

The Quality of Literature

Linguistic studies in literary evaluation

Edited by Willie van Peer



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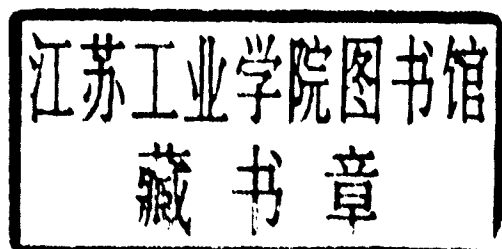
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Edited by

Willie van Peer

Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich



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Foreword

In preparing this volume I have had the help and support of many people, first and foremost, of course, from the various contributors, whom I would like to thank for their kindness and their patience in the long road of preparing the volume for publication.

I would like to thank especially those colleagues who have provided me with extensive feedback in earlier stages of the book's preparation: Don Freeman, Elrud Ibsch, Gerard Steen, Peter Verdonk and Sonia Zyngier. I owe them my personal thanks for their keen criticism and their widening of my perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

The evaluation of literary texts

A new perspective

Willie van Peer

The evaluation of literary texts is something that readers almost always, automatically, and spontaneously, engage in. They judge the development of a plot and generate feelings of pleasure or dislike at particular events, they feel that the text does not yield what they had expected, or they find the author's style rewarding or awkward. All of this evaluation usually takes place as an integral part of the reading process. But also off-line judgments about the text are made: in conversations with spouses or friends, in a discussion with colleagues, or in writing an email to a student. And then there are, finally, the debates about the evaluation of texts by professionals: critics or academics who write reviews in the newspapers, in magazines, or in journals and books, or who may engage in public debate or in the mass media. Evaluation is a significant activity both for individual readers and for cultures at large. Evaluating a literary text is an instinctive practice in which we engage both routinely and with fervor.

Yet among this ubiquity of evaluative activities one must acknowledge that we have extremely little information as to how such judgmental processes and outcomes function. Theoretically one can conceive of three major features playing a role in the process: the text, the reader, and the context. We may assume that readers evaluate specific features of the text: whether it induces suspension in them or makes them laugh, whether it makes for easy reading or it employs elevated language, or whether its content is erotic or *risqué*. All these are linguistic elements of some kind or other that could influence a particular reader to make the text pleasant or unpleasant to read. But it seems intuitively clear that not only the text, but also features of the reader play a role: presumably readers differ in their tastes and preferences, so that the same linguistic ingredient may produce an agreeable feeling in one reader, but be boring or insulting to another. Readers' concrete goals and expectations, their past reading experiences and personal biography, or their knowledge of certain genre conventions, may all drive their evaluative process in one direction or another. But such readers do not live in a vacuum: they are sur-

rounded by other people who equally evaluate texts, thus mutually influencing each other. It is easy to imagine how a particular reader may be receptive to the opinions of persons dear to him/her, or may be afraid of uttering his own opinion in a totalitarian state, or may let judgment be influenced by the prestige of the author. These three factors, the text, the reader, and the context, may all steer the evaluative processes in a particular direction. Moreover, they do not operate in isolation, but may interpenetrate, enhance, counteract, or neutralize each other. For instance, readers leading a daily life of routine in a Catholic surrounding (*context*) may welcome content that is of an adventurous or rebellious nature (*text*), because such semantic material provides them with the possibility of escapism (*reader*).

How are studies of these factors represented in literary studies? Surprisingly, there seems to be a strong bias in favor of contextual explanations, defined here as ideological contexts. Most literary scholars seem to believe that the judgment of literary texts occurs under a strong influence of readers' immediate surroundings, their gender, class, race, nationality or sexual and ideological inclinations, and so forth. That certainly is the opinion of Herrnstein Smith (1988), who asserted that the evaluative processes involved in canon formation are inherently biased toward existing power structures and their ideological legitimization. Most theoreticians, including scholars like Culler (1983), Eagleton (1983), Fish (1989), Guillory (1993), all emphasize the contextual determinacy of evaluative mechanisms. While it is certainly not to be denied that contextual factors are at play, and may under certain circumstances even impose powerful imperatives for the evaluation of literary texts, an over-emphasis on them could lead these authors into an awkward position.

