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# Unlocking the Text

Fundamental Issues  
in Literary Theory

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# Preface

My excuse for producing yet another textbook on literary theory is that this one is concerned not with theorists and schools but with the essential problems these theorists and schools have attempted to tackle. There are some excellent textbooks available which provide detailed accounts of critics from Sidney to Barthes, or schools from the New Critics to the Deconstructionists. My experience as a teacher is that students at an early stage in the study of literature who are beginning to concern themselves with issues of literary theory are not always helped by syllabuses on literary theory which give them a large mass of descriptive material about critics and critical schools which has to be learned for an examination. Such a syllabus too quickly becomes just one more study area rather than the basis for study which informs all parts of a literature course. It is important to know about the history of literary criticism, about the theories, methods and approaches of influential critics and about the important groupings and movements in literary criticism. But first of all the student needs to know why such things are worth studying, and how they feed in to the study of literature.

This book, therefore, is designed to be used as an introduction to the scope of literary theory. It can profitably be used alongside a textbook giving more specific attention to individual critics and critical movements, but this is not essential. What is essential is that the student recognize that this is not a study apart; it is a study of the problems that are inevitably thrown up by the reading and discussion of literature.

When I started planning the book, I decided to try to write a book that made no reference to individual critics or theorists, that contained nothing of any originality, no personal opinions of my own, and that raised questions without suggesting answers. I soon found that to go this far would not be helpful to readers; certain problems are so bound up with the writings of particular critics that mention of their work and views is natural and helpful when discussing the problems. Moreover, even one's choice of problems suggests one's own priorities, and to offer no opinions of my own would have been artificial and – I venture to suggest – might have made the book too

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boring. But my original aims should suggest how I see this book: a guide to what literary theorists have found it important to discuss and argue about, and why. I hope that students will be able to relate the issues I discuss to their own reading and study of literature, to see these matters not as the specialist concern of isolated academics, but as problems that literary study leads intelligent readers towards.

My choice of examples is not generally very original, as my aim has been for clarity of exposition rather than that of shedding new light on traditional problems. I have lifted some examples from my own first book, *Identity and Relationship* (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1973), and I am grateful to the publisher for permission to do this. Not all of my other examples are from primary sources. This is because I have been more concerned to find clear expositions of particular points of view than accurate representations of what a given authority actually maintains. As I have stated, not all 'Saussurean' views can be defended in terms of what can safely be attributed to Saussure – nevertheless, these views are influential, and I have taken some of them as clear statements of positions I have found it useful to discuss.

A short book such as this inevitably leaves much out and also fails to do full justice to the complexity of some issues. I hope, nonetheless, that it will help students – especially those nervous of or sceptical about literary theory – to see the relevance the study of literary theory has to their reading of literary works, and perhaps to pursue the issues I raise further.

Jeremy Hawthorn  
March, 1987

# I

## Introductory

### (i) Literature

A sensible way to begin to book on literary theory, the reader might reasonably presume, would be by giving a succinct and workable definition of what literary theory is. Many writers on literary theory in practice start rather differently – by explaining that the provision of such a working definition is difficult or impossible. Although this is doubtless rather frustrating for the reader, it is worth exploring why the term ‘literary theory’ is itself problematic, for such an explanation does have the virtue that it introduces many themes and issues central to literary theoretical debate. Why should it be that a term in such common use should present problems of definition?

To begin with, the term ‘literature’ is itself far from unproblematic. Asked by James Boswell, ‘What is poetry?’ Samuel Johnson replied, ‘Why, Sir, it is much easier to say what it is not.’ A number of recent commentators have suggested that such definition is difficult because terms like ‘literature’ or ‘poetry’ are open rather than closed, and that their meaning varies from age to age and culture to culture – and even within cultures.

