Jonathan Bate

Professor Jonathan Bate CBE FBA is Provost, Worcester College, University of Oxford. A video of extracts from this interview can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/prosperingwisely/bate

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What was the initial spark that made you want to study literature, and Shakespeare in particular?

Jonathan Bate
It all began at school. I remember the first Shakespeare I did at school was *Othello*; it was at the time of O-Level. The teacher made us listen to a very old gramophone record, and it was absolutely terrible and I didn't understand a word of it. But then I started going to the theatre, and suddenly it clicked. We had a very good drama teacher, and I played the part of Macbeth when I was 16, and that was it. There was something about the language of Shakespeare that just grabbed me. There is nothing like performing it, nothing like doing it. I think I still know the whole of *Macbeth* word-for-word, because I learned the part and you listen to the other parts, and it just enters your skin. Shakespeare was writing for the theatre, he was writing to be performed. And once you see it – or even better, do it – it just comes alive and it stays with you.

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So Shakespeare needs to be seen and heard?

Jonathan Bate
The key to getting people interested in Shakespeare is enjoying the language. It is getting the words aloud. The problem with Shakespeare, and indeed other dramatists of his period, and indeed for that matter much literature of the past, is looking at it on the page. The language can seem very alien. The sentence structures can seem very complicated. But when you read it aloud and, above all, when you see it on stage, you see it performed, then the language makes sense. You start enjoying the language. It doesn't matter that you don't understand every word of it.

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Your website[1] describes you as 'biographer, broadcaster, critic, Shakespearean'. Which of those labels is the most important to you?

Jonathan Bate
I suppose of all the labels I attach to myself, *Shakespearean* is the most important. The thing about Shakespeare is there are multitudes within him. What is so fascinating about Shakespeare is that he writes in almost every literary genre imaginable, and his plays have inspired so much later great creativity. There are so many great novels, later plays, operas, ballets, films, you name it, inspired by Shakespeare. It's as if what you have in Shakespeare is a kind of concentration of the force of creativity, the force of the imagination. Everything else flows out from that. I have always had very wide interests in my scholarly study. I am very interested in the classical inheritance of English literature, the way that the renaissance was a great discovery of the cultural glories of ancient Greece and Rome. Shakespeare, of course, was part of that, because he studied the Latin classics at school; they were formative of him. But then I am also fascinated by the process that Shakespeare has been constantly re-invented down the ages on stage, on screen, in different media. So, Shakespeare, for me, is the central point – the centripetal force that brings everything together.

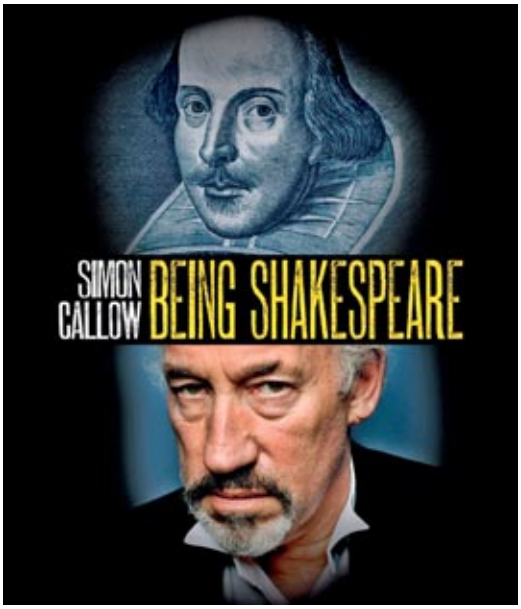
But I have ranged very widely in my work. My PhD thesis was on the Romantic poets: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron, Shelley, and how they were influenced by Shakespeare. Ever since doing that thesis, I have always felt that to be a true *critic*, to understand literature fully, you should not confine yourself within one specialism or one period, because there is a sense that all of literature, and perhaps all of cultural creativity more generally, is a form of dialogue. Writers are always answering back to other writers. So, as a critic, I have often explored those kinds of relationship, those sorts of cultural intersection.

