

Contemporary
Literary Criticism

Literary and Cultural Studies



fourth edition

Robert Con Davis
Ronald Schleifer

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University of Oklahoma



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Preface

READING *CONTEMPORARY LITERARY CRITICISM*

This book is intended to help readers to explore and interrogate contemporary literary criticism and theory. To that end, it provides the immediate background for current criticism with essays that attempt to trace the definitions and history of criticism and theory.

In our General Introduction we have attempted to offer a short overview of contemporary literary and cultural criticism by presenting a short historical and formal definition of literature and raising some of the implications, worked out in our introductions and selections throughout this book, of juxtaposing formal and historical questions that arise in interpretation.

Parts I and II examine the ways that contemporary criticism has taught us to reexamine and critique the practice of literary studies in terms of the nature of “literature,” the “ethics” of criticism, the profession of intellectual (or “theoretical”) study, the formation of literary canons, and the place and efficacy of literary study in the world. The book then presents criticism in terms of six major areas of concern that illustrate particular critical questions or systems of thought—rhetorical, structuralist, poststructuralist, psychological, historical, and gender-based—and a final section that raises explicitly the relationships between interpretation and cultural life. This is not an inclusive listing of contemporary approaches to reading literature—it presents little that deals with traditional literary analysis (such as explicit examples of “New Critical” literary criticism) or more traditional literary history or, at another extreme, the remarkable outpouring of studies of “popular” culture. And it touches little on the rich recent work demonstrating the relationship between reading and writing. But the nine areas covered are arguably major areas of concern that suggest and connect with many of the others and are likely to spawn other developments in the new century.

We imagine, in fact, that one possible way of using this text is to begin with a chronological reading of the part introductions. By doing so the student can follow an integrated discussion and a kind of intellectual history of contemporary thought about literature and discourse in general. To this end we have extensively interrelated the discussions across parts of the book. The General Introduction, as we said, examines the history and definition of “literature” and discusses contemporary criticism and the “humanities” in relation to the concept of the “human sciences.” And in subsequent introductions, we emphasize the role of critique in literary studies and the possibilities of reading literary and other cultural texts in terms of ethics as well as aesthetics. These possibilities, we think, help expand literary to “cultural” studies. The

last introduction in many ways sums up all the other part introductions, and the introductions together comprise a history—a coherent narrative and survey—of contemporary critical thought.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Within each part, the essays are designed to raise questions about one another, and the “framing” sections—the introductions to “What Is Literary Studies?” (Part I) and “What Is Literary Theory?” (Part II) and the gesture toward a conclusion in “Cultural Studies” (Part IX)—are especially designed to present various kinds of debate about crucial issues concerning the definition, functioning, and value of literary criticism. Thus, “What Is Literary Studies?” offers the argument over whether literature is “disinterested” or “interested” and whether its study is best understood as formal or historical. “What Is Literary Theory?” offers the argument, clearly seen in the juxtaposition of Aijaz Ahmad and Edward Said, about the *value* of literary theory. We also discuss the definition of “culture,” the nature of knowledge, and the relationship between understanding and social action.

In other words, the essays of this book are closely interrelated as “contests,” as Said says, over “forms and values,” and the framing sections attempt to make that interrelationship clear. There are two other ways we have attempted to emphasize this. Each part introduction ends with a list of further reading. These alternative readings address the concerns of that section from a different vantage point. (In the Introduction to “Feminism and Gender Studies” (Part VII) we even give a close reading of Annette Kuhn’s “The Body and Cinema: Some Problems for Feminism,” which is not included in our book, in part to suggest an important text for further reading.) Moreover, each part introduction provides cross-references to essays in other parts of the book. In this way, students and instructors can choose to follow a thematic rather than paradigmatic exploration of contemporary literary studies. But more than this, each part introduction also offers an overview of the history and concerns governing the essays contained in it, which aims, as far as possible, to relate that section to the others. Just as, earlier in the preface, we attempted to relate our discussion of ways of reading criticism to the two definitions of teaching Felman examines in “Psychology and Psychoanalysis” (Part VI)—and then offered a short list of essays in the book that help define her approach—so the part introductions offer discursive relationships among the parts themselves.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SECTIONS

A significant feature of this book is the manner in which each part is structured. First of all, we have chosen one essay of each section (in “What Is Literary Studies?” [Part I] and “What Is Literary Theory?” [Part II], the first two essays) to provide an especially clear and basic description of the school or approach of the whole part.

