

THE LITERARY AGENDA

Series introduction to the literary agenda

The Crisis in, the Threat to, the Plight of the Humanities: enter these phrases in Google's search engine and there are 23 million results, in a great fifty-year-long cry of distress, outrage, fear and melancholy. Grant, even, that every single anxiety and complaint in that catalogue of woe is fully justified – the lack of public support for the arts, the cutbacks in government funding for the humanities, the imminent transformation of a literary and verbal culture by visual/virtual/digital media, the decline of reading . . . And still, though it were all true, and just because it might be, there would remain the problem of the response itself. Too often there's recourse to the shrill moan of offended piety or a defeatist withdrawal into professionalism.

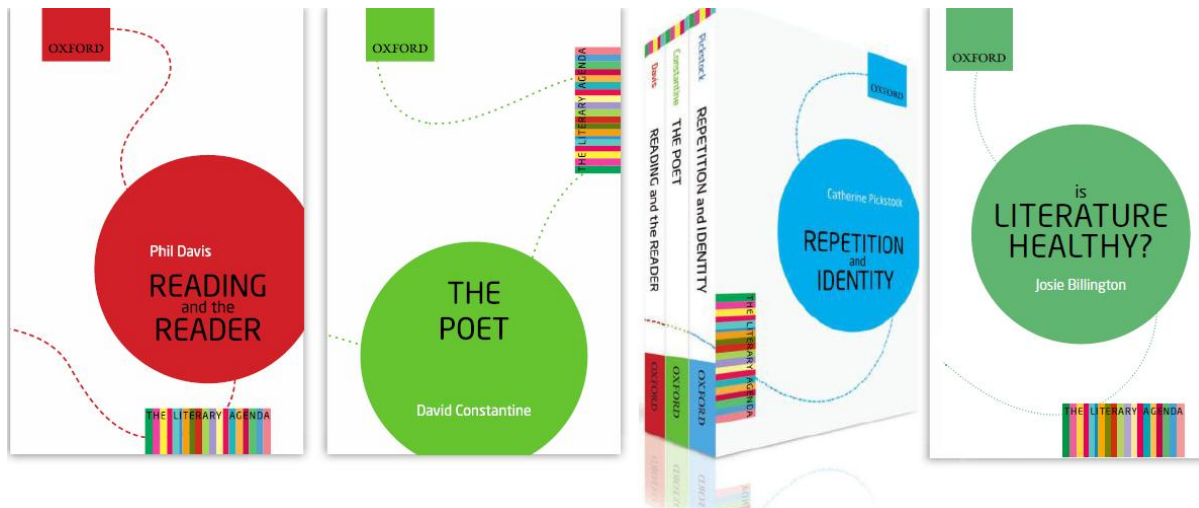
The Literary Agenda is a series of short polemical monographs that believes there is a great deal that needs to be said about the state of literary education inside schools and universities and more fundamentally about the importance of literature and of reading in the wider world. The category of 'the literary' has always been contentious. What is clear, however, is how increasingly it is dismissed or is unrecognised as a way of thinking or an arena for thought. It is sceptically challenged from within, for example, by the sometimes rival claims of cultural history, contextualized explanation, or media studies. It is shaken from without by even greater pressures: by economic exigency and the severe social attitudes that can follow from it; by technological change that may leave the traditional forms of serious human communication looking merely antiquated. For just these reasons this is the right time for renewal, to start reinvigorated work into the meaning and value of literary reading for the sake of the future.

It is certainly no time to retreat within institutional walls. For all the academic resistance to 'instrumentalism', to governmental measurements of public impact and practical utility, literature exists in and across society. The 'literary' is not pure or specialized or self-confined; it is not restricted to the practitioner in writing or the academic in studying. It exists in the whole range of the world which is its subject matter: it consists in what non-writers actively receive from writings when, for example, they start to see the world more imaginatively as a result of reading novels and begin to think more carefully about human personality. It comes from literature making available much of human life that would not otherwise be existent to thought or recognizable as knowledge. If it is true that involvement in literature, so far from being a minority aesthetic, represents a significant contribution to the life of human thought, then that idea has to be argued at the public level without succumbing to a hollow rhetoric or bowing to a reductive world-view. Hence the effort of this series to take its place between literature and the world. The double-sided commitment to occupying that place and establishing its reality is the only 'agenda' here, without further prescription as to what should then be thought or done within it.

What is at stake is not simply some defensive or apologetic 'justification' in the abstract. The case as to why literature matters in the world not only has to be argued conceptually and strongly tested by thought, it should be given presence, performed and brought to life in the way that literature itself does. That is why this series includes the writers themselves, the novelists and poets, in order to try to close the 2 gap between the thinking of the artists and the thinking of those who read and study them. It is why it also involves other kinds of thinkers - the philosopher, the theologian, the psychologist, the neuro-scientist - examining the role of literature within their own life's work and thought, and the effect of that work, in turn, upon literary thinking. This series admits and encourages personal voices in an unpredictable variety of individual approach and expression, speaking wherever possible across countries and disciplines and temperaments. It aims for

something more than intellectual assent: rather the literary sense of what it is like to feel the thought, to embody an idea in a person, to bring it to being in a narrative or in aid of adventurous reflection. If the artists refer to their own works, if other thinkers return to ideas that have marked much of their working life, that is not their vanity nor a failure of originality. It is what the series has asked of them: to speak out of what they know and care about, in whatever language can best serve their most serious thinking, and without the necessity of trying to cover every issue or meet every objection in each volume.

- Philip Davis



The series

There may be an element of nostalgia involved, but it isn't difficult to think back to a time when Everyman, Penguin or The Library of America had a national educative mission as publishers, when people who would not have called themselves especially 'literary' made a volume of poetry their personal companion and a local library their second home, when great figures from the world of literature commented on events far outside their apparent sphere as the consciences of a good humane society. Literature mattered.

Today literary work is being challenged as a way of thinking about contemporary life. Many fear that it has become side-lined by newer, more fashionable, disciplines such as cultural and media studies, while others view its failure to attract funding in competition with more 'useful' subjects as the beginning of the end. Indeed, the rise of instant social media and new digital technologies provokes the question: is there any point in poetry, plays, novels, in literary criticism and, above all, slow serious and deep reading?

The Literary Agenda is a brand new series that will show that this is the right time for renewal, and to start reinvigorated work into the meaning and value of literary reading. Short works offering strong personal visions will each take an aspect of 'the literary', exploring the standing of literary thinking in the twenty-first century and speculating on its future direction. This series marks the launch of what its editor has called 'a reading revolution'.

Reading and the Reader by Philip Davis

Reading and the Reader was one of the first three volumes to be published in this series in September 2013, offering a defence of the value of reading serious literature. It argues that

- Literature provides a holding-ground for the exploration of human existence.
- It creates room in which to use and not just suffer one's personal experience; to think thoughts that customarily may be unadmitted or felt as anomalous; to establish a place of emotional contemplation in between religion and secularization.
- Reading becomes a form of mental travel—across ages, countries, different minds—that yields alternatives to any conventional worldview.

At a time when the arts and humanities are under some threat, *Reading and the Reader* seeks both to narrow the gap between the way writers and readers think, and to bring literary thinking into the ordinary thinking of the world