Continuing his reply to Boswell, Johnson commented that, ‘We all *know* what light is; but it is not easy to *tell* what it is.’ In like manner it can be stated that we all know what poetry, or literature is, and that trying to define what ‘we all know’ is a time-wasting activity. The problem is that what ‘we all know’ turns out, on closer investigation, very often to involve an assumed rather than an actual agreement. This can be demonstrated both historically and in terms of our own contemporary attitudes. When English Literature developed as a university subject in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, for example, the common assumption was that this would involve the study of poetry and drama rather than of the novel. It was also very often assumed that it would not include recent writing, and well into the 1960s certain British university departments of English were notorious for concluding their chronological coverage of English literature with late-nineteenth-century works.

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If you look up the term 'literature' in the Oxford English Dictionary, you will find the following definition:

Literary production as a whole; the body of writings produced in a particular country or period, or in the world in general. Now also in a more restricted sense, applied to writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect.

Clear from this limited definition is the fact that in English there has been, historically, a narrowing down of the accepted meaning of the term 'literature'; from applying to 'the body of writings produced in a particular country or period', the scope of the term has suffered a diminution such that it now denotes a particular sort of writing, that possessed of 'a beauty of form' or that which is productive of a certain 'emotional effect'. The implications of this historical narrowing-down of the meaning of the term 'literature' will be looked at in more detail in due course; for the time being we can note that even the narrowed-down definition is by no means uncontroversial. Are there not things for which we look in order to decide whether we are reading 'literature' other than beauty of form and emotional effect? We can think of Brecht's desire to get his audiences to react intellectually rather than emotionally to his plays,<sup>1</sup> or of Wilfred Owen's *Preface* to his poems in which he states that,

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.  
My subject is War, and the pity of War.  
The Poetry is in the pity.<sup>2</sup>

Should Owen's implicit rejection of concern with 'beauty of form' and Brecht's of 'emotional effect' lead us to assume (if we agree that their works are as they describe them) that neither writer is a producer of literature?

A range of theorists have attempted to offer alternative definitions of literature which accord with what 'we all know', definitions based upon 'the language of literature', on literature's fictionality, or on some alternative view of its aesthetic appeal. But no such alternative definition has been found universally acceptable, and it would seem that 'literature' is a term which eludes watertight definition. Again, I will go into more detailed discussion of the implications that this fact has later on in the book; for the time being it is important that we are on our guard against too careless a use of the term 'literature'. We should remember not only that what is a work of literature to one person many fail to qualify as such to someone else, but also that

<sup>1</sup> See for example the essay, 'Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction'.

<sup>2</sup> C. Day Lewis (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, London, Chatto, 1963, p.31.

generalizations about literature may be only partially justified, may apply to some literary works and not to others.

One other point is worth making at this stage. The dictionary definition of literature quoted mentioned 'writings', and the etymology of the word 'literature' has a clear connection to writing. But in normal usage today 'literature' often has a rather wider scope, including oral productions and performance works. The way we divide the world up linguistically is often much more inflexible than might be desired; language often changes a continuum into a set of discrete stages or steps. In the pages to come I will try to indicate ways in which some of the problems about which I am talking can be illuminated by setting written literature alongside oral productions and the performing arts.

The narrowing-down of the scope of the term 'literature' during the past century or so has involved a shift from predominantly *descriptive* to *descriptive/evaluative* meanings. To refer to a work as a literary work today is to suggest something about its value. In his book *The Scholar-Critic* F. W. Bateson attempts to distinguish between 'literature', 'would-be literature', 'sub-literature', and 'non-literature'. He comments that

Whatever literature is, it is not the poem or novel that is unreadable because of its total incompetence (would-be literature). Nor is it the pot-boiling journalism, whoever the author was, that is only potentially more than mere entertainment (sub-literature). Nor finally is it the use of language, in print or in speech, that is wholly trivial . . . or strictly utilitarian (non-literature).<sup>3</sup>

His three unsuccessful contenders to the condition of 'literature' Bateson argues, are 'subordinate verbal artifacts' which 'differ *toto caelo* from the *literary artifact* (in its various forms), if only because great literature represents by general agreement one of the pinnacles of human civilization.'