Another thing that I have learned, crucially, from Shakespeare is the need to communicate to a wide audience. Shakespeare was writing in an age where some poets wrote very narrowly-focused poetry for a very specialised audience – maybe for their patron, maybe for their friends. But Shakespeare wrote for everybody. He wrote for the public stage as well as the court. He is the great example of the crossover between high culture and low. I don't like the idea that there is an elite form of literature, and a way of approaching literature that is only for experts. It should be for everybody. So that sense of *broadcasting*, reaching a wide audience, is also something that I think really begins with Shakespeare.

[1] www.jonathanbate.com

In my later writing, I have become increasingly interested in the art of *biography*. Biography, of course, is a form that does have popular appeal but also requires great scholarly skill and dedication. The wonderful thing about writing a biography is that you have simultaneously got to be a scholar, working scrupulously with archival sources, balancing what you read, say, in a writer's diary or in someone's letter, seeing how different people interpret the same events. So you have to be a scholar, you have to do the archival research. But, in telling the story of an interesting person's life, you also have to be, in a sense, a novelist. You have to tell the story. You have to grab the reader. Those arts of writing biography are something that I have become increasingly obsessed with.

In a way, that has been a reaction against one of the main sort of doctrines when I was a student of literature, which was that you shouldn't really think about the writer's life too much. English literary study, really from the 1950s to the 1970s, was dominated by the so-called New Critics, under the influence of the great American poet-critic, T.S. Eliot, but in Britain, especially, the influence of the Cambridge critic F.R. Leavis. The watchword – this is very much how I was first taught to study literature – was to concentrate on the text; only the text counts. The context, and especially the biographical context, was something you shouldn't really look at. There was a sort of stringency, a purity to the idea that all you should do is focus on the text. I have reacted against that now. The fact is, all literary texts, all forms of cultural creativity are produced by people who have their own experiences, their own lives, their own historical, social, cultural context. Exploring the biographical origins of great works of art seems to me an absolutely fascinating task, although you always need to be careful not to try to look for a crude mapping of a writer or creative artist's life onto their work. The imagination is a form of alchemy. Things change. Every writer uses what they have experienced. But the best writers transmute it in such a way that the process of going back from the work to the life is a very delicate and intricate one.



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You wrote a biographical play about Shakespeare.

Jonathan Bate

The play that I wrote for Simon Callow, originally called *The Man from Stratford*, and then renamed *Being Shakespeare*, arose precisely out of the problem of writing a biography of Shakespeare. I knew I wanted to write a biography of Shakespeare, and I had a lot of original research for it. But I was struggling to write it in a new way. The problem with orthodox biography – which begins with the birth, goes through the life, and ends with the death – is that in the case of Shakespeare the documentation that we have is really rather boring. We have his baptismal records, his marriage records, the record of his death. We have some records of financial disputes he got involved in. We know, roughly, when his plays were written. But we don't really have a way, in terms of original biographical documentation, to get inside his mind, his imagination.

I wanted to write a kind of intellectual biography of Shakespeare, a biography of his mind. I had lots of material gathered for it, but I couldn't find a structure. Then out of the blue, I had a postcard from the actor Simon Callow, saying that, having had great success with his biographical play about Charles Dickens, he wanted to do something similar for William Shakespeare, and could I write it for him.

So Simon and I got together, and we started hammering out the problem of how to present Shakespeare's life. We realised that my problem, how to do it on the page, and Simon's problem, how to do it on the stage, were the same. By working together, we created a structure that allowed us to solve that problem. It was a really simple discovery, which is that Shakespeare himself told us how to do it. In the great speech 'All the world's a stage' in *As You Like It*, the character of Jaques divides human life into seven ages. I did a lot of research on the idea of the seven ages of man, the idea of life as a play, and it was absolutely perfect. It just opened up so many aspects of Shakespeare's world, Shakespeare's life. So it worked for me in the structure of writing my biography, and it worked for Simon as a piece of theatre.

