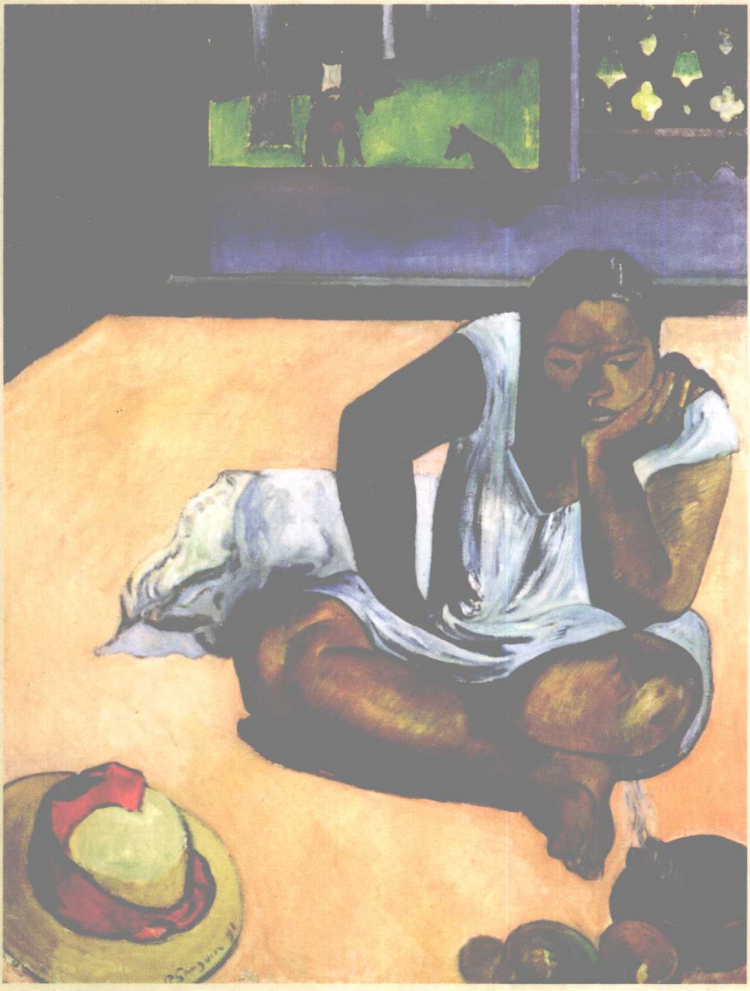
LITERATURE IN THE MODERN WORLD

Critical Essays and Documents



SECOND REVISED EDITION

EDITED BY DENNIS WALDER

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INTRODUCTION

This collection of critical essays and documents was originally designed to accompany an Open University course that ran for ten years during the 1990s with an annual population of about 700 students. Yet the book also reached well beyond the boundaries of the OU and indeed the United Kingdom, attracting sales over the decade of some 40,000. This second and revised edition is aimed more consciously at the broader readership that the original attracted, a readership perhaps less specific, yet equally likely I hope to respond to the aims of the first—which was, after all, designed to engage 'relative newcomers' to the field with some of the main themes and issues which can be expected to concern them as 'serious readers of literature today'.

Serious readers are not necessarily students; but the main audience for this book is assumed to be those involved in some form of guided study that encourages them to get to know the most important and stimulating writings that have affected the way literature has been discussed and thought about in recent years. It was my aim in the first edition to provide material that struck me as exciting, original, and above all accessible, rather than simply representative of this or that critical or theoretical approach; and I am convinced that this was one reason for its success in a field littered with more comprehensive primers, many of which try to provide introductions to the whole range of critics and positions. This was never my aim; not merely because I felt it was beyond me (many of the current introductions are jointly edited, and no wonder), but also because the proliferation of schools and approaches has been such that it is now hardly possible to cover them sensibly in a single volume—hence the more recent appearance of readers and anthologies dedicated to particularly influential lines of thought, from feminism to post-colonialism, and to particularly influential individuals, from Edward Said to Hélène Cixous.

Examples of these approaches and the writings of those who promoted them will of course be found here. But not only have I sacrificed coverage to clarity and multivalency—selecting extracts substantial enough to be used at different times for different purposes—but I also have my own agenda, inevitably expressive of my particular experience and preferences; and I would encourage readers to take that into account when using this book alongside others. What, then, is that agenda? It involves a view of what has happened to literary criticism and its ostensible object over the last century.