It is interesting that Bateson's argument here displays a not uncommon slippage; trying to talk about what *literature* is or is not, he very soon slips in to talking about *great literature* – as if it were unsatisfactory merely to talk of (by implication 'un-great') literature. More recently the theorist Stein Haugom Olsen makes it clear that for him the terms 'literature' and 'detective stories' are mutually exclusive.<sup>4</sup> It is apparent that for both Bateson and Olsen the term 'literature' is necessarily in part (or perhaps even in essence) an honorific one.

If we are to study literary theory then we need to remember that

<sup>3</sup> F. W. Bateson, *The Scholar-Critic*, London, Routledge, 1972, p.62.

<sup>4</sup> Stein Haugom Olsen, *The Structure of Literary Understanding*, Cambridge UP, pp.211–12.

what seem to be theoretical disagreements may turn out on closer inspection to involve differences of definition, disagreements about what 'literature' actually is. What is potentially very confusing is that often our implicit value-judgements alter without our being too conscious of the fact, without our realizing that the same terms and vocabulary can conceal shifting meanings. My impression is, for example, that by no means all readers and critics today would accept it as unproblematic to assume that 'literature' and 'detective fiction' were necessarily mutually exclusive. I recall a discussion in 1967 about the introduction of Film Studies as a university subject. One participant was guardedly enthusiastic about such a prospect, but noted that he took it for granted that by 'film' we were not including such things as the Western. Again, what 'we all know' today was apparently not known by certain people twenty years ago.

In recent years discussions concerning 'the canon' have highlighted some of these problems. This term is of ecclesiastical origin: the canonical books were those accepted by the Church as part of the Bible. By extension, in literary studies 'the canon' came to designate those literary works accepted by university departments of literature as worthy of serious academic study – or, in some interpretations those works which merited the description 'literature'. Note, incidentally, that a canon implies a Church, an *institution* which makes selective and evaluative judgements. The canon in literary studies was not established by common readers, but by university academics, and very often a consciousness or unconsciousness of canonical distinctions can be seen to distinguish academic from non-academic readers.

It should be noted too that inclusion in the canon was normally argued in *de facto* terms: if most university departments of literature agreed that certain works merited serious study, then these works were, *ipso facto*, canonical. Subsequent explanations of the merit of these works might be ventured, but no abstract definition of what qualified a work for canonization could normally be found. One might be able to justify why Jane Austen's novels were canonical and Agatha Christie's were not, but as to *whether* these works were or were not on the canon there was no dispute: one could check the syllabuses in university departments of literature.

Now although this apparent unity about the canon was never complete (think, for instance, of F. R. Leavis's dismissal of the work of Laurence Sterne and Henry Fielding), it is certainly true that during the present century there have been long periods of relative agreement about what 'serious literature' or 'great literature' are, and by which works these categories are represented. But in more recent years the opening up of college and university literature syllabuses to popular literature (often directly or indirectly as a

result of the influence of Media Studies), and also with the development of campaigns for 'alternative' or 'lost' traditions – women writers, working-class writers, writers from colonial backgrounds or submerged groups – fierce argument about what is or is not worthy of serious academic study 'as literature' has broken out. Such argument has perhaps revealed that beneath the seemingly monolithic term 'literature' at different times and places is to be found a wide variety of works, read, studied and enjoyed in a range of varying ways.

'Read and studied' is a revealing phrase. 'Literature' today is inescapably connected with education, both at school, college and university level. One might cynically suggest that whereas people read books, students study literature. The narrowing-down of the meaning of the term 'literature' is intimately related to the growing stress placed on a literary *education* by European and North American societies.