Northrop Frye, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Stanley Fish, Jonathan Culler, Slavoj Žižek, Raymond Williams, Diana Fuss, and Dick Hebdige each provide an introduction to a way of thinking about literature—ways of performing, enacting, criticism—that helps to situate the essays that follow in each section. Even when we begin with more “classical” statements—Ferdinand de Saussure’s technical but illuminating attempt to reorient students to language study, Jacques Lacan’s attempt to rethink psychoanalysis in terms of discourse, Mikhail Bakhtin’s innovative attempt to relate meaning and historical materialism—the next essay performs this duty of introduction. In Part I, the opening essay has a conspicuous function. T. S. Eliot’s famous “Tradition and the Individual Talent” begins *Contemporary Literary Criticism* by reminding us that “criticism is as inevitable as breathing,” and our Introduction to “What Is Literary Studies?” (Part I) aims at situating contemporary criticism in relation to modernism and American New Criticism so that students will get a sense of the historicity of criticism and a sense, too, of the ways that critical activity has attempted to negotiate a position for itself between formal and historical analyses. There and throughout this book, our aim is to allow students to comprehend the very existence of literary criticism as a dialogue in relation to the intellectual world it finds itself in and to grasp its sense of the *stakes* of that activity.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

In this edition, we have redesigned *Contemporary Literary Criticism* by adding thirteen new essays (including the essay by Bakhtin, which appeared in the second edition). We retained the organizational structure of the third edition. Our overriding aim in these changes was to make the major issues shaping literary studies today—sometimes issues which by their very nature aim at making “common sense” difficult—accessible to students of this exciting area of intellectual life. Thus, *Contemporary Literary Criticism* offers alternative tables of contents in the cross-referenced essays in the introductions. Many colleagues who offered suggestions and criticism based on their use of the earlier editions expressed a need for such guides for students and classes, and we hope that these innovations will prove useful.

The fourth edition has a complicated relationship with the previous editions, especially the second edition. That book was the result of our collaboration (after R. C. Davis developed the first edition on his own), and our ongoing collaboration with *Contemporary Literary Criticism* led us to write *Criticism and Culture: The Role of Critique in Modern Literary Theory* (Longman, 1991). *Criticism and Culture*, closely based upon our work on the second edition of *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, attempts to develop a sense of the cultural work of literary criticism in the twentieth century. What we learned from working on *Criticism and Culture* had great influence on the third edition of *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, where we developed the nine section titles we have retained for this fourth edition. The changes from the second edition to the third were extensive, and we have found with some gratification that the directions we had then imagined were shaping contemporary literary and cultural

Thus, students who do well with this material not only recognize criticism as essentially an activity to be performed but also understand its importance. Other students tend to regard criticism as simply a body of knowledge to be learned, in which failure is always lurking so that each new critical position or school they encounter could be something to confuse and confound them. They imagine that successful completion of the course means getting through it unscathed, “mastering” criticism, but basically remaining untouched by the critical positions they have examined, their own views on literature still intact. In “Psychoanalysis and Education” in “Psychology and Psychoanalysis,” (Part VI), Shoshana Felman discusses these two versions of “learning.” They are related, as she demonstrates, to Jonathan Culler’s discussion of “Convention and Meaning” in “Deconstruction and Poststructuralism” (Part V) and tutored by the recent turn in psychology and psychoanalysis discussed by Teresa de Lauretis, Jacques Lacan, Catherine Belsey, Michael Warner, and others throughout this book. Felman presents a “performative” version of learning that encourages students to view a course in criticism as a tour on which they will explore a number of worlds from the “inside.” In this version of education, students should be able to learn from literary rhetoric, as Barbara Johnson suggests, to apprehend the function of rhetoric in the most pressing controversies of our society.

When they read Louis Marin’s structural analysis of Disneyland, in another example, as much as possible they should “become” structuralists and see the world of experience of capable of being subjected to “textual” analysis. When they read post-structuralism, they should come to know a text as decentered by the play of difference and learn to read by undoing the fixation of hierarchical authority. As Marxist critics, they should try to understand a text as situated within an ideological superstructure in relation to a historical and “material” base, while as feminist or gender critics, they should self-consciously read with a sense of the overwhelming importance of gender in relation to the understanding of personal and cultural experience.

