mind of "women everywhere" decking themselves with "plumes"), but the driver behind analogy has subtly shifted. For Darwin, what mattered was evidence from nature that the "Sense of Beauty" is not confined to man. For Prum, the role of Beauty in driving sexual selection was a lesson conned a long time ago; what counts for more at this point in our cross-disciplinary conversations is the *descriptive consequence* of holding that human beings operate aesthetically in tandem with many other species/sub-species, all making "multiple, ontologically distinct kinds of judgements." When we take pleasure in footage of bowerbird bowers, or inhale the famously rank scent of a *Amorphophallus* corpse flower (Araceae), or admire a domesticated hybrid rose, we are "human evaluators" of "biotic artworks" that run a gamut from independently evolved objects with their own "ecological communities" to objects that reflect a high degree of human engineering. In providing a technical vocabulary for the complex intermeshing agencies that result, Prum is not just inviting us to rethink the arrogation of "aesthetic agency" to the Human; he is providing a way of conceptualizing what other aesthetic agencies amount to. In his own terms, he is "recontexualiz[ing]" the idea of agency through recognizing "the qualities, properties, and consequences of non-human biological and material agencies" (p. 43).

The birds are delightful. Prum's image (p. 65) has sat on my desktop for some days, reminding me that curation of one's domestic environment might count as an art of courtship not drudgery. But they tempt me, as they tempt Prum and

[18] *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1871), II, pp. 112–13.

[19] *Life—The Vogelkop Bowerbird: Nature's Great Seducer—BBC One*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1zmfTr2d4c, at 00:30–52, and 02:20–28.

tempted Darwin, to a perilous kind of identification that can feel at once heartfelt and, inevitably, comic. In part this is the comedy that sits in near proximity to all analogy: "in analogy the pleasure and power of the form is felt in part because it is *precarious*," Beer rightly notes: "We experience a sense of trepidation as we follow the analogy through its various stages lest we are arriving at the point where the parallels dispart."[20] Siegel gives this form of comedy rich play as he pursues Beauty, Truth, and Goodness through their nineteenth- and twentieth-century fortunes and up to the present day. We are, moreover, prey, at this point in the conversation to a "meta" comedy (which may well be in Beer's sights, too) attaching to our *flirtation with* analogy, our decision to *play* within the very evident limitations of comparisons that set us in a kind of familial company with creatures who for the most part have (presumptively) rather less interest in their similarity to us than we have in ours to them.

Edward Lear (who illustrated both Darwin and Gould) seems to me the presiding genius of this terrain: in love with birds, keenly alert to the hapless identifications we human observers make when asserting their kinship to us while having to concede their profoundly alien existence, and thereby opening the door to comedy and to nonsense. "Should any transmigration take place at my decease [. . .] I am sure my soul would be uncomfortable in anything but one of the Psittacidae," quips Lear,[21] his recourse to Latin archly conceding the gap between man and parrot. Nonsense is what happens, Matthew Bevis suggests, when human imagination meets and concedes its limits (lines of poetic flight, hankerings after free flight that, with our heavier bodies, more complex minds, and our capacity for questioning ourselves, elude us). Bevis homes in on the psychological import of the avian identification: "the parrot is uncanny not simply because it is the talking animal, but because, in mimicking me, it reminds me that I am a mimic." In some contexts, more than others, that reminder may have a monitory force well beyond any intent attributable to birds: Tennyson's parrot, Bevis notes, used to murmur "Oh God" when the family knelt down to pray . . . [22]

Comedy seems to me the good conscience of an argument that cannot *but* bear witness to the profound difference in agency that comes with the ability to wield language beyond mimicry. My mother's parrot (since these are partly questions of family and its limits, as well as aesthetics, I feel bound to introduce my mother), had a ropier background than Tennyson's. Brought into her shared 1950s London flat, having once been in the possession of an opera singer and recently acquainted with sailors, it began its vocal exercises with implacable regularity at 5 a.m. "La – la – la . . . " up and down the melodic scale, starting from middle C, working upwards