Aims and Background

To begin with, then, I wish to suggest how the construction of 'English Literature' has been challenged and revalued through the development of a variety of opposed or undermining critical perspectives during what E. J. Hobsbawm has persuasively characterized as the Short Twentieth Century—from the end of the First World War to the collapse of communism—a period which witnessed the decline of Britain as a world-imperial power, and the rise of the United States to take its place. This shift in world power relations is unignorable; as are the recurrent crises which marked the twentieth century, and whose effects remain with us: the impact and memory of two world wars, economic depression, decolonization, genocide, and terror. The literary and cultural influence of modernism (in all its varieties) is inseparable from these and related social, political, and historical factors; although the precise nature of the interaction is extremely difficult, if not impossible to determine. Literary critics even more than writers tend to exaggerate their own importance in the scheme of things. Nevertheless, it is possible to suggest that since the late 1960s, and the cultural and intellectual turmoil surrounding the strikes, student revolts, and anti-Vietnam War protests in the United States and Europe, traditional literary criticism in English and the associated 'canon' of texts came under fire as part of a critique of the whole complex of conservative, authoritarian attitudes supposedly supporting the liberal-democratic ('bourgeois') states of the West, and their institutions, including schools and universities. The thinking of Marx and Freud was reinterpreted and reapplied by radical French intellectuals such as Louis Althusser (1918–90) and Jacques Lacan (1901–81) so as to undermine the idea of the individual as an independent self whose actions were in some sense free. And just as the individual came to be redefined in terms of unconscious or social and historical forces beyond its control, so, too, the literary text came to be seen as crucially subject to context, to the extent that texts as such often disappeared entirely from the terms of analysis.

Language was a key feature of this 'theorizing' of literary study—or rather, a particular set of ideas about language, which chimed in with the general suspicion of what became anathematized as 'liberal humanist' conceptions of the individual and society. According to the 'structuralist' tradition, language is not directly connected with the reality outside itself, but refers to it according to a set of rules: it is the means by which reality is constructed, rather than some passive medium through which we perceive things. Literary works are texts referring to each other, rather than to some external reality; and the point of criticism seemed to be to find the more general rules according to which language issued in texts, literary or not, so as to question the received ways of

thinking which become visible in them. A good example was the widely influential 1968 essay 'The Death of the Author', by the Parisian writer and cultural critic Roland Barthes (included here), which killed off the author by claiming that texts emerged not so much from the mind or pen of one person, but as the focus of a whole range of contextual forces. The organic unity formerly found, and praised when found, in literary works was an illusion; instead, the work was a text which, like any other, was an unstable linguistic entity, the so-called 'site of struggle'. The authority of the author, and with it authority generally, was thus undermined—the whole aim of 'theory'.

It should be recalled that the interest of 'theory' as a set of critical approaches was not the concern of more than a minority within the academic institutions of the West. Nevertheless, these approaches have continued to have an impact elsewhere, especially in those places where European colonial systems of education were deeply rooted, as for example in India, Singapore, or Australia, and where the various 'isms'—from structuralism to post-structuralism, from feminism to new historicism—were soon to be found. From the 1970s onwards such new, or newly formulated, ideas about literature, language, history, culture, and society have had a profound effect upon literary studies generally, which helped pave the way for the specific ideas associated with Marxist, feminist, and psychoanalytic writings to reach teachers, students, and (on occasion) even wider audiences. The reversal of perspective which undermined universalist claims about the centrality of the accepted 'canon' of great authors and their works around which Western literary criticism and teaching circulated opened up the possibility for literary critics and others of attending more closely to the alternative claims of historically neglected or marginalized works. These works were by definition non-mainstream, and helped promote a sense of difference, of challenge, to the 'canon'—itself a more fluid concept than many had previously realized.

The presence—and, moreover, widespread acceptance—of writings from outside the traditional Anglophone literary 'canon', as well as the rise of a radical critique of that canon in terms of class, race, gender, and nation, mean that 'Literature in the Modern World' seems a more accurate formulation of the subject than, say, 'Modern English Literature'. Dropping 'English' is more than a matter of responding to a shift in view of what counts as writing in English or, more precisely, in the range of Englishes used by people from Chicago to Delhi, from Cape Town to Sydney, and from New York to London; it is also a matter of responding to the fact that for many readers—and writers—literatures in translation are sometimes of more pressing interest than writing in their 'own' languages, even one as dominant as English. Writers have always been less concerned with the boundaries between literatures and languages than critics and

teachers, which is one reason why I have sought writers rather than their explicators where possible for evidence of the shifts in attitude towards literature that developed over the twentieth century.