For one thing, they thereby seem to assume that evaluating literary texts is driven by one factor only, thus presuming some kind of mono-causality. By denying that any influence from the reader's personal characteristics or particular linguistic features of the text play a role in the evaluative process, these authors claim that out of a range of potential explanations, only one applies. Such forms of mono-causality are, however, extremely rare in the social and cultural field, where usually several, if not dozens of factors are at play simultaneously, and interact with each other in highly complex ways. By denying the complexity of these processes, most literary theorists create a radically oversimplified picture of cultural processes and are thus involved in an extreme form of reductionism. True, some form of reductionism may be unavoidable in research, but one should at the same time be conscious of the reduction, and not forget the factors that one has factored out. In the case of the evaluation of literary texts, it seems highly implausible that only one of the three factors discussed earlier would be involved. There is also something strange in a position that explains cultural phenomena in a deterministic way. Given the nature of culture, it seems so much more probable

to expect its phenomena to emerge in a highly dynamic rather than contextually predetermined way.

Defenders of the contextualist explanation do not provide any arguments why processes of literary evaluation should follow a mono-causal and deterministic path. Against this position, I claim that there are no reasons to expect that reader or text characteristics do not exert an influence in the evaluative processes either. The over-emphasis on contextual explanations has led to a situation, however, in which very few studies have been carried out of the influence of these factors. Granted, it is not always easy to find appropriate methods to disentangle the separate factors in a complex network of interactions. But difficulty is not impossibility. The present volume at least makes an attempt in this direction by investigating the role of textual factors. This is not to deny the importance of readers' characteristics, nor, indeed, of contextual factors. But for those of us who have a keen interest in the nature of literary texts themselves, the question in what way the formal and semantic elements of the text may contribute to positive or negative evaluations is an intriguing one.

The enterprise of bringing together the various contributions in this volume goes back to an essay that was published several years ago in *The British Journal of Aesthetics* (Vol. 36, No. 2, 1996:97–108). In this article, I made a detailed analysis of two texts that are identical in theme, and similar in content, and written at approximately the same time, one of which ended up in the literary canon, while the other did not. The texts selected were Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Arthur Brooke's *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, published in London some thirty years before Shakespeare's text. By taking a detailed look at the language of both works, I hoped to gather some degree of insight in possible textual factors that may have contributed to canonization in Shakespeare's case, and to virtual neglect in the case of Brooke. The results were interesting in at least two respects. On the one hand, the language of Shakespeare's play turned out – in comparison to Brooke's – to be substantially more complex and innovative, more varied and richer in style and register, while at the same time reverberating with multiple meanings. At the same time, while the plot lines of the two texts run almost completely parallel, the specific content, and especially the evaluative slant on the events from a narrative perspective differed remarkably. The point of view taken in Brooke's text is completely in line with contemporary power positions and their ideology in Elizabethan England, while Shakespeare's is at odds with them. Here then was a pair of texts showing the relative *unimportance* of contextual elements, obviously falsifying Herrnstein Smith's thesis: Shakespeare's text clearly undermines the prevalent views of those in power during his time. In the course of history his text came to be valued more highly than that of Brooke, whose views were completely in line with the power structure of his time.

While this was interesting in itself, the enterprise was of limited value for an obvious reason: it concerns one case study only, and as is well-known, it is notoriously dangerous to draw conclusions from a single case. If other similar analyses could be carried out and compared with the present one, the case for gaining insight in the text's contribution to evaluation could be made stronger. In the course of time, favorable reactions to my article from several colleagues led to a collaborative effort at extending the data base of such textual comparisons. The present volume is the outcome of the various interactions and collaborative efforts that grew out of this idea. It contains a range of studies carried out by colleagues, making similar comparisons between pairs of comparable texts or genres by looking in a detailed way at the language employed in those texts, complemented by some theoretical reflections on the evaluative process.