[20] *Darwin's Plots*, p. 80.
[21] Quoted by Matthew Bevis, "Some Birds," *Poetry Magazine*, March 2, 2020, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/152456/some-birds [last accessed May 24, 2021].
[22] Ibid.

till it reached a high B: "la . . . la . . . la . . . SHIT!" I am perfectly happy to say that Polly Oliver had something we can call a sense of aesthetic pleasure. I am much less convinced that it was exercising aesthetic judgment (though, on this question generally, the jury remains out among ornithologists[23]). I am quite sure that it was not entering the terrain of the "discussable," where, Isobel Armstrong suggests, aesthetics starts to meet politics (p. 127).[24] Our aesthetic co-existence with these creatures, in other words, may matter as much or (I would hazard) *more* in this context for what it tells us about our peculiar nature than about our shared nature; our identification with them may be, on the same basis, more revealing in what it says about *identification* than about identity.

If shared "aesthetic agencies" with other species cannot sufficiently ground a naturalistic claim for the value of a Humanistic concern with Beauty, the deeper scrutiny that the pluralization of agency invites to the concept can certainly be of help. "It is," Steven Connor proposes, an "effect of the wide acceptance of the value of what is called 'agency,'" that "everything that does not allow for or might require the restraining of agency" seems "puzzling or provoking." Birds, as it happens, intrude metaphorically when he proposes that what we are really talking about when we invoke "agency" (or, now, "agencies") is not "action," but a "potential for action" apprehensible only through contemplating the language that expresses it:

> Despite my rising irritation over the last few years with the unreflective parroting of the need and value of "agency", agency is a complicated notion . . . . Agency

[23] My thanks to Alex Kacelnik and Irene Pepperberg for assistance in isolating the vocal range of a gray parrot (since Polly Oliver was sadly unrecorded, I am estimating a top B). Pepperberg's celebrated thirty-year study of the gray parrot Alex, demonstrating some capacity to reason at a basic level and use words creatively, makes the parrot, more than the bowerbird, the ideal test case here. Aesthetic *judgment* and, especially, the capacity for aesthetic *discussion* still seem to me to go further than any evidence yet permits. I realize that I am making a point closely akin to one Simon Blackburn makes, in reviewing Martha Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001):

> Talking of two dogs, she says:
>
> They showed a dejection when the men were temporarily absent, and a boisterous joy when they returned home, that showed that they had put these two men into their lives in a much more than instrumental way—still eudaimonistic, in the sense that the men were central to their scheme of goals and projects, but not simply survival-linked in the way of many of the eudaimonistic emotions of animals.
>
> I have no difficulty with the boisterous joy that dogs can show, but I do have a lot of trouble with the dewy-eyed belief in "their scheme of goals and projects," and I certainly do not know how that scheme could be described as eudaimonistic unless the animals were thinking in terms of their own flourishing, a feat that is surely beyond them. ("To Feel and Feel Not," The New Republic, December 24, 2001, https://newrepublic.com/article/66029/feel-and-feel-not [last accessed May 10, 2021]

I take it, on the basis of his claims about evaluation, that Prum might go so far as to identify "evaluator disagreements" beyond our species, glimpsed, for example, in the neighboring bowerbirds' unlike tastes (though I wonder how strong a reading of "disagreement" he would endorse).

[24] It is beyond my scope here to go into the subject of whether non-human animals' capacity for art should be judged in terms of their capacity to generate "subtle forms of conceptual art." On that subject, see Davies, *Artful Species*, pp. 29–31.

> names a theory about the possibility of the kind of action I am able to perform. Wherever there can be agency which sees and knows itself as such, it is something more or other than simple action. In knowing itself for what it is, and in being experienced as future possibility, agency must no longer be the elementary and unreflective doing of a thing that it is supposed to be .... Agency ... signifies the power to perform actions that themselves signify my power to perform them.[25]

This is precisely the ground of Milton's radicalism, as Richard Eldridge accounts for it: re-imagining "man's first disobedience" as the recognition of his own capacity to "choose the exercise of personal power ... over patient abiding"—a capacity realized by means of poetry's ability to "animat[e] the cognitive faculties and combin[e] spirit with the mere letter of language" (this volume, Chapter 11, pp. 210, 218, quoting Kant's Third Critique).