It has also been part of my agenda to question the idea that it is predominantly critics and 'theorists' who are responsible for the shifts in perspective that have affected literature and literary studies; rather than the wider culture that includes commercial as well as educational institutions, government bodies such as arts councils, and the media. This wider culture is where the commitment—social and political as well as aesthetic and personal—of writers has often been expressed: quite explicitly in manifestos and public statements of varying kinds, as well as in their 'creative' or fictional work. Some writers (Bertolt Brecht springs to mind) have been at ease and readily engaged with both theoretical and literary writing, including the theorizing of their own work; more commonly writers quietly resist attempts to colonize their imaginations by what often appears to them as the reduction of their work to packaged examples of trends or tendencies. Many writers have provided more nuanced and inviting accounts of what they think they are up to than any critic or theorist. I have included documents by modern writers whose influence has been both immediate and continuing, from T. S. Eliot to Virginia Woolf, from Chinua Achebe to Salman Rushdie. But I have not attempted to move yet further beyond the boundaries of what might reasonably be thought of as literary study: to have entered into cultural studies more generally would not have been feasible within the terms of my brief; nor is it necessary. Many of the pieces that will be found here, such as those dealing with interpretation, ideology, or history, are invested in topics which by definition cross disciplinary boundaries; but the focus here is on literature, or literary artefacts—products of the imagination, rather than the institutions that mediate them.

Despite what I have just said about my emphasis upon writers rather than critics or theorizers, it is a fundamental assumption of mine that the ensemble of ideas current as part of the 'theory revolution' in literary studies since the 1960s is intrinsically worth attending to. 'Theory' used to have to do with clarifying assumptions so as to validate an approach to literature, and this meaning continues to lurk in the undergrowth of debate; while 'critical theory' should perhaps have been retained for the historically specific sense it had when used by members of the Frankfurt School (the group of Marxist thinkers who fled the Nazis for the United States), such as Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and the latter's close friend Walter Benjamin—never an official member of the school, but closely associated with it, and, since his suicide in 1940, one of the most significant influences upon the reformulation of Marxist criticism. I have already suggested that the writings of Marx, and to a lesser extent

those of Freud, as they were interpreted and revised during the later twentieth century, have had an obvious influence upon the discussion, interpretation, and evaluation of literature, as many of the texts assembled here clearly demonstrate.

However, I have not seen it as part of my task to provide those originary writings, which may easily be found elsewhere; nor, indeed, have I felt it necessary to present extracts by early originators of contemporary literary theory such as the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), whose ideas about language gave rise to structuralist theory; the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984), whose ideas encouraged the distinction between literary language and reality; or the Russian American linguist Roman Jacobson (1896–1982), who developed the idea of literary language as a medium with its own analysable characteristics, providing an influential model of language function based on selection from two axes, the 'metaphoric' or associative dimension, and the 'metonymic' or contiguous.

Instead, what I have tried to demonstrate here is how theoretical and critical discussion has been concerned with questioning the principles and procedures of traditional literary study inherited from the nineteenth and early twentieth century. There is an important sense in which this level of discussion has arisen as a phenomenon accompanying the rise of the various associated literary, artistic, and cultural movements we think of as modernism; but there is also an important sense in which other factors, such as the women's movement and the rise of feminism, have been responsible for the new thinking about language that has had such a profound effect upon literary studies over the last half-century. This effect may be discerned initially as the motive for displacing the traditionally accepted texts of the 'canon', although that has become part of a larger movement to challenge orthodoxy into accepting what have been increasingly identified as marginalized voices—whether by the procedures of pedagogy or by the politics of institutions. According to Marilyn Butler (in the first extract in this book), 'the canon' has over time 'acquired a weird momentum of its own', as a result of the 'politics and social needs' of the day; now that those politics and social needs have changed, a new and historically informed set of canons is required, if millions of potential readers in different parts of the world are not to be denied.