Literary criticism is of course older than this development – much older – but it is important to remember that what we refer to as literary criticism may not have been described as such by the critic's contemporaries. The Oxford English Dictionary, dating from the early years of the present century, involves reference to a 'Literary Man' and to a 'Critic' but not to a 'Literary Critic' – more evidence of that narrowing down of the meaning of 'literature' and cognate terms during the present century. We can surmise that the concept of 'literature', and views of what criticizing literature involved, were more open in the past than they are today, less seen in specialist or quasi-technical ways than has been customary in the present century. As I have suggested, there is little doubt that the increasing association of literary studies with formal – and especially higher – education is connected with such changes.

It is as well to bring this issue out into the open at this stage of this book, for in one way or another it haunts literary theory and critical theory. A general problem in all knowledge concerns the extent to which our observations disturb, destroy or create what it is that we are studying. With literature and criticism this problem is particularly acute: their study today is inescapably centred in academic departments of literature, but these same departments are influential in defining what we see as literature, how it is to be critically studied, and even (to a more limited extent) how it is to be written. Is literary criticism then an activity that has been created by the academy and has little or no relationship with the manner in which 'ordinary' (or 'common') readers read?

An adequate response to this question has to be more sophisticated than a simple 'yes' or 'no'. To start with, it needs to be pointed out that there can be few – perhaps no – 'ordinary readers' whose

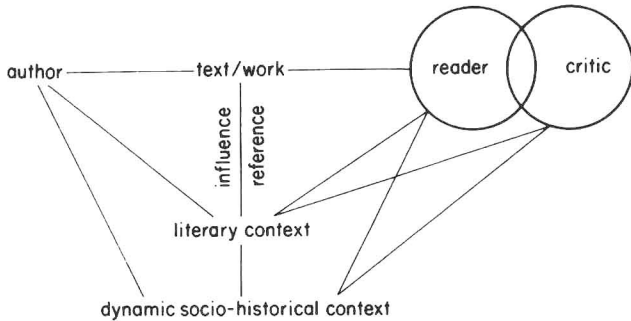
reading habits have not been at least partly formed through education. This has always been true in a general sense: someone always has to teach us to read. But in the present century the forming of reading habits has become more and more intimately linked with the educational *system*. Not only do most of us start reading literature at school, but our teachers have been trained in colleges and universities.

Nonetheless the ghost of the 'common reader' haunts literary theory – and rightly so, for it is central to questions about what literary criticism is. If the concept of 'literature' eludes watertight definition, we meet with further complications when we ask what it is that literary criticism actually studies or concerns itself with, what its object is. Does the literary critic typically study the work, the work in relation to its author, its time, or to other works, the reader's (or a reader's) response to or appreciation of the work, the meaning of the work (variously defined), or the significance and implications of the work (again as variously defined)? (For the time being I leave aside the complex question of the relationship between *text* and *work*, to which I shall return.)

If all this seems complicated enough, it is not hard to show that it is a considerable simplification of a more complex actuality. It is often assumed, for instance, that whereas literature is independent of literary criticism, literary criticism is parasitic on literature. But is literature independent of literary criticism? Are not our readerly expectations, or reading skills, or very view of what literature is, formed at least in part by literary criticism – particularly through its association with education? Would the novels and poems that are being written today have been written had no literary criticism been written? Moreover, when we come to trying to distinguish between 'reading', 'response', and 'criticism', then we soon realize that the three words – so conveniently discrete and separate – denote activities that cannot easily be distinguished one from another in any absolute sense.

These are all problems to which I will return. In the mean time I would like to suggest that it may be helpful, initially, to 'explode' literature into a number of more manageable components, to move, in short, from 'literature' to 'the literary process'. We can depict this process in a very simple form diagrammatically.