The clearest verdict comes from Stein Haugom Olsen. The defenders of the view that literary value is essentially based on social power or influence suffer a significant defeat at the hands of Olsen: the assumptions underlying their claims are taken apart piece by piece. Yet the major force of his argument comes from his prediction about the works of Hugh MacColl (1837–1909), a now forgotten Scottish author of two novels which, so Olsen convincingly shows, are artistic failures, and will therefore never be part of a literary canon. While the ideology presented in both works is totally in agreement with the then prevailing ideas and attitudes in society, this did not prevent the author from disappearing altogether from the history of English literature. The reason for this becomes clear when one analyses the characters and their problems, the theme and the language of the novels, and contrasts them with comparable contemporaneous works, such as, for instance, Mrs. Humphrey Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1888), a work that still is remembered and read. Olsen writes: "One could continue aspect by aspect with MacColl's two novels and demonstrate this lack of imaginative realisation of events, situations, characters, and relationships, and how this is closely linked with an extensive use both of clichés in the language and of stock situations and characters."

I think Olsen is right in his claim that Hugh MacColl is not, nor will ever be, part of a literary canon. It is not simply the claim about this particular author, however, that makes his argument significant: it is that Olsen addresses the issue in the appropriate arena: that of empirical statements about reality. We would certainly advance more in our understanding of literary evaluation if more scholars were prepared to make such predictions about the future canon. I believe the example proves Olsen right: even if all his opponents were from this very moment to set out 'canonizing' Hugh MacColl, it is perfectly clear that they would not even remotely succeed.

A similar approach is taken by Jan Gorak. By setting Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* in its context of production, by comparing it to the more popular (and commercially successful) spy novels of his days. Gorak is able to highlight

how in Conrad's hands the generic material and conventions are systematically defamiliarized. As with Shakespeare / Brooke, the semantic material looks similar only at first sight. A closer analysis brings to light the extent to which entrenched ideological categories of the time are systematically undermined. As far as the correspondence with his publishers reveals, Conrad was an author who sought popularity (but much to his chagrin, never really attained it – and ended up in the literary canon instead). At first sight, *The Secret Agent* makes use of a popular genre, the spy novel. Yet, as Gorak demonstrates, Conrad uses the genre in a highly innovative way, namely to investigate the ruptures in national and cultural identity that presented a serious crisis sweeping through England and Europe at the time. "In Conrad, canonicity and popularity are interdependent," writes Gorak. By comparing Conrad's work with popular Edwardian spy novels like William Le Queux's *The Invasion of 1910* (1906), Erskine Childers' *Riddle of the Sands* (1903), and Edgar Wallace's *The Four Just Men* (1905), Gorak documents how in these works "the secret agent embodies the values of individuality, good breeding, and cool courage. The secret agent of the spy novel answers the fears of the invasion narratives that the national virtues have entered decline." Verloc, Conrad's character, by contrast, is the very opposite of these virtues, and the outcome is "inglorious disaster" rather than salvation.

Generic comparison is also the theme of Tom Barney's analysis. While Gorak's emphasis is on the semantic aspects of text-type, Barney concentrates on the linguistic *form* of a particular genre. His main thesis is that form plays a predominant role in literary evaluation: how well does the writer employ the possibilities of traditional form, and to what extent is s/he able to transcend these possibilities? The form selected by Barney for detailed study is the *villanelle*: one is Ernest Dowson's *Villanelle of Marguerites*, the other William Empson's *Reflection from Anita Loos*. "Is it possible for a poet to be defeated by a form," Barney asks – and after a meticulous analysis of both poems, concludes that Dowson's case is really that the formal requirements dictate the content of his poem, preventing coherence from emerging. In the case of William Empson's villanelle, by contrast, one observes how the risks involved in the formal constraints are successfully overcome in a virtuoso handling of semantic material tightly integrated into a formal pattern.

A similar enterprise is undertaken by Laurence Lerner. As a first test case, Lerner contrasts two poems he calls radical – in the sense that they voice outrage at social injustice; the poems chosen are Mary Robinson's *The Birth Day* and William Blake's *London*, both written in the 1790s. Lerner shows how Robinson establishes a *homology* between the poet's indignation and the poetic form chosen. In Blake's poem, by contrast, the indignation is cast in language that unsettles our craving for clarity by shifting its meaning constantly into something else. Does that make Blake's work less forceful as a political argument? Lerner thinks it does, while at the same time making it more successful as a literary event. What the anal-

ysis shows, according to Lerner, is that literary quality is independent of a political stand. If this is so in politically revolutionary poems, then, to complete the picture, one has to make a similar analysis of conservative poems; three are selected, all by Wordsworth. Again Lerner demonstrates how literary quality in the texts is irrespective of their political stand, and that the politics of the poems neither guarantee nor prohibit quality to stand out.