It is to those new readers that this anthology is primarily addressed: readers who seek to understand the exciting ways in which modern literature has come to be discussed, without losing their focus upon literature, and without having first to study philosophy, linguistics, sociology, or psychology—despite the fact that these other disciplines have been extensively drawn on by literary theorists. The struggle to redefine the subject in terms of developments elsewhere has

inevitably led to an increase in difficulty and jargon; but new thinking involves new language, and there is a degree to which the more you read, the easier it becomes. Nonetheless, much of what is written by theorizers seems addressed solely to the initiated, those thoroughly imbued with the language and thought of those three great gendarmes (as Barthes called them) of modern literary culture Marx, Freud, and Saussure. You will find here writing which has been deeply influenced by them; but familiarity with their works is not assumed. Nor, therefore, will you find here many examples of the higher reaches of debate, the post-structuralist or deconstructionist work of Jacques Derrida (b. 1930), the post-Foucauldian or post-Lacanian work of Gilles Deleuze (1925–95), or the 'post-post-structuralist' work of those who have engaged with them, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (b. 1942). But you should find those higher reaches more accessible once you have worked through what is here—including indeed extracts from two of the most influential and accessible of the 'Yale deconstructionists', Geoffrey Hartman and Paul de Man, and two of the most prominent post-structuralist feminists, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler, initiators of a significant new site of debate under the rubric of 'Queer Theory'.

The writings of some of those I have included in any case do not fall easily into any such categorizing, and seem to have gone through it all and come out the other side: the Bologna semiotician Umberto Eco, for example, whose account of theatrical performance goes some way towards addressing the marked absence generally of drama theory (most theory until fairly recently concerned itself with the novel, or narrative), has long manipulated what he called (in his 1990 book of that name) *The Limits of Interpretation* so as to provoke readers into becoming more flexible and imaginative. The work of other contributors, such as Michel Foucault, has been of an interdisciplinary breadth and continuing influence that, while admitted to this book, has had to be limited to what has been specific to literary concerns, namely his essay on the figure of the author in literary criticism. Nevertheless, I hope to have given enough to demonstrate the quality of Foucault's thought, leaving it to the reader to pursue his historical and philosophical studies elsewhere. Foucault's thought—like that of several influential modern critics, such as Paul de Man and Judith Butler—goes back to a figure whose reflections perhaps more than any other underlie the anti-authoritarian and subversive drive of many of the major modern critics: Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Yet Nietzsche's significance in challenging metaphysics, and proposing a theory of power as the basis of morality, while relying on an analysis of language through its etymological and rhetorical structures, is of more interest in relation to the development of postmodern and deconstructionist criticism than the modernist work that primarily concerns us here.

My overriding concern has been to provide some sense of the important developments that have preceded, as well as accompanied and affected, the rise of postmodern thinking. Postmodern debates arose in the 1970s, and may be said to deal with theories and practices that both engaged with modern issues, and went beyond them. This is not to suggest any simple linearity of development; there are always both continuities and discontinuities. Nonetheless, I believe it is vital to try and understand the attitudes and approaches towards literature in terms of modernism, in order to get to grips with postmodernism, while aware that many writers and thinkers straddle the boundaries between these movements in literary and cultural affairs—most notably perhaps those concerned with conceptualizing 'difference', such as Judith Butler. Moreover, our sense of current concerns draws as much on modernisms as on the postmodern, both of these periodizing labels alluding to continuing constructions of meaning, interpretation, and value in the modern, that is, contemporary, world.

How to Use this Book

Don't read this book straight through. It will drop from your lifeless hands. Nevertheless, it has a cumulative logic. I have divided the material into two parts, 'General Approaches' and 'Themes and Issues'. Broadly speaking, Part One is designed to provide a range of voices on leading topics that anticipate the more specific formulations that follow in Part Two. I say broadly, because I have for this edition added a final section that raises more general issues once again, in particular the issue that many critics feel has been overlooked in the rush to theorize: the question of 'value'. This will return you to the opening debate about the 'canon', but on a more profound level. The book as a whole is not organized chronologically, but according to a sense of the deepening of debates and discussion; although by arranging the items within each section so as to create a sense of the development of a topic or theme, that has usually but not always led to a chronological order in them.

So you may wish to look at some of the extracts in Part One before those in Part Two, although that is not essential. Yet the earlier sections do anticipate the more specific concerns of the later, as you can easily tell if you look at, for example, the opening extracts in Part One, *Section I*, 'Questioning the "Canon"', where the question is raised of what constitutes literature as a subject of interest or study, and of how this has been debated. The extracts are chosen not only to suggest the different positions of widely influential figures, from Gilbert and Gubar to Frank Kermode and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., but also to feed into the discussions you will find in, for example, 'Literature and Gender', 'From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial' and 'Literature and Value'. If Marilyn Butler may

be thought simply to argue for the reinstatement of a 'minor' poet such as Southey, and Kermode to question the need for any real change in the concept of the canon, Eagleton, Gilbert and Gubar, and Gates all find compelling reasons to extend, or indeed demolish, the whole idea of a canon. Critics as varied as Sedgwick (who considers *Gone With the Wind* worthy of discussion) and Brathwaite (who promotes Caribbean 'pioneers' of oral literature like Louise Bennett) challenge familiar canonical restrictions, thereby reinforcing Barbara Herrnstein Smith's emphasis upon the radically relative nature of literary evaluations (Part Two, *Section IX*, 'The Exile of Evaluation').