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Why is Shakespeare so important for understanding our own culture?

Jonathan Bate

For me, Shakespeare is both the mid-point and also a living, changing reference point within culture, partly because the amount of other early literature that is studied in schools, and indeed increasingly in universities, is diminishing. People perhaps have the idea that Shakespeare is the father figure, the starting point, the place where we begin. But of course, that isn't the case. Shakespeare built upon a huge achievement in earlier literature: Chaucer came before Shakespeare. He also, in very, very important ways, built on the inheritance of the classics, the inheritance of ancient Rome, ultimately of ancient Greece. Yet, he has been constantly reinvented, revived, had a shaping influence in later cultures. So, he is genuinely a figure who is constantly changing, but he is a figure who, in his work and in the story of the reinvention of his work, enables us to connect the past, the present and the future.

There are aspects of Shakespeare that are now very alien to us, and it is crucial that academic commentary should help to keep those alive.

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We can see Shakespeare being performed for ourselves. Why do we need academic commentary on Shakespeare?

Jonathan Bate
Shakespeare is universal, and if he is well-performed, you can get it without the academic commentary. But, at the same time, a deep understanding of a cultural phenomenon from the past needs an understanding of the historical context of the language. There are aspects of Shakespeare that are now very alien to us, and it is crucial that academic commentary should help to keep those alive.

Ben Jonson, who was Shakespeare's friend, rival, fellow dramatist, wrote a wonderful poem as a preface to Shakespeare's collected works, when they were published just after his death. Jonson says two things about Shakespeare. On the one hand he says, 'Thou art not of an age, but for all time' – the idea that Shakespeare's characters, the human dilemmas he presents are valid in every age, every culture. But he also described Shakespeare as 'Soul of the age' – Shakespeare somehow embodying the spirit of a very particular historical moment.

There are many dimensions of Shakespeare's work – whether attitudes towards monarchy, for or against republicanism; or the great crisis of religion, Catholic against Protestantism; or the encounter between European Christianity and the Islamic Ottoman empire, the great confrontation in the Mediterranean at that time. These historical dimensions are things that people today need help with. We need historians, literary scholars, to place the work in their original context. And that can be an incredibly enriching experiencing, as all forms of historical reconstruction can be when done well.

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Is it important that Shakespeare is studied because of his role in our national identity?

Jonathan Bate
There is a particular phenomenon with regard to Shakespeare in British cultural life which you could perhaps get to by a famous remark of the great general and politician, the Duke of Marlborough, in the early 18th century, who said, 'The thing about the English is that they get their history from Shakespeare and their theology from Milton' (he was thinking of Milton's *Paradise Lost*).

Take the idea that the English get their history from Shakespeare. It is certainly the case that the Shakespearian theatre was the place where national history, the Wars of the Roses, the Hundred Years War against France, the idea of Richard III as a bad king, and Henry V as a great king – these ideas, these national myths – were played out for the first time to a wide public on the Shakespearian stage. You could read about them in the history books, but the history books were expensive and only available to the literate. It was Shakespeare who gave the national story to the people.

Now, it is very tempting for politicians to say, 'In that case, we must study Shakespeare, we must pay Shakespeare scholars out of the public purse, so that they can carry on that national story' – a sort of patriotic duty to study Shakespeare. Of course, what you discover when you start reading a play like *Henry V* carefully is that actually there is a powerful critique of patriotism built into that, even as it is an expression of patriotism. Shakespeare, in a way, becomes a tool for questioning ideology, even as politicians put it forward as an exemplar of a kind of national ideology.