Connor's interest is in how attention to agential power in language may help us to think and talk better about the ways in which the power we could look to assert is, instead, moderated, its positive force "subtracted" or "retracted." Why, he asks, have we become collectively so keen on asserting, attributing, defending agency as a good, so inattentive to the ways in which social and political life are tolerable only because agency is restricted? Eldridge's concern may seem quite the opposite: namely, with how, under the inspiration of the aesthetic, we "become aware of multiple attractions among which we must choose" and thereby understand our own power to act; aware also of the moral implications of that power (we see "that various objects of attraction are, despite appearances, good or bad for us in various ways" [p. 212]). Connor and Eldridge are, in fact, training our attention on two ends, two *consequences* if you will, of our ability to grasp our potential to act through contemplating the language that gives that potential conceptual form. To know our own agency through language, both suggest, is at once a kind of liberation into and a constraint on action (it is, in the moment of reading or hearing, potential not realized action). Milton's genius, as Eldridge describes it, was to rewrite the biblical account of the origin of morality and free will as a genealogy of politics, locating its genesis in the seductive power of aesthetic form. There is—and here Eldridge channels Milton's thought in the direction of Darwin—"vanity ... built into the very structure of self-conscious, discursive awareness of alternatives and the power to choose" (p. 217).

Understanding and negotiating the linguistic delimitation of our human agency not just as an individual experience but as social experience is, indeed, a large part of what we do in the Humanities. It is what all the contributors to this volume are in practice about as their essays address the repercussions of unevenly shared or

[25] Steven Connor, *Giving Way: Thoughts on Unappreciated Dispositions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 10.

distributed aesthetic agency in the production and reception of art and literature, looking to test our "own experience [...] against the experiences of others" (Attridge, Chapter 1, p. 30), then setting about necessary or desirable adjustments of critical perspective with reference to different, new, or excluded experiences. I read Attridge's account here of the political activation of art and literature in the moment of its experience as an extension of his earlier, important work defining the "singularity" of the reading event and its ethical implications. Here he gives wider ambit to that ethical effect, arguing that, at its most potent, the artistic event calls upon "the full engagement of mind and body," plus any knowledge we possess of its creation and the accrued history of its engagements, plus the connections set running by "the environment" in which it is experienced anew. Ben Jonson's elegy to his first born son, channeling private grief into public utterance, has struck many chords over the centuries; re-read by Attridge in the context of millions of Covid-19-related deaths worldwide, including (at the point of writing) 231 children under the age of 15, "On My First Son" allows us to weigh the reality of an individual death amid daily announcements so repetitive, and overall numbers so large, they can no longer elicit deep grieving.

The four chapters grouped in Part III provide the volume's strongest concentration of attention on how politics is currently entering into experience of the aesthetic. "It comes down to language," Armstrong argues (I take it she, like McDonagh, would include images). Let me summarize the political point of address in these essays succinctly, with a view to isolating what they have in common, despite differences in political focus and methodological articulation:

- Armstrong's essay (Chapter 5) is written in urgent pursuit of the kind of political and aesthetic accountability for criticism that much recent critical theorizing misses, and, by missing, fails (a) to connect with why non-academic audiences value aesthetic experience; (b) to say anything by way of meaningful resistance to the rise of New Fascisms.
- Josephine McDonagh's (Chapter 6) account of migrant representations in the contemporary arts and literature alerts us to the strengths and weaknesses, political and aesthetic, of a field of artistic endeavor substantially driven by desire for social justice and by indignation at a collective international failure as yet to deliver anything like justice.
- Ankhi Mukherjee's essay (Chapter 8), closely allied in its concerns, makes a bid for stronger, less opportunistic connections between the political and aesthetic work of criticism and "postcolonial" critical theory—the gain from which would be genuine openness to new "enunciating subjects," the *price* of which would be that some politically motivated texts must be "allowed to fail" aesthetically.
- Edgar Garcia's essay (Chapter 7) gives fresh aesthetic and political point to a kind of material criticism more often practiced in the way of historical

literary critique: he tracks the art of painting back to source in the extraction and manufacture of its materials (beautiful pigments, dyes, minerals), revealing how intimately they have borne and still bear with them the poison, literal and figurative, of colonialism and its legacies.

