ever they’re conveying.” The same could be said of Hulsey’s own pieces—but knowing what information they convey, and her meticulous intellectual approach, makes them all the more captivating.

Hulsey can detail the concepts behind her artwork, but she struggles to describe its aesthetics. “I don’t fully speak the same language as people who are more scholarly in the art world,” she says. Instead, her vocabulary stems from linguistics itself. The systems and components that make up language and art draw her to both disciplines. Language is composed of parts that fit together in a particular manner: words are ordered in certain ways to form sentences; roots, prefixes, and suffixes fit together to form words. Likewise, movable type on a letterpress must be arranged in a particular manner; books are structured into groupings of lines, pages, chapters, volumes, editions, and series. By appropriating the visual style of diagrams, maps, and charts, Hulsey’s pieces marry the craft and rigor of conceptual art with the graphic pop of information design, to edge toward fresh takes on communication itself. Language, she explains, “is this really elaborate structure that speakers are, for all intents and purposes, totally unaware of”—and her work explores the subtle intricacies that make speech make sense.

When she first pursued printmaking, Hulsey considered it a side interest, completely separate from her academic studies. A linguistics concentrator at Harvard, she attended workshops and courses on letterpress printing, papermaking, and bookbinding. While earning her Ph.D. in linguistics at MIT, she kept a studio in nearby Somerville to pursue her hobby. Ten years and one M.F.A. from the University of the Arts (in Philadelphia) later, she has left the world of academic linguistics behind for the rich possibilities of art and design.

The present book is an exercise in the art of literary criticism, which I take to be the appreciation of quality, of excellence, in art made with words. Literary criticism is not science: it does not prove and discover; it persuades and reveals. But the chances of a work of literary criticism being worth reading outside expert scholarly circles are much increased if it first meets their standards, which often do involve proof and discovery. Philology, in the broad sense of the word, is where criticism starts from, but not where it ends.

That is because criticism has a higher aim, which may be described as moral and humanizing. Literary criticism is the appreciation of verbal art as a power that elevates our ordinary experience in almost every way. Literature cultivates wisdom, courage, generosity, breadth of outlook, intellectual and moral judgment, a reflective passion for justice, and, not the least of these things, pleasure, civilized pleasure as opposed to brutal or trivial pleasures. But literature also enhances our capacity for sympathizing with others, or at least for understanding them, by allowing us to travel into different moral worlds, such as that of Homer, or the authors of Genesis, or the author of Paradise Lost. Literary criticism strives to show why certain works of literature are good, why they have enduring quality, and, however different their values are from our own, why they are not only civilized but civilizing. I should add that I use the word civilizing and civil, civis “of the city,” with the intention of including politics, concern with the polis, the polity. For it seems to me—I say this as someone who cares for all the arts—that literature comes first among them because it is made with our political instrument, language. Certainly John Milton put literature—which for him meant poetry—first among the civilizing arts, and I have written this book in agreement with his judgment on the matter.

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