There are wonderful stories to discover about how Shakespeare has been used for subversive purposes, not only in British culture, but in other culture down the ages. The great example would be during the Soviet era in Russia and Eastern Europe. When there was very strict censorship of new plays, Shakespeare's plays were often used as a way of criticising the current regime. There was a famous production, for instance in Romania of *Hamlet*, where it was clear that the villainous Claudius and Gertrude were the Ceauşescus. And when the revolution came in Romania, the person on the tank going into the television station was the actor, Ion Caramitru, who had played the part of Hamlet in that production. It is not the only time in history that Shakespeare has been part of a revolution.

I am not sure that is what the government would want to hear when prescribing Shakespeare for school examinations, but it is something to be aware of.

I had a bit of an argument recently with the officers in the current Department for Education, where I was brought in to advise them on the canon of literary works that should be studied in a revised form of GCSE. A very strong steer was coming from the Minister that there should be two compulsory Shakespeare plays, the sense that Shakespeare is the centre of our national literary canon and, therefore, all students leaving school should know at least two of his plays – maybe a comedy and a tragedy. I slightly got the sense that, as a Shakespeare scholar, I was being brought in to agree with that. But I actually proposed on the contrary, that everybody at school should study at least two plays, at least one by Shakespeare and one by someone *other than* Shakespeare. I worry that the sort of canonisation of Shakespeare, the reverence we have for Shakespeare, is now getting to a stage where he is becoming, as it were, the token of high culture – the tokenistic, representation of the whole of the cultural past, the literary past. 'If you have Shakespeare, that is all you need.' I think to the contrary. You need to have Shakespeare *beside* his contemporaries and his successors. For one thing, you can only tell how great and how distinctive Shakespeare is if you read some other things as well. I don't think my idea went down particularly well in the Ministry, but I am going to keep on fighting the battle for dramatists other than Shakespeare.

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Do we have to be wary of putting Shakespeare on too high a pedestal?

Jonathan Bate
I think it is very important for academics to have a little bit of scepticism about what George Bernard Shaw called, 'Bardolatry', the idea that Shakespeare could not write a bad line. Actually, Shakespeare wrote loads of bad lines. The cult of Shakespeare is something that we need to ask questions of. The history of that cult is itself an extremely interesting story, and a complicated one. It is something I have done a lot of work on. But I hate it when you hear politicians or journalists just assuming that Shakespeare stands for universal genius. It is a much, much more complicated story than that. And part of the business of the academic is to ask some rigorous questions about that, and indeed to find new ways of complicating the way in which people understand Shakespeare.

I am working at the moment with a film company. We are creating a series of Shakespeare apps, where you will be able to download a Shakespeare play to your iPhone or your iPad. You will get the heads of actors speaking the lines. It will be like a sort of video book – a 21st-century equivalent of the audiobook – but you will also get the text. When you turn your iPad from vertical to horizontal, you will get the commentary down the right-hand side. So you will get the pure experience of hearing the words, seeing the text. But then you will also get the opportunity to get the commentary that will help you have a deeper understanding of it. And then you will be able to click on various buttons and getting deeper and deeper into the background, into the historical context. With that series, our hope is that a kind of toolkit for a really serious understanding of Shakespeare will be made available to anybody who pays a few quid and downloads it.

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So are you optimistic about our continuing interest in Shakespeare?

Jonathan Bate
I think it says something incredibly positive about where we are as a culture that Shakespeare is still so alive, whether it is a workshop in a school, a production at the Globe, or an amazing movie like the recent, low-budget *Much Ado About Nothing* – more or less shot over 10 days in black-and-white around someone's kitchen table, and yet a beautifully achieved production which makes a 400-year-old story as fresh as if it were written yesterday. I think Shakespeare just brings so much to so many people. It is fantastic that we can continue to celebrate him, to perform him, and to do work on him that keeps him alive. That enables people to understand him more and more deeply.