In other words, “becoming” a critic is making the assumptions particular critics make about literature and culture in their reading and understanding. Learning (and “doing”) criticism, like learning to play the piano, is something one practices to do. Students may eventually reject some or all of the critical schools presented in this book. But while studying each area of concern, they can try to see it as one of its adherents might view it, as in fact a central concern of understanding our world and a central concern of attempting to affect the world we live in. Becoming a “member” of the critical school we are studying constitutes a methodological wager that valuable insight can be gained from a sympathetic entry into a critical system, as opposed to an “objective” scrutiny of a foreign object.

At the beginning of this book, in “What Is Literary Studies?” (Part I) and “What Is Literary Theory?” (Part II), we present essays that examine the most fundamental assumptions of literary studies in order to situate the practice of criticism in the larger social contexts presented throughout the book—in the classroom, in the profession, in society at large, and even in the larger world outside Western Anglo-American society. But even these macrocosmic approaches to criticism—these broad “stances”—are positions to be assumed by students. At the book’s end, in “Cultural Studies” (Part IX), we try to offer a range of discussions of the ways in which the study of literary

(and, in James Clifford's ethnographic study of missionary work, "sacred") discourse can raise questions about culture and society that have been more or less implicit throughout all the essays. Cultural studies at its best, we believe, fulfills the most ambitious promises of literary studies. It allows us to see criticism not as a set of monuments to worship but as a set of activities undertaken with others who have made a record of their explorations in literary studies in order to establish a critical stance, an articulation of value, and a call to action. In this way, criticism may become something that one tries out, tries on, lives in, and lives through. It is an experience that one actively engages in rather than a difficulty that one avoids or fends off.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book derives largely from our experience teaching literary criticism in undergraduate and graduate courses at the University of Oklahoma, the University of Tulsa, and Knox College. Additionally, we were enriched by, and this book has benefited from, discussions about contemporary criticism with faculty and students at the University of Washington; Wichita State University; the University of Kansas; Georgia Institute of Technology; Eastern Michigan University; the Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville; Texas Tech University; the University of Northern Colorado; and places as far away as the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand; the University of Haifa; Rome; Moscow; and Utrecht. This fourth edition has also been greatly improved by the help and good advice of a host of people who have used the earlier editions. Many of these people were friends and colleagues, but at least equal in number were the many who simply wrote to discuss their experiences of using the book in class.

A large number of people assisted in the preparation of this edition of *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. An old debt, and chief among our debts, is to the late Gordon T. R. Anderson of Longman, USA. In the first two editions, he was instrumental in developing this text, and the strong guidance he gave to higher education throughout the United States in his work at Longman is a lasting legacy of his wisdom and generosity. Kathy Schurawich and David Fox of Longman saw the third edition through publication and gave important assistance. The fourth edition, amid changing schedules and editorial locales, benefited greatly from the advice of Virginia Blanford and Lisa Moore at Longman. Their patience and good humor made our job a pleasure rather than a task. Our wives, Julie Davis and Nancy Mergler, were equally helpful and patient during the revision of the book. Noah Mathew Davis was born just as we began thinking about this new edition, and it is to him, along with Cyrus and Benjamin Schleifer and Joshua Michael Davis, that we dedicate this fourth edition of the book.

Many colleagues and friends at the University of Oklahoma made suggestions, read material, lent books, and endlessly discussed how the earlier editions could be improved. They include Eve Tavor Bannet, Richard Barney, Hunter Cadzow, Daniel Cottom, David Gross, Susan Kates, David Mair, Henry McDonald, Catherine Hobbs, and Alan Velie. We also consulted widely, and we received timely and impor-