Reading across these essays, I am struck not only by their confirmation of the two more-readily agreed aims of the volume, but by the combined case they make for the social and political value of the aesthetic as (in Connor's terms) it mediates and moderates—rather than asserts—human aesthetic agencies. All four critics are wedded (it would be surprising if they were not) to the power of art to redistribute our attention, with a striking recurrence of Rancière's definition of aesthetic experience as the *distribution of the sensible*, a disturbance of the relation between sense as understanding and sense as sensory perception (elegantly redescribed by Mukherjee as "a perturbation and distribution of the ethos which posits one sense over another") (p. 171; see also Siegel, Chapter 3, pp. 82–4). To put the point more simply (if less compactly), these essays deepen and give political content to the idea that aesthetic experience empowers us with a proper sense of what agency amounts to, reorienting our perception and our understanding of the potential for action in the world around us. That potentiality is, as they show, both individually felt and complexly shared in the way of experience tested, argued over, often disputed *and accruing public value as much via disputation as via agreement*. The strongest implication to be taken from such an account of the aesthetic is that it is possible to talk meaningfully of such a thing as aesthetic justice and aesthetic injustice. Once we recognize aesthetic value as accruing through the interpretative acts of agents interacting with one another socially, comprehending and adjudicating aesthetic value in a language that figures vividly the potentiality of agency, we are on the way to articulating a political philosophy of aesthetics grounded in language.[26]

Arguments about which aesthetic experiences we hold in high value and which we esteem less—or, indeed, disvalue altogether—are ubiquitous, their political implications often latent rather than explicit. Several of the contributors here worry about the specific refinements in judgment, and the accompanying

[26] Elaborating the terms of such a philosophy is plainly beyond the scope of this chapter, and I take to heart George Levine's clarification in stating that the current volume is not intended primarily as a contribution to philosophy. The term "aesthetic injustice" is credited, by analogy, to Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). See esp. chs. 4 on "The Virtue of Testimonial Justice" and 7 on "Hermeneutical Injustice." More recent contributions to this rapidly growing area of interest include Gustavo H. Dalaqua, "Aesthetic Injustice," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 12.1 (2020), 1–12, defining the term as "denoting any harm done to someone specifically in their capacity as an aesthetic being." See also the work of Dominic McIver Lopes: *Being for Beauty: Aesthetic Agency and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), esp. chs. 6 and 12; and work in progress toward *Aesthetic Injustice* (the subject of his Mark Sainsbury Lecture, March 16, 2021). To the best of my knowledge, this work has not yet directed attention to literature as the aesthetic mobilization of language in ways that channel recognition of justice and injustice.

separation between popular and academic aesthetic experience, that follow from a Humanities higher education in literature, history, art, music, philosophy (an education that—almost by definition—alters what we are inclined to commend, though Mothersill is surely right that we may not command[27]). Armstrong, especially, voices concern about the separation between academic aesthetic tastes and those that galvanize non-academic publics: the lyrics of Pink Floyd, for example, not often taught, even, to the best of my knowledge, in cultural studies departments though we are decades past the point where it might seem contentious.[28]