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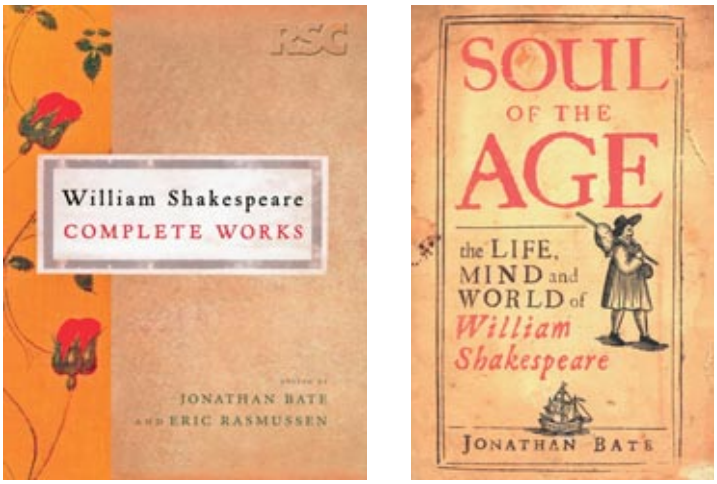
You said that your work has ranged beyond Shakespeare.

Jonathan Bate
I think the piece of work that I am proudest of is my biography of the poet, John Clare,[2] an agricultural labourer from Northamptonshire in the early 19th century, very much a contemporary of Keats and Byron, but comparatively little known. Yet, to me, John Clare is the greatest writer from a humble origin that England has ever seen. Scotland had Robert Burns; England has John Clare. He is also our greatest writer about the natural world: flowers, trees, the life of nature. No one had really done justice to his life. There was a huge amount of unpublished, archival material, letters and so on. The process of gathering that and exploring this extraordinary life – where he overcame so much hardship, then fell into mental illness and ended up in a lunatic asylum – was very satisfying. Every great writer needs a biography that readers will say, 'Yes, this does justice to his achievement. This gets inside the mind of the subject.' I really believe I did do that with John Clare.

You hear politicians or journalists assuming that Shakespeare stands for universal genius. Part of the business of the academic is to ask rigorous questions about that, and find new ways of complicating the way in which people understand Shakespeare.



Jonathan Bate's books on Shakespeare include the 2007 Royal Shakespeare Company edition of the complete works of Shakespeare, and 'Soul of the Age' (2008).

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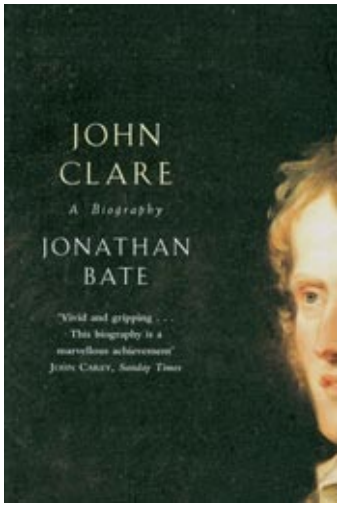
Why is John Clare so interesting for us?

Jonathan Bate
My biography of John Clare coincided with a broader revival of interest in him, and there was also something timely about it. Clare was very interested in questions of environmental fragility, ecological change. He witnessed great changes to the land and landscape around him, and he was very conscious of the fragility of the natural environment. He was an ecologist, before his time; a conservationist. The rediscovery of that aspect of his work

[2] Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography* (2003).

gave a very interesting literary dimension to the great passion for questions of 'What do we do about environmental crisis?' which really came to public prominence in the late-20th century and the beginning of this century.



Another thing that happened, interestingly, was that shortly after my biography came out, the cottage in which John Clare had been born and brought up, and lived for much of his life, came on the market. A charitable trust was set up and they managed to obtain the cottage and have now turned it into a visitor centre and education centre and a writers' centre. So, writers can go there to work. But perhaps more importantly, school children from the city who have no sense of what rural life in Britain was once like, and in many parts still is like, can come and learn, through the life and work of John Clare, about rural life and also about questions of environmental fragility and ecological sustainability. So that is a very interesting example of where a piece of scholarship about a poet who has been dead for 150 years can feed into a broader educational, social, and in this case ecological development.