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Also, several colleagues and graduate students wrote some of the biographical headnotes for the critics in this book, as follows: Dorie Glickman: *T. S. Eliot*; Justin Everett: *Northrop Frye*; Brad Will: *Cornel West* and *bell hooks*; Brian Cowlshaw: *Gauri Viswanathan* and *Nancy Armstrong*; Richard Barney: *Paul de Man* and *Michael Warner*; Amie Doughty: *Aijaz Ahmad*; Vinay Dharwadker: *Edward Said*; Kate Myers: *Patrocínio Schweickart* and *Shoshana Felman*; Karen Sheriff: *Barbara Johnson*, *Diana Fuss*, and *Stuart Hall*; Bridget Roussell: *Stuart Moulthrop*; Pamela Liggett: *Ferdinand de Saussure*; Samantha Ward: *Teresa de Lauretis*; Scott Kelley: *Louis Marin* and *James Clifford*; James Comas: *Michel Foucault*; Susan Williams: *Jonathan Culler*; Scott LaMascus: *Jacques Derrida*; Stephanie Gross: *Catherine Belsey*; Elizabeth Hinds: *Jacques Lacan* and (with Thomas Bowden) *Mikhail Bakhtin*; Meredith Jones: *Slavoj Žižek*; Katherine Patterson: *Laura Mulvey*; David Gross: *Raymond Williams*; Hunter Cadzow: *Stephen Greenblatt*; Mitchell Lewis: *Cora Kaplan* and *Dick Hebdige*; Jennifer McClinton: *Judith Butler*; Thom Conroy: *Donna Haraway*. We also thank Brian Cowlshaw for coordinating the work on the headnotes for the twelve new contributors to the fourth edition, and Roger Cook for updating biographical information for the earlier headnotes. Roger served as our assistant in readying the fourth edition for press, and his cheerful help greatly aided the completion of this edition, as did the work of Bonner J. Slayton and Susan Kendrick.

Our thanks to all of you.

ROBERT CON DAVIS
RONALD SCHLEIFER

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General Introduction

A Preliminary Guide to Literary and Cultural Studies

Many readers new to this book may already have a strong response to literary criticism and theory and cultural studies. While some may know next to nothing about criticism and theory and think they do not like them, others will have learned already that working with criticism and theory can enhance and deepen one's understanding of literature and culture. We suspect that both kinds of readers will be surprised to discover in T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," the first essay of this book, the claim that "criticism is as inevitable as breathing, and that we should be none the worse for articulating what passes in our minds when we read a book and feel an emotion about it." Equally surprising will be one further assumption implicit in much contemporary literary and cultural criticism—the suggestion that while criticism may be an "inevitable" dimension of the encounter with literary and cultural texts, the self-evident ("traditional") practices of reading literary and cultural texts are not inevitable in the particular forms they take. Rather, the way we understand and interpret texts and even the assessing of our emotions in this process exist in bounded and defining contexts of culture, history, and social relations.

In "Convention and Meaning: Derrida and Austin" (in this book's section called "Deconstruction and Poststructuralism" [Part V]), Jonathan Culler even suggests that such cultural contexts govern the very shape and substance of our emotions themselves. The examples he uses are the expressions of love. In a footnote to his essay distinguishing the plain "use" of language from its "mention" (or "quotation"), he asserts that "no matter how wholeheartedly I may wish to 'use' certain expressions, I find myself [merely] mentioning them: 'I love you' is always something of a quotation, as many lovers have attested." In this way, many working today in the study of discourse suggest that the most *self-evident* categories of our experience of literature and the sciences—including the category of "object" called *literature*, the seeming "inevitable" process of reading, and the self-evident categories of the humanities and arts—exist in various contexts in which these *activities* are intelligible in relation to the work they do and the effects they have on those who participate in them.

THE NATURE OF LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDY

Literary study, then, must be approached as a body of knowledge and as a discipline of inquiry, the "disciplinary" practice of literary criticism. The traditional view is that

the “humanities” is an area of knowledge that examines unique human events. Every “object” of humanistic study—Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, the Battle of Waterloo, Locke’s *Treatise on Human Nature*, Picasso’s *Guernica*, Mozart’s *Hunt Quartet*, even Newton’s *Principia* and Darwin’s *Origin of Species*—is a unique event that occurred only once and, in a manner of speaking, can be studied only through description and paraphrase. As the linguist Louis Hjelmslev notes, according to this traditional view, “humanistic, as opposed to natural phenomena, are non-recurrent and for that very reason cannot, like natural phenomena, be subjected to exact and generalizing treatment.” “In the field of the humanities,” he goes on, “consequently, there would have to be a different method [from science]—namely, mere description, which would be nearer to poetry than to exact science—or, at any event, a method that restricts itself to a discursive form of presentation in which the phenomena pass by, one by one, without being interpreted through a system.”

