Writing about Literature

Essay and translation skills for university students of English and foreign literature

Judith Woolf

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Preface

I am extremely grateful to Katrina Attwood for her support, encouragement, chivvying and technical advice, and for co-authoring the section on 'Using Google'; to Karen Hodder for her help with literary theory; and to Anna Clarkson and Philip Mudd at Routledge for their patience and hard work. My greatest debt is to all the students whose struggles and triumphs have been both the inspiration and the source material for this book.

I had hoped to be able to thank Robin Hood for casting his wise and critical eye over the manuscript, but his sudden death in January 2004 has left me instead with the far harder task of thanking him for thirty years of friendship. Robin had a rare ability to guide students into making their own discoveries, and his sharp eye for textual detail and slow, considered delivery of shrewd observations, unexpected insights, and stories with a twist made teaching with him an education and a delight. No university teacher since Alcuin has ever put more scrupulous and painstaking care into helping his students improve their written work, and the same care and practical kindness went into counselling students in difficulties or distress.

Friendship with Robin was a form of cultural exchange in which we invariably remained in his debt. But for him we would never have heard the voices of Henry Irving and Ellen Terry, or the Gaelic psalm-singing of Murdina and Effie MacDonald, or noticed that, in Joseph Strick's film of *Ulysses*, Joyce's 'packet of Epps's soluble cocoa' has been replaced by Fry's. Robin was larger than life, and life seems smaller to us without him.

Most great teachers are fated to leave their best memorial in the minds of former students who have long ago forgotten their names.

It is not only for the obvious reason that that could never be true of Robin Hood.

> Quiet consummation have,
> And renowned be thy grave!

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Chapter 1

Introduction

To know the road ahead, ask those coming back.
(Chinese proverb)

Conventional study guides and essay-writing manuals can be positively unhelpful to literature students, since the kind of advice about researching and structuring an essay which is useful and relevant if you are studying history or sociology or law is only too likely to prove limitingly rigid and restrictive when applied to such a creative and wide-ranging subject as literature. This book has been written especially for university students of English and foreign literature and tries to combine detailed practical advice with an introduction to the intellectual scope and imaginative possibilities of literary criticism. It covers every stage of the essay-writing process, from reading the text and choosing and researching a topic to referencing and presentation, as well as giving advice on safe computer use and tackling the all-important question of will-power. For students of foreign literature there is also a section on adult language learning and translation skills. However, the major emphasis throughout is on the art and craft of writing. If you have an ambition to write as well as possible about literature, both because it is a subject you are passionately interested in and because you are eager to make your own discoveries and experiments with language, this book is for you.

If, on the other hand, you have chosen to study literature at university because you are passionately interested in student politics or journalism or sport, or because you want to take a degree in the subject you came top in at school as a prelude to becoming a librarian, accountant or lawyer – all good and honourable reasons for taking a degree in literature – then this book will give you a useful

grounding in the technicalities of structure, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation and spelling, as well as helping you with background research, computer skills and presentation, but it won't pretend to tell you how to get a decent degree result without the expenditure of anything much in the way of time, patience and hard work. This is a guidebook, not a primer. It doesn't dictate how you should interpret the literature you write about or steer you towards one particular school of criticism, it doesn't give you model answers or pre-packaged ways of constructing an essay, and it certainly doesn't offer you neat formulae for impressing your tutors or bluffing your way through exams. Instead it tries to help you to think through your own ideas and express them cogently and lucidly. In other words, this is primarily a book for people who want to learn a challenging professional skill, and are prepared to put in the hours, and the effort, and the independent thought needed to become real writers.