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In 2011, you edited a collection of essays defending the humanities. Why did you do that?

Jonathan Bate
The collection of essays on *The Public Value of the Humanities*[3] really emerged from a challenge that did indeed come from the government funders of research in the humanities. Its origin was a meeting, when I was on the council of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which gives out public funding for humanities research, where a senior civil servant was pressing us. He said, 'I very much value the work that you do, but not everybody in either the civil service or indeed the government shares that value. I want to challenge you to find some good answers as to why the taxpayer should pay people to research medieval history, archaeology, the history of film, the poetry of the Romantic period, whatever it might be.' So we asked scholars in a whole spectrum of humanities disciplines to try to say something about the public value of what they did.

The book that resulted had a rather interesting tension at the heart of it, because in a way we were trying to balance two conflicting impulses. On the one hand, we were putting forward ample evidence that economic benefit does flow from the study of the humanities. A piece of archaeological research about Stonehenge can have a huge knock-on effect on tourism. A piece of research on Shakespeare can feed into Shakespearian productions, which then maybe take you into the world of the movies, and vast amounts of employment and economic activity can follow from that. So, there was one impulse just to gather together evidence that we are not all sitting in an ivory tower, indulging a sort of fetishistic passion for some obscure area of medieval history, but we are actually doing stuff that has an effect in the wider community. At the same time, one of the reasons for studying the humanities is precisely that the humanities draw our attention to big, valuable, important things that cannot be contained or constrained within a model of economic benefit. Beauty, truth – these are difficult, abstract concepts, concepts that defy quantification. So the other aspect of the book was to challenge that model of economic productivity, through the humanities.

The humanities draw our attention to big, valuable, important things that cannot be contained within a model of economic benefit.

In the introduction to the book, I talked a bit about a great debate there was in the 19th century. One of the things the humanities do is show us that the past can help to illuminate the present; the disputes we have in the present have also been played out in the past. I looked at a pair of essays by the great Victorian philosopher, John Stuart Mill: one on the philosopher Jeremy Bentham; the other on the poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Bentham famously was the man who quantified, the man who said what we need to do in society is create 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' of people. If we can measure what brings most happiness to the people, that will produce a good society. Coleridge said almost the opposite. He said what we need to do is find the good, the true, the beautiful, the significant, and those are things that can't be quantified. If we simply followed Bentham, it would be football for everybody. If you simply followed Coleridge, you might have a rather elitist sense that the people were excluded from high culture. What John Stuart Mill argued for was some kind of balance between the two. That is what we were seeking in the collection of essays. There is huge public value in the work that the humanities do. And there are, for instance through collaborations with museums, art galleries, theatre companies, wonderful opportunities to share humanistic scholarship with a wide public and to enlighten, to stimulate them. But at the same time there has to be an aspect of our work that challenges this idea that all that matters is that it should be popular, and readily accessible to everybody.

[3] Jonathan Bate (ed.), *The Public Value of the Humanities* (2011).

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You quote Coleridge talking about the humanities securing for the nation 'that character of general civilization, which equally with, or rather more than, fleets, armies, and revenue, forms the ground of its offensive and defensive powers'.

Jonathan Bate
There's a great twist that Coleridge introduces when he is talking about the value of having what we would now perhaps call 'public intellectuals'. He says that the work of humanistic scholarship, the work of creativity, of critical investigation, is actually a form of power and a form of defence. He actually says that intellectual work, academic work, in some senses can achieve more than an army or a navy. It is what nowadays might be called 'soft power', or might be called 'hearts and minds'. If you are going to maintain a position of strength in the world, then you need a robust set of principles, moral, ethical and perhaps aesthetic – a set of values that you can stand for, you can fight for.