The first section, then, is the model for all the sections that follow: the setting up of a position or range of positions, which are then questioned, challenged—or, sometimes, sidestepped in order to make a different point on the issue, the whole section anticipating perspectives that will emerge later on. Here, introduced by the first section, is the fundamental issue of how to select the texts we wish to read, or study.

But if we could agree about what to read or study, how then would we agree about the meaning of those writings? Is such agreement possible—or desirable? *Section II*, 'Interpretation', provides some of the most influential and persuasive views on the subject of 'hermeneutics', the art or science of interpretation, supposedly derived from the name of Hermes, winged-footed messenger of the Greek gods, and patron of interpretation, among other things. As this implies, how we determine the meaning of a piece of writing goes back a long way; but modern hermeneutics is to a large extent derived from specifically German thought about how to interpret the Bible, initiated by the Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Schleiermacher's emphasis upon philology and history, twin means of access to the kind of understanding that involves a new experience in the present, may be found in many modern interpretative theories, such as those of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2001) and (included here as engaged in the more specifically literary field) Hans Robert Jauss. But a comparison of the arguments and ideas of critics like E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Stanley Fish, and—directly engaged with Fish—Robert Scholes, suggests how far questions of interpretation have penetrated well beyond the European source of many of them, to brilliant and provocative effect. And as Geoffrey Hartman's account of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* set beside Wordsworth's 'A slumber did my spirit seal' suggests, there is no end to interpretation, when 'ordinary language' gets pressed into art.

Yet there appear to be moments when what Sartre refers to as 'the situation of the writer' calls forth closure, as an acknowledgement that the larger movements of society, history, and politics have made the undecidability of meaning a luxury. Not that Sartre's position is a simple one but, like Virginia Woolf's two

decades before, it is passionately held. Nor is 'Commitment' a simple matter, as the extracts in *Section III* indicate, anticipating many voices spanning the troubled twentieth century, included for example in the sections 'Literature and Ideology' and 'Literature and History'. If this anthology should be read with an awareness that the themes and issues raised in Part One will turn up again in Part Two, that will not always be where you might expect to find them. Virginia Woolf's demonstration of the repression of women's voices in 'To Cambridge Women' usually leads to her work being placed under the feminist or gender rubric, and that is fair enough; yet her reflections upon, for example, the importance of 'anon', and the storytelling and spinning that surrounded (and still surrounds, in many cultures) children—these touch on the relation between society, language, and literary culture in a way that connects with, for example, Kamau Brathwaite's remarks about 'nation language' as an oral form, inadequately recognized by the written traditions of the dominant modern metropolis. Pondering this may prompt reflection upon the question of how far feminist approaches have taken into account the narratives of those who, despite all attempts to make them 'speak' in the world, remain obscure, even silenced, by the noise of the modern metropolis.

There is of course a vast gap between the overt politics of a writer such as Woolf and someone like Brathwaite; nonetheless, there are concerns that connect them as writers acutely aware of their situations within the complex and paradoxical cross-currents of the modern world, and it would be fair to test them both as 'committed' writers in that context. More obvious connections can be made: as, for example, between Sartre and Adorno, since the latter takes Sartre as his starting point in his famous meditation upon 'Commitment'—famous if only for having reiterated the memorable and challenging remark to the effect that 'to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. Adorno's range of reference is extraordinary, touching on all the arts in his discussion of the virtues and vices of both committed and autonomous art—a discussion that concludes with the same image from Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* that so entranced Walter Benjamin, who describes it in the passage extracted in 'Literature and History'—itself picked up by Anne McClintock for the title image of her critique of 'post-colonial' terms in 'The Angel of Progress'. There are many other such connections backwards and forwards in what follows, some of them more subtextual than these; and I leave it to the reader to discover them. If, as Calvino remarks, 'Literature' is 'one of society's instruments of self-awareness', so, too is the discussion of literature, as his lecture 'Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature' testifies.

Part Two, *Section I*, elaborates structuralist approaches to literature, as an instance of the striking development of the more formal, analytic dimension of