Working in the same historical period, David Miall compares two highly similar poems by Coleridge, "To the Rev. George Coleridge," written in May 1797, and "Frost at Midnight," dated February 1798. Although both commit a good sense of Coleridge's feelings, the former is hardly read nowadays, while the latter has acquired some kind of canonical status, having been reprinted in many anthologies. "Why has the fate of these two poems been so different?" Miall asks. The argument he provides is highly illuminating, as it casts light on the mechanisms authors may deploy to catch the reader's attention, thus locating their reading process at a deeper (and hence emotionally more involving) level. After assessing the language, structure and rhetoric of both poems, Miall comes to the conclusion that at each of these organizational levels both texts create an implied reader, but that one of these (the one in "To the Rev. George Coleridge") remains an outside observer, while the one in "Frost at Midnight" becomes a participant. In due course, we become "participants in the unfolding processes of the poem, having made those processes relevant to the fate of our own feelings" – and it is these processes that may be of paramount importance for the evaluation and canonization of literary texts. Where the language, structure, and rhetoric of the text do not facilitate such participatory processes, it may be discarded and forgotten.

A special opportunity to study the evaluation of literary texts offers itself when more than one version of the same text exists. Short and Semino take up this opportunity, by analyzing two extant versions of the first stanza of William Blake's *Tyger*, and then later (after having considered some evaluative issues with respect to Ted Hughes' *October Dawn* and T.S. Eliot's *Little Gidding*) the two versions of John Fowles's *The Magus* in their 1966 and 1977 editions. Since Fowles decided to make the changes in the 1977 edition, one may presume that he himself must have thought that the changes were an improvement. By making detailed linguistic analyses of comparable passages from both editions, Short and Semino are able to show that in the passages chosen from the first edition, the narrative point of view is much more from the 'I-as-character', providing an immediacy of the protagonist's thoughts and feelings, while in the same passages in the later edition this impression is diluted by an oscillation between the 'I-as-character' and the 'I-as-narrator' perspective, thereby presenting a less coherent and more detached point of view. Needless to say, such analysis concerns only brief passages, and therefore may not inform us about the processes that shape the evaluation of a whole, long, novel, and thus further work is needed on how such small-scale analyses can and

should be integrated in the overall evaluation of literary works. The value of Short and Semino's contribution lies in the fact that they demonstrate the very possibility of explaining in detail a particular evaluation (not the one shared by Fowles, by the way) of such selected passages. Short and Semino's work also brings to the fore the intimate connections between evaluation and interpretation of texts, an issue taken up more concretely in the essay by von Heydebrand and Winko, who see socially mediated schemata as the interface between interpretation and evaluation.

Walter Nash has picked a poet who certainly was politically incorrect in his own times. Although Juvenal may from an establishment perspective be called ideologically dubious, his works survived for two millennia, making him an interesting test case for the claim that literary evaluation is inherently biased toward existing power structures. Indeed, the claim seems to forbid a satirical writer ever to enter into the canon. How could Swift ever have become so famous, having satirized about every power structure of his own age? Juvenal's reception in English literary history, however, mainly through Dryden and Johnson, betrays a serious misunderstanding of the Roman poet. Both translated Juvenal into English, and made him into an 18th century Christian poet, thus fundamentally misunderstanding and bypassing Juvenal's spirituality. This raises the issue of translation in the canonization process. To stay close to his spirit, Nash strongly recommends avoiding 'imitations' of the kind provided by Johnson, but instead aiming for a word-for-word faithfulness. While this may not look a translator's ultimate goal, it has all the advantages of conveying a sense of unfamiliarity, which is often present in the original as well. As such, it recognizes the defamiliarization of the literary language better than a smooth and elegant translation.