This “method,” Hjelmslev suggests, is “history” in its most chronological manifestation. Since the “objects” of humanistic study are unique, they can be cataloged only in chronological order. Because of this, the humanities have traditionally been “historical” studies: the history of philosophy, the history of art, history itself, the history of science, literary history, and so forth. Northrop Frye says the same thing about critical practice in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” (in “What Is Literary Studies?” [Part I]): “Literature being as yet unorganized by criticism, it still appears as a huge aggregate or miscellaneous pile of creative efforts. The only organizing principle so far discovered in it is chronology, and when we see the miscellaneous pile strung out along a chronological line, some coherence is given to it by the linear factors in tradition [chronologically conceived].”

Implicit in Frye’s and Hjelmslev’s remarks is the possibility that the humanities could “reorient” itself and adopt a more scientific model for its study. Instead of following what Frye calls “naive induction,” the humanities could be subject to the attempt, as Hjelmslev says, “to rise above the level of mere primitive description to that of a systematic, exact, and generalizing science, in the theory of which all events (possible combinations of elements) are foreseen and the conditions for their realization established.” Such a discipline would attempt to account for the objects of humanistic study in terms of the systematic relationships among them (e.g., Frye’s attempt to understand genre—poetry, fiction, drama, etc.—as a system governing “literature”) or among the elements that combine to constitute those objects rather than their chronological description. In this case, the “humanities” could be conceived as the “human sciences.” In such a conception, criticism would take its place among the social sciences rather than the natural sciences. In fact, such a division can be seen in the social sciences themselves. In the *Course in General Linguistics*, for instance, Ferdinand de Saussure specifically distinguishes between two methods of studying economics—economic history and the “synchronic” study of the economic system at any particular moment. Most of the social sciences, in contemporary practice, are divided in this fashion. Psychology, for instance, encompasses the analysis of unique case histories of “clinical” psychology (such as the Sherlock Holmes case Slavoj Žižek analyzes in “Psychology and Psychoanalysis” [Part VI]) and the analysis of the general functioning of mental activity in “experimental” psychology. Anthropology encompasses both the

study of unique cultures and, as in Claude Lévi-Strauss's work, the "general" functioning of aspects of culture. Even an earth science such as geology studies both the historical development and the synchronic composition of geological formations.

Literary study also can be seen to offer two "methods" of study—literary history and more or less systematizing criticism. What allows the systemization of criticism, however, is the common and "recurrent" element of traditional humanistic study, the fact that, as Hjeltmlev notes, all the humanities deal in the study of language and discourse. Discourse, moreover, is common to the social sciences in general, and consequently a systematic criticism could be a more general theory of discourse, a more general study of cultural (i.e., discursive) formations. Criticism can transform itself into being the "human sciences" that would study the functioning and creation of a host of "discourses" within society (including, of course, "literary" discourse). Such a human science would attempt to describe what distinguishes literature from other language uses and what literature shares with them. It would attempt, as many have already attempted, to situate literary practice within other cultural practices, including linguistics, teaching, politics, psychology, philosophy, ideology, sociology—and even the "professional" debates within literary studies themselves. All of these areas intersect with the instances of literary and cultural studies that are examined in the various essays of this book.

We are suggesting that the study of criticism can profitably be situated as a part—and a leading part—of the study of culture. A more complete justification for this expansion would necessarily involve a discussion of the definition of the term "culture" beyond what we can offer here. (See our book *Criticism and Culture: The Role of Critique in Modern Literary Theory*.) "Culture," Raymond Williams notes in *Keywords*, is "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language." In another book, *Culture*, Williams says that "'cultural practice' and 'cultural production' are not simply derived from an otherwise constituted social order but are themselves major elements in its constitution." In this conception, culture is not some "informing spirit" within society. Rather, Williams writes, it is "the *signifying system* through which necessarily . . . a social system is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored."

Williams's definitions are not the only valid description of culture, but it is clear from his ideas that literary studies conceived as a systematized critical activity—a criticism that studies "signifying systems" in a more or less systematic, exact, and generalizing way—is in a position to direct its methods and observations to the widest area of the production of meanings, to cultural activities as specific signifying practices and as a general area of inquiry. A strong argument can be made—Williams in *The Long Revolution* and in this book critics as different as Cornel West, bell hooks, Paul de Man, Edward Said, Catherine Belsey, Nancy Armstrong, and Shoshana Felman also make this argument—that the texts that we customarily call "literature" constitute a privileged site where the most important social, psychological, and cultural forces combine and contend. In this way, the attention to discourse, to language in all its manifestations, in its production and in its reception, is a "natural" focus of literary studies and a "natural" outgrowth of criticism. One result of such a possibility has been the recent turn, in critical activity, to the examination of the institution of literary study in the academy. In books like Robert Scholes's *Textual Power*, Richard