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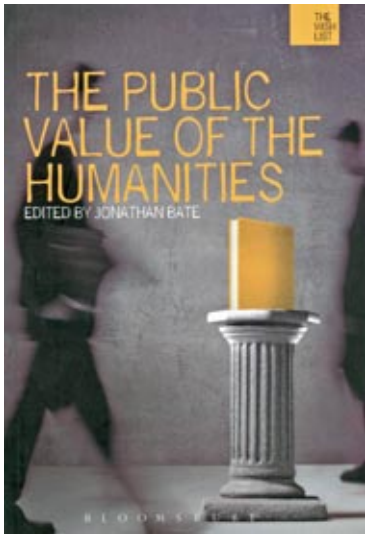
Can you give an example of that from the book?

Jonathan Bate
For the book *The Public Value of the Humanities*, we simply asked a ranged of academics to tell us one story about why they thought their work was valuable. The philosopher, Simon Blackburn, came back with a lovely, simple story about someone who wrote to him asking if he could translate Simon's little book called *Think*, which is essentially a book about philosophy, about the art of thinking, the art of asking questions.[4] This person, who was Syrian, asked him if he could translate his book *Think* into Arabic, because, he said, the Islamic world needs an introduction to secular philosophy. It needs a counter to a sort of Islamist fundamentalist way of thinking. Simon Blackburn says that that simple act is potentially a huge achievement. It is something that could actually change the world. You need to change minds in order to change politics.



And of course, what would then follow is that, if you begin by changing minds, then you move forward without the appalling human and indeed financial costs that come through working with hard power, with armies, with bombs.

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And the humanities continue to contribute to the culture of the nation.

Jonathan Bate
One has to justify public funding of the arts, of scholarship. But at the same time, one has got to say what matters. When people are lying on their deathbed, looking back at their lives, what are some of the things that they will remember and will think were worthwhile? Having great cultural experiences is part of that. Cultural experiences do not come cheap. A great cultural experience will often require an enormous amount of work, of expenditure, of time, of intellectual work in the background in order to make it possible.

Just to take a crude example, think of the 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony, which created an extraordinary national feel-good sense. It really did raise the morale of the nation at a difficult time, and it told a very interesting story about Britain. But if you look at the background to that, what you will find is that Frank Cottrell Boyce who wrote it, working with Danny Boyle who directed it, did an immense amount of research in English history, in English culture. They got particularly interested in the work of the great documentary film maker, Humphrey Jennings, in a book of his called *Pandæmonium*,[5] which was about the Romantic period, the growth of the industrial revolution. That book in itself condensed an immense amount of historical and literary scholarship. So there is actually a direct line that goes through there. It's not immediately visible, and yet there is no doubt that an event like that is of great value. All the people who said, 'The money being spent on the Olympics is a waste of money' – well, they were wrong, weren't they?

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What did election to the Fellowship of the British Academy mean to you?

Jonathan Bate
It was a great honour and surprise to be elected to the Fellowship of the British Academy, because I thought it was something for old men from Oxford and Cambridge. I was 40 and taught at the University of Liverpool. The first thing I thought was, 'Thank you to Shakespeare', because there is no doubt that it was my work on Shakespeare that made it possible. But it also really pleased me, that it was a way of acknowledging that somebody whose work was as wide-ranging and in some sense populist as mine, was acknowledged as a proper scholar, a proper academician. There can, within academic life, be a kind of snobbery about people who try to reach a wide audience. That makes me very angry. Of course, if you are writing for a wide audience, sometimes you have to simplify. But I think you can still have a real scholarly rigour and you can smuggle in a surprising amount of genuinely original scholarship even when you are writing for a wide audience.

[4] Professor Simon Blackburn was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2002. His book *Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy* was published in 1999.

[5] Humphrey Jennings, *Pandæmonium, 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers* (published posthumously in 1985).