As Juvenal has been in the canon for a couple of millennia, it is appropriate to distinguish between fleeting, contemporary fame and permanent fame. Such a distinction is made by Colin Martindale in his essay. In a tongue-in-cheek mode, Martindale presents an impressive array of research that systematically correlates long-term eminence with other factors. Tongue-in-cheek the style of his chapter may be, the argument is not less powerful for it, as it spells out a number of rather objective measures that correlate with eminence over the long term - objective in the sense that they can be independently checked and replicated by other researchers. The number of anthology reprints is such an objective measure, but Martindale has himself developed a number of computer programs that measure various aspects of texts. In this way one can see what eminence is correlated with, and what it is *not* correlated with. For instance, on the basis of the analysis of a considerable sample of British poetry, it becomes clear that contemporary fame does not significantly correlate with 88 variables lined up by Martindale. Eminence, however, was negatively correlated to the expression of emotion and pleasure, and with secondary process content. On the other hand, eminence correlates positively with imagery and concreteness. Summarized, then, these data mean that great po-

etry deals with the depths of the human mind in a concrete and imagery-rich way, avoiding thought, action or emotion. Another mark of eminence is the variation in sentence length: great poets intermix short and long sentences. Martindale's finding should not, of course, be interpreted as prescriptions. It is not to be expected that one will become a famous poet by intermingling short and long sentences. Martindale does claim, however, that poets who do *not* abide by this rule have considerably fewer chances of ending up in the canon. His findings are therefore to be interpreted as necessary, not as sufficient, conditions to attain eminence over time.

In her chapter, Sonia Zyngier investigates how corpus linguistics can contribute to our understanding of literary evaluation. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is contrasted with Holinshed's and other contemporary texts on two major dimensions: predictability and function. This has obvious limitations, but also advantages: it allows a more rigorous isolation of individual factors that may contribute to the canonization of Shakespeare's text as compared to Holinshed's, and in that way may deepen our grasp of how long-term evaluation works. It turns out, as in the analysis of Van Peer, that the computer analysis marks the superiority of Shakespeare's language over his source text again and again. As such, the chapter goes beyond the interpretative mode characteristic of other contributions in this volume. Zyngier also argues that such a corpus approach has evident pedagogical applications and advantages. She outlines a teaching program whereby students will arrive at their own conclusions about the language of the play by going through successive analytical steps using a corpus approach.

Like Olsen, Fricke wants to make evaluative statements *empirically predictive*. Obviously this is a courageous and important step in investigating literary evaluation. If we can make such valid predictions, we will have taken a giant leap forward. And if our predictions turn out not to be valid, we will have learned a good deal in the process anyway. Fricke tackles the problem head on, by proposing 'laws' that operate over the evaluation of literary texts. An example of such a law is that a text containing a deviation that serves one function in the text will be evaluated lower than when such a deviation may fulfill more than one function. Such laws should be understood as operating under the *ceteris paribus* principle. When we apply this principle (of *other things being equal*), however, we can start manipulating texts and testing their evaluation. Although Fricke stops short of testing, his proposals have wide implications, not in the least because he provides different manipulated versions of poetic texts, and makes concrete predictions about their evaluation.

The volume closes with two theoretical considerations that place the study of literary evaluation in a wider context. Livingston offers a current overview of the various positions concerning the problem of evaluation in present-day analytic philosophy. As such, it provides important information to literary scholars about the debates philosophers are currently involved in. Granted that such debates have

become more technical over the past decades, Livingston's mapping of the various positions presents a valuable contribution: it allows literary scholars a possibility of orientation in the field.

I started this introduction by pointing to three components relevant to the evaluation of literature: the text, the reader, and the context in which the reading and evaluation take place. Von Heydebrand and Winko take up these different factors by offering a systematic reflection on the nature of evaluative activities in a pluralistic society. It incorporates theoretical reflection on values and the canon, but also research in social psychology and the psychology of cognition. The authors develop a balanced model for the study of literary evaluation, in which the various individual and social components, as well as the content and structure of texts, are given their due relevance. The authors conclude with a call for more empirical research on acts of evaluation, and outline a number of issues that should be investigated empirically.