Philip Davis's vivid attestation to D.H. Lawrence's "wild aesthetics" (his search for a "feeling-language" apt to the "heliotropic shift" we undergo in sensing beauty) takes an alternative route to the same concerns around specialist training and, more especially, the effect of specialist languages—typically abstract, technical, too often exclusionary (this volume, Chapter 10). Assaying Lawrence's style, he reminds us that the feeling for "'beauty," the *desire* for beauty, are not abstract things ("an experience of the aesthetic"): they touch us powerfully, physiologically. Too much writing on the subject failed, for Lawrence, at the first hurdle: its language dry, categorizing, euphemistic, "cosy," "easy," riskless, sexless. He sought words, rhythms, repetitions, paragraph constructions, grammar, punctuation that put literature, and us with it, vitally at risk from instinct. Humanities scholarship now, at least as much as in Lawrence's lifetime, may struggle to exonerate itself from his fierce repudiation of academic thought: the "thin, spurious mental conceit . . . all that is left of the mental consciousness once it has made itself exclusive."[29] On the other hand, Davis suggests, few writers better reward revisiting, equipped with the insights of recent work in embodied cognition. *Un*persuaded by Darwinian sexual selection, Lawrence nevertheless crafts an "immanent aesthetic" (as Davis terms it, p. 203)—a hard-fought-for/fought-with art that stimulates not just brain but "gut," skin, nerves, whole body.

The Ruskinian and, indeed, Hardyan strands of inspiration accounted for in Davis's reading of Lawrence chime with Herbert Tucker's encouragement to look before and after Darwin for assistance in grasping the wide political stakes of literary-aesthetic value (this volume, Chapter 4). Here, too, but with a wider comparative remit, we are helped to recognize a form of political urgency that is quite distinct from, ultimately far more ambitious in its scope, than the ends-driven agendas generated by the "rush to relevance in contemporary humanities study" (p. 98). The "unruliness" of the Romantic and Victorian poetic language and forms on which Tucker trains our attention disclose pre-Lawrentian forms of "wild" creativity emanating not just from the energy of individual (or, indeed,

[27] Mothersill, *Beauty Restored*, p. 217.

[28] For *Jacqueline Fowler v. The Board of Education of Lincoln County* (1987), see https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/819/657/245113/ [last accessed May 24, 2021].

[29] D.H. Lawrence, *Phoenix II: Uncollected, Unpublished and Other Prose Works*, ed. Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore (London: Heinemann, 1968), p. 596.

collaborative) aesthetic endeavors but from the ongoing participatory, "processive" energies of aesthetic reception. The "reciprocation of beauty with truth" as the poem is read is not subject to decision or closure, Tucker urges: (risking an application of Darwinian metaphor) it is, rather, a "collective and ongoing… aesthetic *evolution*." Shelley, Keats, Browning, Tennyson, Arnold, Swinburne, Ruskin, Pater—these are canonical figures, but Tucker's readings draw out their capacity still to radicalize the terms of entry into aesthetic debate by "disavow[ing] principles" for prose and poetry, eschewing didacticism, laboring rather under a "mandate whose outcomes and applications were radically unknown to the present, and for that very reason [remain] speculatively precious to the future" (p. 98).

The particular appeal of Victorian aestheticism, like the particular appeal of Lawrence, may split readers. It would be, in a sense, a failure for writers so willing to risk disapprobation and give offense to the arbiters of taste in their day if they had lost that power. Disagreements, uncertainties, ambivalences are in the nature of our aesthetic experience, understood not "just" as an evolved variety of aesthetic responses, nor by reference to agreed standards (Kantian or otherwise), but as a form of responsiveness to aesthetic stimuli that is in our nature but constantly under pressure from cultural change and subject to adjustment all our lives. Educable, certainly, but individually characteristic of us up to a point, taste is also, often, vagrant. Much of the best critical writing about aesthetics, in recent years, has been about the ordinary, everyday density of our reactions to aesthetic experience, the ambivalences it can induce in us, and the social and political implications they bear even without taking a long view.[30] And it is to the point here that even the most generously pluralizing approach to our descriptive categories for criticism of art and literature can be thought open to a charge that taxonomic subtlety may miss the point (too many fresh conceits, Merve Emre suggests, can start to "curdle": "one is left suspicious of the category—of all aesthetic categories"[31]). In refining our language, in other words, cultural theory may fine-sieve what we care to argue over; or it may harden our resolve to keep something of the power of our aesthetic experience out of the classroom, where, if we are not careful, it stands to lose as well as gain from our professional acuity.