Ohmann's *English in America*, Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature* and *Beyond the Culture Wars*, Jonathan Culler's *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions*, Frank Lentricchia's *Criticism and Social Change*, as well as a host of feminist, postcolonial, and African-American studies, the very nature of the study of literature is being examined in relation to other cultural practices. We are attempting in this book to include as much as possible this wider conception of critical practice focused upon cultural critique as an important informing force within contemporary literary criticism. This is apparent in the fact that many of the contributors—Cornel West, Edward Said, Stuart Moulthrop, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, James Clifford, Donna Haraway—do not conceive of themselves to be (at least primarily) literary critics.

LITERATURE AS AN INSTITUTION

The concept and existence of privileged forms of verbal discourse that go beyond the pragmatic function of communication seem to have been a part of all organized human societies. Ancient Chinese culture, for instance, developed the term *wen*, which referred to “patterned” or rhymed language, what we might call “literary language” or “poetry.” But *wen* also referred to patterns or markings on natural objects, to inherited cultural traditions, and to the order of the cosmos. Chinese ideas about patterned discourse played an important role in ancient Japanese culture, and the earliest anthology of Japanese verse, dating from the eighth century, demonstrates the strong Chinese influence of codified ideas about poetry. Similarly, Classical Greek culture coined the term “poetry” (from the Greek *poesis*, meaning “to make”) and, in Plato and Aristotle, developed a sophisticated sense of what would be called “literature” today. But even earlier pre-Classical Greek commentaries on poetry and poets, handed down mostly in fragments, suggest that the poet's discourse was a privileged mode of linguistic activity. These commentaries describe the divine origin of such discourse; its power to arouse emotions of pleasure, distress, or anger; and its special status in preserving personal glory and social values. In ancient India, as we know from commentaries that predate Plato and Aristotle by more than a thousand years, the practice and appreciation of patterned discourse was deeply integrated into the activities of daily life. Thus, *Ayurveda*, the Indian science of medicine, believed that a perfectly structured couplet could clean the air and heal the sick. But even in less expansive societies than ancient China, Greece, or India, in smaller tribes and villages and in societies without writing, the patterned discourses of myth and poetry are ubiquitous within social formations. Native American cultures, for example, consistently distinguish between sacred and secular narratives, and different tribes carefully define the subject matter and the manner of telling of sacred tales.

This survey, adapted from Ronald Schleifer's definition of “literature” in the *Encyclopedia Americana*, concludes with a catalog of six definitions of “literature.” These definitions can be identified or associated with particular arguments about literature exemplified throughout *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. They include T. S. Eliot's emphasis on the universal and philosophical focus of literature; Matthew Arnold's defin-

ition of its disinterested and expressive nature; the scientific-linguistic definitions of literature that grow out of structuralism; the emphasis on its religious and metaphysical power that J. Hillis Miller and James Clifford describe; definitions of the conventional and generic nature of literary forms, elaborately classified in the Renaissance, implicit in Barbara Johnson's study of lyrics and in Slavoj Žižek's study of mystery narratives; and finally, examinations of the ways that literature helps us to understand historical and ideological formations of particular cultures, such as those of Raymond Williams, Nancy Armstrong, Cora Kaplan, and several others in this book.

But even as peoples have classified and revered certain kinds of linguistic production from time immemorial, the term "literature" itself is of a much more recent origin, arising, in its present meaning, during the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the West. The earliest use of the term "literature" in English, Raymond Williams tells us, occurred in the fourteenth century, borrowed from French and Latin, and it described polite learning through reading. For this reason, literary studies has come to have the role, most often a privileged one, of transmitting definitions and understandings of culture and knowledge from one age to another. Gerald Graff and J. Hillis Miller both discuss this role of literary studies in "What Is Literary Studies?" (Part I) and "What Is Literary Theory?" (Part II) in this book; Gauri Viswanathan and Aijaz Ahmad offer historical critiques of its role. Often that institutional role, as Robert Hodge notes in *Literature as Discourse*, takes the form of defining a "regime of literature" whose initial task is to separate "literature" from "non-literature" and then make the many designations among poem, novel, play, short story, and so on substantiate and support the initial separation and bolster the institution of literature as a category and practice in culture. Aristotle made this distinction when he ranked the study of literature above the study of history, owing to literature's ability to discover that which is representative and exemplary among history's supposed mere records of what has happened. The narrow definition of "literature" as fine and artistic writing, as Williams notes in *Keywords*, dates only to the nineteenth century. In *The English Novel*, Williams also defines literature as that which exists on the foundation of an essential (though temporally specific) "structure of feeling that is lived and experienced," a realm of actual experience that must be in place before the elaborations of culture and literature. In time, Williams believes, those structures get "arranged as [the] institutions" of culture such as art and literature.