What has been set out in this volume are not last words, but only beginnings in the study of literary evaluation. There are three kinds of criticisms however, that are likely to turn up in the debate, which I believe have to be addressed, albeit briefly. One relates to the issue of power, another to the subjective nature of evaluation, the third one to the pluralistic nature of modern societies. Let us look briefly at each of these arguments.

The first issue concerns the claim that evaluation is driven by the reproduction of unequal power structures in society. Could it not be that those in power cleverly subscribe to the high values of canonical works, even when these denounce or undermine the current power balance, as a cunning ruse – to let people think they are free to admire these works, while in actual fact, nothing will change? For instance, one could argue that the ruling groups in society are clever enough not to promote Brooke directly (at the expense of Shakespeare), because that would simply be too obvious. Therefore, they also admire Shakespeare, go to see his plays, but make sure that things stay the way they are. One could say that in that sense they are hypocritical.

What are we to make of this view? Even if we were to concede that it is realistic (which I think it is not), i.e., that ruling groups in society indeed act on this hypocritical scenario, that already would show some kind of progress: better to have ruling classes that at least in theory acknowledge the utopian view of the equality between the sexes. Hypocrites they may be in this sense, but there is an inherent danger in playing out this stratagem: as Taylor (1993:228) has pointed out, once we are over this hub of acknowledging that this is a better model after all, then it may be only a matter of time before things will really start changing.

Hypocrisy is itself an attitude that results from sociological changes related to processes of civilization as described by Elias (1947). For a long time in medieval Europe, members of the aristocracy had no need to behave hypocritically: they

could just do as they pleased. With ever longer interdependence chains (largely dictated by economical and political ties), they were gradually forced into playing things differently. It is in Elizabethan times indeed that these civilizing processes get under way in England, and thus, the argument of hypocrisy may carry some weight. Note, however, that hypocrisy does not explain the popularity of the play – the rulers of the time could have been embarrassed by it, and subsequently play the hypocrite, but it does not explain that they massively chose to go and see it. Anyone clever enough to speculate on the potential consequences of promoting the Romeo and Juliet scenario could have predicted the danger it involved in the long term. And precisely because of the danger involved, one must still explain the popularity of *Romeo and Juliet*. The danger in letting this utopian vision emerge certainly was serious enough, so that it should be explained adequately why the ruling classes let it pass in the first place – unless one believes that literature has absolutely no influence on the social world; but that seems obviously untrue; see the debate between Stolnitz (1991) and van Peer (1995). Some social revolutions have their origin in the theatre, and the many anti-theatrical movements show the acute awareness of the ruling classes of this danger; see Hjort (1994); see also the impressive research by Robert Darnton (1996), showing how popular literature on the eve of the French Revolution profoundly affected public opinion in France at the moment, thus contributing in part to the revolutionary mood. Thus the argument of a sly stratagem on the part of the powerful to accommodate works of art that are at odds with their own ideology leaves much to be answered.

A second criticism of the analyses in this volume could be that they remain somehow subjective. For instance, one claim that has been made is that complexity plays a role in evaluation. Shakespeare's text was deemed more complex than Brooke's and this contributed to its higher evaluation. But why pick complexity as a criterion, the critics may counter? Is that choice not purely subjective in itself?

I would argue that it is not, and that there are good reasons to employ the criterion of complexity in the evaluation of literature or art works. As Martindale has pointed out in his essay, the relation between evaluation and other factors is often non-monotonic, and usually takes the form of an inverted U-shape: if we plot a particular textual characteristic, such as complexity, on a horizontal axis, and readers' evaluations of the text on a vertical axis, one can observe that texts with minimal complexity get (other things being equal, of course) the lowest evaluation, and that with increasing complexity evaluation also increases, but only up to a certain point. Beyond that, further increases in complexity will lead to ever lower evaluations. This is the famous Wundt curve (after the founder of experimental psychology, Wilhelm Wundt) that has been demonstrated in dozens of studies, including art works; Berlyne (1971). This shows that we are cognitively wired to enjoy modest levels of complexity. Too little complexity leaves us bored, whereas too much complexity will baffle us. Therefore, complexity is not just a subjec-