No one ever writes a handbook for aspiring writers without having a political agenda, whether overt or buried. When the radical and activist William Cobbett published his *Grammar of the English Language* in 1823, he declared on the title page that it was 'Intended . . . especially for the Use of Soldiers, Sailors, Apprentices, and Plough-boys'. His book was explicitly written to empower its disenfranchised readers by enabling them to play an articulate and forceful part in political protest, and thus 'to assert with effect the rights and liberties' of their country, for 'tyranny has no enemy so formidable as the pen'.[1] My own book is the result of thirty years of teaching English and Italian literature in the changing climate of British university education. It is written in the belief that the study of literature, far from being an elitist glass bead game or a sophisticated means of grading young people for their place in the labour market, is a vital interpretative process which enables us, as no other discipline can, to put together the disparate and contradictory and difficult stuff which makes us human. No complex culture can survive for long if it loses touch with that humanity, so serious literary critics also help to assert the 'rights and liberties' of us all. However, the real purpose of the enterprise can only too easily be forgotten in the face of ever-growing public concern with test results and grades, targets and mission statements. If teachers go on wanting to teach despite this, it is because their students still approach literature with fresh and personal excitement and still wrestle ambitiously with the problems of self-expression.

In a culture so preoccupied with testing and grading, it can be hard even for bright and committed students not to feel that their tutors – or the author of a book such as this one – are being remiss if they fail to pass on the great secret of how to get top marks for essays and exam scripts, but the truth is that, in a creative subject such as literature, the only way of ensuring that you score the highest possible marks for your essay is to stop worrying about the marks and concentrate on making as good a job as you can of the essay. This is also the only way – in a society in which the teaching of literature can sometimes seem like an ingenious means of making young people conform to a set of cultural norms – to ensure that your writing will empower you by enabling you to discover and find words for what you really want to say.

This book does not set out to instruct you how to write, but rather to help you to discover how to teach yourself, as professional writers, great and small, have always had to do. The most important message it aims to convey is the one which William Cobbett directed to the soldiers, sailors, apprentices and plough-boys for whom he wrote his *English Grammar*, and to the fourteen-year-old son to whom he affectionately addressed it. As a sharp-minded political thinker, Cobbett firmly believed that there were only two reasons why someone would write something in a less than lucid way: either because they were unable to focus their thoughts sufficiently to communicate them clearly or because they were trying to sell someone snake oil. What is true of political writing is true also of literary criticism. However complex or sophisticated the ideas you want to put across, wilful obscurity will never enhance them, nor will any discerning reader think that they are more intelligent or striking for being unnecessarily opaque. In fact, the serious creative and critical effort you need to put into making them clear will enable you to test out their validity. As Cobbett told his son James (and the italics are his): '*Never write about any matter that you do not well understand.* If you clearly understand all about your matter, you will never want thoughts, and thoughts instantly become words.'[2] That 'instantly' may cause you a wry smile as you draft and redraft your opening paragraph, but otherwise this is invaluable advice.

Advice is what the middle-aged have always offered the young: measure twice and cut once; *i* before *e* except after *c*; walk three times round yonder church and never think on a fox's tail.[3] Writing this essay-writer's guide, I have sometimes felt like a Jewish mother standing on the quayside as my readers embark on the great voyage

of life and calling, 'Always back up your work and don't forget your stapler.' All teachers spend their professional lives on that quayside, since the end and aim of all teaching is the day when the teacher is no longer needed; so I should like to end this Introduction with the words of another powerful social critic who, like Cobbett, wrote an *English Grammar*: the dramatist and poet Ben Jonson. (He was a contemporary of Shakespeare, so forgive him the gender-specific language.) If there is indeed a secret to the production of successful interpretative prose, then this one sentence contains it. Achieve this and you can call yourself a writer.

> A man should so deliver himself to the nature of the subject, whereof he speaks, that his hearer may take knowledge of his discipline with some delight: and so apparel fair and good matter, that the studious of elegancy be not defrauded; redeem arts from their rough, and braky seats, where they lay hid, and overgrown with thorns, to a pure, open, and flowery light: where they may take the eye, and be taken by the hand.[4]

Chapter 2

Reading

> Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider.
> (Francis Bacon, 'Of Studies', *Essays*, 1625)