The definition of "literature" as a cultural and social institution is a useful and also a persistent one. But, as we have seen, it is not the only way to view literature. Even in Williams's comments there are overtones of a different view. While Williams clearly treats literature as a cultural and social institution, his concept of a "structure of feeling"—in the understanding of it that Aijaz Ahmad discusses in "Literary Theory and 'Third World Literature': Some Contexts" in "What Is Literary Theory?" (Part II) and Stuart Hall presents in "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms" in "Cultural Studies" (Part IX)—posits a natural progression from the essential (noncultural) foundations of "feeling" and, in a recurrent topic of this book, of "experience." To the extent that "literature" is an organized outgrowth of "experience" and "feeling," these things must function sufficiently to stipulate the program for the way culture and society

must be. In this sense, “literature” is not a constructed institution but an expression of the ways the world and the human experience of it *are*. “The study of English Literature is accepted by most of its practitioners,” Chris Baldick notes in *The Social Mission of English Criticism: 1848–1932*, “as a ‘natural’ activity without an identifiable historical genesis.” “It is only history,” as Baldick goes on, “which can challenge any assumption of ‘timelessness’ about literature as an institution.” Baldick is opposing history to the “timelessness” of literary “form” and “formalism” that express universal and “essential” human experiences. The opposition between the formal and historical study of literature—implicit in the “systematizing” and “historical” approaches to literary study we mentioned in relation to Hjelmslev and, indeed, in the “transcultural” (e.g., its presence in “all organized human societies”) and historical definitions of literature we are presenting here—is examined throughout the essays that introduce the sections of this book, but especially in the Introduction to “What Is Literary Studies?” (Part I). Williams advances the historical critique of literature Baldick is articulating, and the recurring references to him throughout the essays in various sections of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* attest to the influence of his work. That is, Williams’s conception of “structures of feeling” emphasizes not only the “natural” self-evidence of *feeling* but the very socially and historically determined *structures* that give rise to feeling. In an important sense, the phrase “structures of feeling,” gathering together historically determined mechanisms and seeming “timeless” experience, is an oxymoron that combines the different impulses and definitions of “literature.”

The definition of literature-as-institution remains confusing in part because of the equally persistent view of literature as a realm in its own right, a view glimpsed fleetingly in Williams’s *The English Novel*. If literature as a total body or as a tradition is seen, in fact, as “presumably coherent in and of itself,” as Graff describes this position in “The Humanist Myth” (in “What Is Literary Studies?” [Part I]), then one conclusion to draw is that the study of literature through criticism would most likely distort or loosen that coherence, “murdering” to dissect, in Wordsworth’s famous description of rational analysis. The corollary to the view of literature “in and of itself” (literature viewed as a privileged aesthetic or “disinterested” realm, largely separate from particular historical cultural formations) is that literature will be appreciated best in concert with the recognition that, in Graff’s words, “literature teaches itself.” As implemented in literary studies in the United States, this credo has meant that, as he explains, “great literary works can be freed from the institutional and professional encumbrances that come between students or laymen and the potency of the work itself.” (Viswanathan’s counterhistory of literary studies emphasizes, literally, the *politics* imbedded in pedagogy.)

This view—which Graff is explaining and not propounding—is problematic particularly in light of the fact that, as Baldick notes, “the real content of the school and college subject which goes under the name ‘English Literature’ is not literature in the primary sense, but *criticism*.” Baldick’s point is not a theoretical one but a practical observation that “every student in British education [and U.S. education, as well] is required to compose, not tragic dramas, but essays in criticism.” All literary courses are perforce criticism courses in that ordinarily in literature courses (as opposed to creative