Any Humanities reader will identify with the resulting "double bind of professional reading and personal reading" described by Susan Wolfson (this volume, Chapter 12): the embarrassment of emotion in response to beauty that generates

[30] See, esp. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); and *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgement and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020). Ngai's description of *Ugly Feelings* as "a bestiary of affects… filled with rats and possums rather than lions" seems apropos here.

[31] "Our Love-Hate Relationship with Gimmicks," *The New Yorker*, November 16, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/11/16/our-love-hate-relationship-with-gimmicks [last accessed May 24, 2021].

this sense of wanting to keep something of our response to beauty in reserve. Tearing up over beauty, no less than gushing over it, tends to "the confusion or embarrassment of . . . students," Wolfson remarks. Pregnancy exacerbated the hazards, in my own case. Welling up, reading Keats's "This living hand . . . " to three second-year undergraduates, I flapped a hand in the air in an effort to dispel emotion, and met with eye-rolling despair from a less susceptible 19-year-old Anthony: "It's good, but I'm not gonna *cry*!" Tracing the signs of Cleanth Brooks's struggle, over more than thirty years, to acknowledge, and at the same time account intellectually for, his deep attachment to Tennyson's *Tears, Idle Tears*, Wolfson draws attention back, with a difference, to the way in which acknowledgment of the emotional power of aesthetic experience seems to prompt questions of agency and *motive*. What is it that acts upon us when we feel poetry, or any other art, deeply? (It seems salient that we are, again, considering a poem about grief, written in the knowledge of many earlier poems that have captured its various intense shadings—despair, regret, remorse, longing. Grief, no doubt, adds gravitas to what we might say, with no less truth, on behalf of pleasure.) "Does [the act of] speaking *release* wild regrets from depths into poetic forming," Wolfson asks, or "is poetry's formative power the agent of these regrets?" "For the critic [Brooks] who argues that form is content," the "or" is "a false distinction."[32] Overdetermination of motive then generates, at the level of the critical phrase, a "grammar of restless motive-hunting," drawn to the surface by Wolfson's acute close reading. She directs us to a quality of Brooks's writing that is the more interesting for being unresolved: expression (up to a point "admission") of uncontained psychic energies that repeatedly escape the critic's attempts at professionalizing and controlling them within the professional practice of accounting for art's workings.

Collectively, these essays seem to me to be worrying—and worrying well[33]—around what is, ultimately, not a weakness in our ability to advocate for the Humanities but an aspect of their value for us, individually and collectively, that resists easy condensation. Let me nevertheless (and at whatever risk of dry academicism) attempt, with their assistance, a "6th claim" for the public benefit of the Humanities to be added to the five identified in *The Value of the Humanities* (2013). By contrast with some familiar, readily sloganized claims ("democracy needs us," "intrinsic value") the claim is comparatively complex and delicate, which is not to say tentative:

[32] I am quoting Wolfson out of turn, here, but not, I hope, misplacing her meaning.

[33] Adam Phillips helpful invites us to think about worrying as 'a form of thinking. At one end of some imaginary spectrum, there is something akin to creative rumination. At the other end, there is the stalled thought of obsession. If worrying can persecute us, it can also work for us, as self-preparation . . . ' 'What, Me Not Worry?', *The New York Times*, 13 December 1996, https://www.nytimes.com/1996/12/13/opinion/what-me-not-worry.html [last accessed 24 May 2021].

- The Humanities have a special interest in experiences of beauty (more broadly, experiences of the aesthetic) as they alter the quality of our perception and our understanding of the world—recognizing that what moves us is at once private and shared, conventionally determined and constantly subject to change. Among the most important work Humanities subjects undertake is the calibration of these experiences in language, recognizing that it is in the process of acknowledging, discussing, debating, disputing aesthetic experience and commending it to others that much of our social and political thinking takes place. Critical to that thinking is the power aesthetic experience affords us to apprehend the idea of agency through language, and thus be in a position to respond better to the reality of injustice.