Texts and their contexts

Literature, as an academic subject, is not restricted to the study of characters, plots and images; it also enables us to investigate the intellectual climate, the social structures and the moral and emotional dilemmas of cultures past and present, familiar and strange. To understand Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson, we not only need to find out about the issues which concerned the Elizabethans and Jacobeans or the mid-nineteenth-century Americans, we also need to understand ourselves and our own society, and thus to enter into a dialogue with the text, transforming it and being transformed by it. Above all, we need to be aware that works of imaginative literature are written in the context of literature itself. Great writers have always been readers of this kind, boldly appropriating and reshaping the literature of the past in order to embody the spirit of their own age in daring and difficult contemporary fictions, a process already well established a couple of millennia ago when the Roman poet Virgil used Homer's story of the Trojan War as the starting point for his own epic, *The Aeneid*. His poem's most famous symbol, the golden bough which his hero Aeneas must find in order to descend into Avernus, the underworld kingdom of the dead, still retains its unique power over the imagination.

> *Quale solet sylvis brumali frigore viscum*
> *Fronde virere nova, quod non sua seminat arbos,*

Et croceo foetu teretes circumdare truncos.
Talis erat species auri frondentis opaca
Ilice, sic leni crepitabat bractea vento.[1]

Like the mistletoe grown
From no parent seed, in the woods in the winter's coldness
Budding new leaf, circling the long round trunks with saffron –
Like that, in the black ilex, were the leaves of gold,
Tinkling so crisply in the breath of air.

The poet and critic Geoffrey Grigson, whose translation this is, said of these lines, 'It is the physical humility of the mistletoe transformed; and it is life, naked, absolute and shining.'[2]

Thirteen centuries later, at the start of *The Divine Comedy*, Virgil's countryman and fellow poet Dante encounters Virgil's ghost on the threshold of Inferno, a place which is both Avernus and a medieval Christian Hell. In a display of respectful modesty which is really a shameless boast, the younger poet greets the older one:

Tu se' lo mio maestro e'l mio autore,
tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore.[3]

You are my master and my author.
It was from you alone I borrowed
The fine style that has brought me honour.

In fact Dante's boast is not nearly big enough. Far from simply imitating Virgil's classical style in *The Divine Comedy*, he incorporated elements of Virgil's story material into an entirely new kind of language for poetry, in which the topical and the scurrilous could share a common space with the spiritual and the profound. He called this language 'the vernacular', the rich and flexible dialect of everyday speech which had never before been used by a Florentine poet for epic poetry. The language of Dante's poem is still in use today: we call it Italian.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Irish writer James Joyce also turned, as Virgil had done nearly two thousand years earlier, to the enduring stories of Homer to create his epic novel *Ulysses*. Its extraordinary range of influences includes Dante, as well as the classical and medieval poets and philosophers who left their

mark on *The Divine Comedy*. Joyce too was forging a new kind of language for literature, and his hero, Leopold Bloom, also goes down into the kingdom of the dead – in a spirit, this time, of mild scientific enquiry.

> Seat of the affections. Broken heart. A pump after all, pumping thousands of gallons of blood every day. One fine day it gets bunged up and there you are. Lots of them lying around here: lungs, hearts, livers. Old rusty pumps: damn the thing else. The resurrection and the life. Once you are dead you are dead. That last day idea. Knocking them all up out of their graves. Come forth, Lazarus! And he came fifth and lost the job. Get up! Last day! Then every fellow mousing around for his liver and his lights and the rest of his traps. Find damn all of himself that morning. Pennyweight of powder in a skull. Twelve grammes one pennyweight. Troy measure.[4]

Troy measure is the system of weights used for precious stones and metals, but Joyce does not mention it here only because it is precise enough to weigh that 'pennyweight of powder'. The day in June 1904 which Leopold Bloom spends wandering around Dublin is a comic modern version of the ten-year voyage of Homer's Odysseus, the hero whom both Virgil and Dante called Ulysses, whose cunning enabled the Greek chieftains to destroy the great city of Troy, which in turn sent the Trojan Aeneas on his own momentous journey.