Like all such models this one has to be used with care if we wish to avoid being – in the words of George Eliot – ensnared by our metaphors. It is, for instance, potentially misleading to separate 'literary context' from 'socio-historical context', as the former is actually an aspect of the latter and inseparable from it. We can also posit that both the author and the literary and socio-historical contexts are in a sense 'in' the text as well as standing outside and apart



from it. As I shall point out later on in the book, it is also much less problematic to refer to 'the author' than to 'the reader'; most literary works have single authors and many readers, and this fact brings many attendant problems in its wake. Moreover, 'the reader' may read the same work many times.

For all this, the diagram has the virtue that it takes our attention away from literature as a 'thing', the text as an object demanding attention, and instead encourages us to consider 'literature' in terms of a set of shifting relationships which are never stable but which are all temporally mobile even if incorporated in and mediated through a relatively stable written text.

This is not to say that such a shift of emphasis is uncontroversial. It is clear that *some* theorists have believed that these relationships in some way or another actually create the work; take the following comment from M. M. Bakhtin:

In the completely real-life time-space where the work resonates, where we find the inscription or the book, we find as well a real person – one who originates spoken speech as well as the inscription and the book – and real people who are hearing and reading the text. Of course these real people, the authors and the listeners and readers, may be (and often are) located in differing time-spaces, sometimes separated from each other by centuries and by great spatial distances, but nevertheless they are all located in a real, unitary and as yet incomplete historical world set off by a sharp and categorical boundary from the *represented* world in the text. Therefore we may call this world the world that *creates* the text, for all its aspects . . . participate equally in the creation of the represented world in the text.

...

However forcefully the real and the represented world resist fusion, however immutable the presence of that categorical boundary line between them, they are nevertheless indissolubly tied up with each other and find themselves in continual mutual interaction; uninterrupted exchange goes on between them, similar to the uninterrupted

exchange of matter between living organisms and the environment that surrounds them. As long as the organism lives, it resists a fusion with the environment, but if it is torn out of its environment, it dies.<sup>5</sup>

Bakhtin's statement is a classic example of a dialectical or relational view of literature, a view that assumes that literature is only understandable in the context of an appreciation of the dynamic relationships between the various aspects of the literary process.

Against such a view can be set the alternative view that literature can, should, and in some versions, must be seen independently of such relationships, in terms of itself. We find this view in various versions of Formalism, amongst which I would include certain Structuralist formulations. David Robey, for example, writing about 'Modern Linguistics and the Language of Literature', expounds the following version of what has been claimed to be a 'Saussurean' view of literature:

... if the literary text is seen as a sign or set of signs in the Saussurean sense, then its meaning or content must be the product of a structure of relationships or differences whose connection with the 'real' world is purely arbitrary.<sup>6</sup>

On the one hand we have a view of literature that sees it in perpetual and necessary symbiotic exchange with the real world; on the other hand we have a view of literature with a purely arbitrary (and presumably, therefore, unilluminating) connection with a world that is of so little substance that it can only be referred to as 'real' rather than as real. (This last smacks somewhat of overkill: if the world is not real then one needs hardly waste time discussing whether or not it is in a necessary or defining relationship with the literary text.) It is probably clear from my presentation of these views that my own sympathy lies with the former rather than the latter view; my own feeling is that rather than starting the investigation of literature by attempting to define literature, it makes better sense to work towards an understanding of the conditions necessary for the existence of literature – literature's 'productive relations'. Unlike many theorists, then, I do not start from what can be termed an 'essentialist' conception of literature, but from a more pragmatic and dialectical view. This view has something in common with what has been termed the institutional view of literature – that is, an approach to the understanding of literature that looks not for an essential quality in the 'thing' (the literary work) itself, but in the

<sup>5</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist; trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin, U. of Texas Press, 1981, pp. 253, 254.