But it is not only epic literature which survives the descent into Avernus. The minor seventeenth-century poet Edmund Waller sends a perhaps imaginary rose to a perhaps imaginary girl, and by some unaccountable alchemy his poem, doubtless intended as a far from original seduction piece, becomes a hauntingly enduring reflection on transience.

> Go lovely rose,
> Tell her that wastes her time and me
> That now she knows
> When I resemble her to thee
> How sweet and fair she seems to be.
>
> Tell her that's young
> And shuns to have her graces spied
> That hadst thou sprung

In deserts where no men abide
Thou must have uncommended died.

Small is the worth
Of beauty from the light retir'd,
Bid her come forth,
Suffer herself to be desired
And not blush so to be admired.

Then die that she
The common fate of all things rare
May read in thee:
How small a part of time they share,
That are so wond'rous sweet and fair.

For all its apparent immediacy, Waller's poem too contains echoes of classical poetry. The tradition to which this kind of seduction poem belongs is often referred to by the Latin phrase 'carpe diem', which comes from one of Horace's Odes: '*carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero*' (take hold of the day, without counting too much on the morrow).[5] Though '*carpe*' here means seize and enjoy, the verb *carpere* is the one used for picking or gathering flowers and fruit. The Cumaean Sibyl uses it in this sense when she tells Aeneas to break off the golden bough from the dark holm oak. More appositely to Waller's poem, another great Roman poet, Ovid, uses it in his *Artis Amatoriae* (*The Arts of Love*) to express exactly the same message as 'Go lovely rose': '*carpite florem / Qui, nisi carptus erit, turpiter ipse cadet*' (gather the flower / Which, unless it is gathered, will fall into ugly decay).[6] Ovid's version is crueller than Waller's, threatening the woman who denies her lover with a frigid and lonely old age in which she will no longer wake to find her threshold strewn with roses; but there is a twist to Waller's treatment of the theme which a present-day reader could easily miss. The image of the rose had come to symbolize virginity, both in a religious sense when applied to the Virgin Mary and in a more directly physical one, so the final verse of Waller's *Song* hints at the real intention that lies behind the apparently innocent gift of a flower.

However, there is another sense in which 'carpe diem' poems are only superficially about either sex or love; and indeed the Horace ode with which the phrase originates is concerned with neither. The underlying subject matter of such poems is time. Even in the

worldly and sensual context of the *Artis Amatoriae*, we find lines which meditate on the briefness of youth and the inevitability of age and death:

Dum licet, et vernos etiamnum educitis annos,
Ludite: eunt anni more fluentis aquae;
Nec quae praeteriit, iterum revocabitur unda,
Nec quae praeteriit, hora redire potest.

As long as you may, and while you are still in your springtime,
Enjoy your sport; for the years flow by like water;
And once it has gone, we are powerless to call back the wave,
Once it has gone, no hour can ever return.[7]

Robert Herrick's famous injunction, 'Gather ye Rose-buds while ye may'[8] (note the opening verb), is not the only possible response to such intimations of mortality. The nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson offers the opposite advice:

Go not too near a House of Rose –
The depredation of a Breeze
Or inundation of a Dew
Alarms its walls away –

Nor try to tie the Butterfly,
Nor climb the Bars of Ecstasy,
In insecurity to lie
Is Joy's insuring quality.

The early seventeenth century was one of the great ages of English song-writing and, as its title suggests, Waller's poem was really a song lyric. It was set by the composer Henry Lawes, who also wrote the music for John Milton's masque *Comus*, in which a Lady lost in a dark wood manages to preserve her virginity from the wicked enchanter of the title, son of the beautiful witch Circe who taught Odysseus how to summon and speak with the spirits of the dead, the episode in Homer's *Odyssey* on which Virgil based Aeneas's journey to the underworld. Waller belonged to the last generation of poets who wrote love songs in quite this way. The great eighteenth-century critic, poet and lexicographer, Samuel Johnson, commented magisterially in his *Lives of the Poets* that Waller's 'amorous verses