<sup>6</sup> David Robey, 'Modern Linguistics and the Language of Literature', in Ann Jefferson and David Robey (eds.), *Modern Literary Theory*, London, Batsford, 1982, p. 46.

system of assumptions, customs and rules which gives the literary work meaning and upon which the writer in some sense depends. In spite of this similarity I am critical of many actual examples of institutional theories of literature because they seem to me to underestimate the degree of disagreement and development in the 'institution' of literature. Comparisons between this institution and the monetary system or the rules of chess have the virtue of exposing the shortcomings of essentialist approaches to literature, but it should be apparent that they involve comparisons with far more unified and stable rule-systems than can be found to operate with literary works.

The history of criticism – I would suggest – can be seen as the history of attempts to understand literature in terms of successive parts of the literary process, only rarely involving all of these parts in their dynamic interrelations. Literary criticism in this view is the history of a sequence of exclusions – excluding the author, the reader, the literary or socio-historical context – or the transformations of history as the text survives through a range of different historical situations.

But at this point perhaps we should proceed to some introductory comments concerning criticism.

## (ii) Criticism

If there are problems in defining exactly what we mean by 'literature', there are no fewer when we turn to 'criticism'. In the following introductory comments I will start by outlining some general problems of definition and demarcation, and then proceed to more specific commentary upon different critical activities. 'Criticism,' we soon realize, is something of a blanket term, one which covers a wide range of different activities, and one which is impossible to separate off from unambiguously non-critical procedures in any totally satisfactory way. Take for example the question of the relationship between reading and criticizing. Are these discrete and easily separable activities, or does each in some way necessarily involve the other? Is criticism a *post facto* procedure, one which starts once reading has finished, or is an adequate reading itself critical in essence?

The answer to such a question, not very surprisingly, has to be that it all depends what one means by 'criticism' and 'reading'. Both are alarmingly elastic terms in current literary-critical usage, and need to be broken down into their component parts – or mapped on the terrain of their typical deployment – to clarify matters. Just as we approached a discussion of 'literature' by turning our attention to the components of the literary process, so too can 'criticism' be at

least partially demystified by considering different critical activities.

*Literary criticism, literary theory, critical theory*

Let us begin, however, with the promised consideration of some general problems of definition and demarcation. First of all, let us consider three confusingly related terms: 'literary criticism', 'literary theory', 'critical theory'. Many readers may well feel that a simple way of drawing boundaries might be by saying that literary criticism is concerned with the practical criticism of particular texts, literary theory with the general knowledge of the nature of literature that can be abstracted from literary criticism, and critical theory with the study of literary criticism itself. And as a rule-of-thumb guide these suggested areas of concern are not unhelpful. Thus we can further distinguish literary theory from critical theory by saying that the latter is derived from and directed towards the practical criticism of particular literary texts, with 'practical criticism' denoting not the narrower 'close reading' associated with the critic I. A. Richards, but a wide range of activities including interpretation, analysis, contextualization, explication, and so on. (For further comment on these terms see below.) Literary theory, in contrast would involve a more general concern with the nature, rôle(s) and function(s) of literature, dealing not so much with what we do with literary works as critics, but with what they are and what their range of functions is.

Although such a neat set of definitions has much to recommend it, we have to contend with the fact that current usage tends to be a lot more untidy. 'Literary theory', for example, is often used as a wider, generic term to embrace both what we can call the aesthetics of literature and also the theory of literary criticism. 'Critical theory' is also a somewhat problematic term as it can indicate either an implicit set of beliefs informing a given piece of literary criticism, or it can denote a meta-critical level of theorizing concerned with what literary criticism is and what it does. And 'literary criticism' in practice is used to refer to a bewildering range of different activities, a summary of which I shall attempt to produce towards the end of this section.

Moreover, theory can be either descriptive or normative: it can either argue that 'this is how literary criticism proceeds', or 'this is how literary criticism *should be* conducted'.

The importance of realizing how flexible some of the terms we are dealing with actually are in normal use is well exemplified by the arguments of Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels in their influential article 'Against Theory'. They produce a definition of 'theory' early on in the article, and this definition is arguably a rather narrow and tendentious one: