

# The Frontiers of Literature

---

LAURENCE LERNER

# The Frontiers of Literature

*Laurence Lerner*

---

Basil Blackwell

Copyright © Laurence Lerner 1988

First published 1988

Basil Blackwell Ltd  
108 Cowley Road, Oxford, OX4 1JF, UK

Basil Blackwell Inc.  
432 Park Avenue South, Suite 1503  
New York, NY 10016, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Lerner, Laurence  
The frontiers of literature.  
1. Criticism  
I. Title  
801'.95 PN81  
ISBN 0-631-14967-8

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Lerner, Laurence  
The frontiers of literature.  
Includes index.  
1. English literature – History and criticism – Theory, etc.  
2. Literary form. I. Title.  
PR21.L47 1988 820'.9 87-35190  
ISBN 0-631-14967-8

Typeset in Bembo on 11/12pt  
by Columns of Reading  
Printed in Great Britain

# The Frontiers of Literature

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Criticism*

The Truest Poetry (An Essay on the  
Question, What is Literature?)  
The Truthtellers (Jane Austen, George Eliot,  
D.H. Lawrence)  
The Uses of Nostalgia (Studies in Pastoral)  
An Introduction to English Poetry  
Love and Marriage  
The Literary Imagination (Essays on Literature  
& Society)

*Poetry*

Domestic Interior  
The Directions of Memory  
Selves  
A.R.T.H.U.R. The Life & Opinions of a Digital  
Computer  
A.R.T.H.U.R. & M.A.R.T.H.A. The Loves of  
the Computers  
The Man I Killed  
Chapter & Verse (Bible Poems)  
Selected Poems  
Rembrandt's Mirror

*Fiction*

The Englishmen  
A Free Man  
My Grandfather's Grandfather

## Preface

---

Some of this book has already been published. Part of chapter 2 appeared as 'What is Confessional Poetry?' in *Critical Quarterly*, Summer 1987; chapter 5 (ii) was an essay in *Reconstructing Literature*, a collection edited by me for Basil Blackwell in 1983; chapter 5 (iv) was broadcast by the BBC under the title 'Murdering the Text', and an outline of the whole, based mainly on the introduction, chapter 1 (i) and chapter 4 was broadcast as a series of three talks with the same title as the book. Much of the rest has been delivered to patient and helpful audiences in lectures and seminars not only at my own universities (Sussex, Munich, Vanderbilt) but at many others that have been kind enough to invite me and listen to my work in progress – Wuerzburg, Passau, the Jagellonian University of Krakow, the Brazilian Association of Professors of English, The University of Tennessee, and others.

Literary criticism is a co-operative activity, and this book has profited not only from such official occasions but from the constant stimulus of conversations with (among others) Gabriel Josipovici, Stephen Medcalf, Bernard Harrison, Jonathan Dollimore, Vereen Bell, Manfred Pfister and Werner Sedlak. An even greater debt is owed to those who read and commented on some or all of the first draft, and showed me how badly it was, in places, expressed: John Burrow, Wayne Booth, Tony Thorlby and Tony Nuttall, to the last of whom I pay a small part of a large intellectual debt by dedicating this book to him.

According to Gerard Genette, the making of such acknowledgements is not an altogether disinterested act: 'un auteur qui a tant d'amis ne peut être absolument mauvais'. So I will say openly what he believes I have already said implicitly, that I hope you (colleague, student, thoughtful lover of literature) will read and enjoy this book, which I value highly and have struggled hard to make as clear and helpful as I can.

Laurence Lerner

*To Tony Nuttall*

# Contents

---

<b>Preface</b>	viii
<b>Introduction: An Analogy</b>	1
<b>1 History</b>	12
Fiction and Autobiography	12
Young David and Young Charles	14
Young Ruddy	19
Fiction and Autobiography	22
Childhood	24
Everything is Fiction: Nothing is Fiction	27
The Famous Mr Joseph Addison	29
Events	38
Fact or Fiction?	43
The Condition of England	47
The Texts	47
Ideology	56
Strategies of Writing	57
Text and Reality	60
Collingwood on History	63
Realism	65
Evangelicalism	68
Evangelicalism and the Historians	69
Evangelicalism and Fiction	75
Representative Figures	77
Power	82
Authenticity of Experience	87
Sermons	89



---

<b>2 Crying</b>	95
Expressing Emotion	95
Expression	96
Confession and Poetry	100
Mere Confession	103
Anne Sexton and the Practice of Confession	107
Forms of Courage	111
The Case for Self-pity	114
Shame	119
The Rhetoric of Confession	122
Expressing and Betraying	125
A Theoretical Problem: Expressing the Dispersed Subject	132
<b>3 Persuading</b>	141
Literature as Didactic	141
Sermon and Poem	145
Donne's Sermons and Donne's Poems	146
Donne's Emotion	151
The Audience	158
Politics	161
South Africa	162
God's Stepchildren	165
<i>The Grass is Singing</i>	167
Liberals and Revolutionaries	169
Nadine Gordimer and the Critics	178
Political Fiction: Political Readers	184
<b>4 Play</b>	189
What is a Game?	189
Word-games	191
Form as Play	200
Everything is Play?	207
<b>5 The Body of Literature</b>	214
The Book	214

---

Titles	223
Exploring the Edges	243
Murdering the Text	256
Notes	272
Index	289

## Introduction: An Analogy

---

Sometimes a country has clear boundaries, such as a river or the ocean. Clear-cut national boundaries, however, are not the norm but the exception: only islands have clean edges, and even they may have internal territorial disputes, or other, smaller islands to which they lay claim. More characteristic are boundaries like Alsace-Lorraine, disputed territories (this one changed hands five times in a century) where there may be two languages spoken, each wrestling for a larger share of attention and prestige.

Now the dispute over Alsace-Lorraine does not, of itself, call into question the reality of France and Germany. Demarcation disputes are quite compatible with the existence of distinct territories – are, indeed, a consequence of their existence if, as I suggest, the typical national boundary is not an ocean shore but a strip of ambiguous land. But suppose the whole territory of Germany were surrounded by border disputes – with Switzerland, with Czechoslovakia, with Austria, with Poland, with Denmark, with Holland, with France (as much of it has been). Suppose these disputes were exacerbated to the point that there was no square inch of territory that was indisputably German (as has been the case with Poland). A German might be reluctant to admit this about his own country: he might insist on a heartland, which could include Heidelberg (the oldest university) or Teutoberger Wald (the legendary victory over a foreign invader) or Aachen (seat of Charlemagne and of an old and richly meaningful cathedral). Since these are geographically remote from each other, and one at least is near the frontier, it is not easy to locate the physical existence of the German heartland. In the conceptual country of literature, such a heartland is often postulated; it is equally difficult to find the actual novels, poems or plays which embody it.

To be committed to the idea of a heartland is (in contemporary

parlance) to take an essentialist view of literature. To the essentialist, it is reductive to see literature (we might even say Literature) as serving any other purpose, to 'faire des Lettres une sorte d'institution d'utilité publique . . . tournant en moyens d'éducation des instruments de plaisir spirituel', as Valéry complained.<sup>1</sup> If the essentialist overcomes his reluctance to pointing out the analogies between literature and other forms of discourse, he will only do so as a strategy for showing that what really matters is the difference, that literature is defined by not having public usefulness, poetry is defined by its untranslatability. He is the patriot who maintains that this piece of soil is wholly and exclusively, ineluctably German.

At the other extreme stands the view that exploration of the frontiers is important because it leads to the steady erosion of the whole territory. The difficulty of knowing whether Alsace-Lorraine is French or German is not a peripheral difficulty, but a paradigm of the very process of defining, a clue to the fact that once we examine closely we see that 'Germany' was a provisional concept, a logocentric entity: it crumbles as it is understood. 'Structure is perceived,' says Derrida, 'through the incidence of menace, at the moment when imminent danger concentrates our vision on the keystone of an institution.'<sup>2</sup> What we have called 'literature' is simply what we have chosen (probably for ideological reasons) to call literature, not for intrinsic qualities, but because of the way we have read it, a way that can change as we give place to (lose power to) a new group of readers.<sup>3</sup> I will call this the deconstructionist view.

This book is neither essentialist nor deconstructionist. Against the essentialist I would claim that Germany is much larger than any heartland, so that we need not pursue a notion of the literary that excludes all disputed territory. For such a notion would take us into a tiny area of pure poetry, excluding most of what as living breathing human beings we spend our time (and our literary reading) on. Valéry declared once to Mallarmé that though he would never be popular, there was in every town in France 'un jeune homme secret qui se ferait hâcher pour vos vers'.<sup>4</sup> He meant this, under the comic note, to count as the highest praise, but it can also be seen as showing the futility of feeling that all that ultimately matters is a pure essence of poetry. Even the gruesome image of being willing to be chopped into pieces may be more appropriate than Valéry noticed, for withdrawing to a heartland is what you do when you are losing a war. I postulate peace as the normal state of

affairs, and in that case a country will have large areas which have much in common with contiguous lands, areas where people cross the border freely, speak two languages, carry two currencies in their wallets, but usually know whether they are German or French, German or Danish.

Against the deconstructionist, on the other hand, I want to claim that the conceptual insecurity of Germany (or of literature) need not make a great deal of difference to our national identity or our literary experience. Even if there is no heartland, even if every inch of Germany consists only of disputed territory, that does not deny the existence of Germany. Switzerland has three languages, each of which is spoken outside the country by a much larger number of people: the linguistic heartland of Switzerland consists only of Romansch (spoken by one per cent of the inhabitants) and the dialectal variations that distinguish *Schweitzerdeutsch* from *Hochdeutsch*. No Swiss will allow this fact to impugn the reality or importance of Switzerland. Nations are a valid way of dividing up the world, even, for some purposes, the most important.

This book is an attempt to explore how literature impinges on, and overlaps with, the contiguous territories. It is written in the belief that the boundaries are real, but that overlaps are nothing to be frightened of, indeed, that they are enriching. It draws the boundaries not by theoretical speculation, but by the examination of actual borderline cases. We are often told nowadays that literary criticism can no longer be practised by the theoretically innocent, that it is necessary to clarify the theoretical basis of what one is doing. Behind this book lies a partial acceptance of this. Theory is important, but so are instances: it is only through their embodiment in actual works of literature that literary theories take on meaning. To read without reflection, even to discuss without wider reflection, is like strolling through one's home town without wondering how it relates to the rest of the world. But to spend all one's time on the principles of demarcation is to be lost in methodology. What sort of a book would one write on Germany if one never learnt German, never visited Aachen or Heidelberg, let alone Cologne or Munich, never read Heine or met any Germans?

In order to give an outline of the book, I must now, clearly, name and describe the adjacent territories (readers who prefer to find out as they go along where they are being taken, are invited to skip the next four paragraphs). There are four, which I have named history, crying, persuading, and play. I have had to regard these territories

as unproblematic, though no doubt there could be studies of history, of psycholinguistics, of moral philosophy and of children's games, that explored the problems raised by the frontiers of each of these territories, as I here explore those raised by 'literature'. But one can only write one book at a time, and I have had to put aside those hypothetical explorations, and operate with a stable conception of each.

1 History is the study of the past. Examples of historical statements are 'Edwin Chadwick's Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Classes was completed in 1841, and published by the Poor Law Commission in 1842', or 'Though Wesley wished to remain in the Church of England, the Methodists, soon after his death, were for all practical purposes a Dissenting sect'. The common element in history and literature is narrative, and the first chapter therefore compares historical and fictitious narrative. Since most novelists draw in their work on a blend of observation, memory and imagination, the discussion will be cleanest if we can isolate these from one another. I therefore begin with two limit cases: first, that in which the novelist draws on material to which no reader has any access (autobiographical fiction), and second, that in which the reader has, in principle, the same access to the material as the author (historical fiction). Since both these discussions deal with the portrayal of individuals, I then turn to what could be seen as the only proper concern of history, the portrayal of social movements, and here again there are two sections, both concerned with nineteenth-century England: one on the physical circumstances of life, the other on changing beliefs and attitudes.

2 The adjacent territory of chapter 2 is called 'crying', a conveniently ambiguous term for the discharge of emotion, verbal and non-verbal. Examples of cries are 'I hate you', 'It hurts', 'Oh Hell' or 'Oh frabjous day, callooh, callay'. As an example of material that seems to belong on both sides of the frontier I choose confession, and the subgenre of confessional poetry, so popular in the 1950s and 1960s. In asking whether the term 'confessional' should be extended to other poetry, taking us back in time to the Romantics and even before, I am led into a discussion about expression theory, and the ways in which it can be heuristically useful. Finally, I ask whether the structuralist decentring of the autonomous subject means that we must abandon expression theory.

3 Persuasion, or advocacy, is the attempt to cause others to act in a certain way: 'Vote Labour.' 'Believe and you shall be saved.' 'You'll never regret buying a Cortina.' Its overlap with literature is caused by the didactic theories that see the function of literature as exciting us to virtue. Didactic views of literature, which go back to the ancient world, dominated criticism for many centuries. Didacticism is now so widely rejected in aesthetics that we need to remind ourselves how many of our great writers claimed, almost as a matter of course, that their work was morally improving. In the two main areas of our social life, religion and politics, advocacy of one position and rejection of another has not and will not cease. This is an adjacent territory that continues to matter, and attempts to assimilate literature to it, either by surreptitious boundary shifts or by direct conquest, will therefore continue. This chapter compares religious advocacy in its commonest form, the sermon, with religious poetry (choosing Donne as the test case); and political advocacy with the political novel or poem.

4 We all play games; but the play element in literature has usually had a bad press. To speak of a poem as a word-game is usually dismissive. Taking the concept of the adjacent territory from Huizinga and Freud, I begin this chapter with the obvious presence of the play element in nursery rhymes and nonsense verse, then go on to suggest that form itself can be regarded as play. We are all too puritanical to leave play alone to enjoy itself, so I go on to discuss those theories that attribute to form not self-contained delight, but some wider function.

It is natural to ask whether I consider these four to be the only frontiers on to which literature abuts. I am sure the answer is no, if only because of the recurrent quirkiness of artists, trying to set themselves unprecedented tasks; but it could still be that these are the most important, and that I do believe, since exploring these frontiers seems to throw up most of the traditional arguments about the nature of literature. If we look for other contiguous territories that I could have explored, the strongest candidate would probably be systematic thinking, or the ordered exposition of knowledge: psychology, sociology, philosophy, even science. Essentialists often select as the defining quality of literature the subordination of part to whole, the claim that no detail can be considered apart from its contribution to the total effect: a claim often stated in organic language. The same claim can be made (but

without the organic metaphor) for systematic knowledge, and a discussion of this frontier would have enabled us to explore the concepts of part and whole, and the uses of organicism. But in the end I was not convinced enough (or not fertile enough) to take on a fifth frontier.

But there is an alternative model of the territory of literature which I must pause to consider. It is possible to construct a frontier that is not taxonomic but evaluative, that sees in the territory beyond that frontier not history or verbal play, but bad novels, bad poems and bad plays.

At a first glance, this would seem to present no theoretical problem. Literature as taxonomic and as evaluative concept can each exist in its own discourse, and to say that bad novels are literature in one sense and not in the other seems a simple matter of being clear about the terminology. The complication arises when works of history or sermons or treatises in moral philosophy or autobiographies get raised, through their excellence, to the status of literature (it will clearly not be quite the same kind of excellence that makes them good history or good philosophy). If some of Plato's dialogues are regarded as literary masterpieces, this means that what began as philosophy can turn into poetry; but it clearly does not mean that all philosophy is aspiring to the condition of poetry, or that Leibnitz, Mill and Wittgenstein should be condemned because they do not show the same kind of imagination or verbal inventiveness. Dorothy Osborne's letters, which have given as much pleasure to later generations as they ever gave to William Temple, are often considered part of English literature, but if we had Temple's letters, and found them no more attractive than those of our great-uncle, we would not dismiss him as unworthy to be her husband. There is no ultimate justification for writing a novel unless it is a good one; but there is plenty of good reason for writing letters or sermons or history books which have no claim to be considered literature. It is possible to produce a work of literature by setting out to do so (in which case it might be good or bad) or by setting out to produce a different kind of writing and performing (without announcing that you are going to) one of the functions this book will be exploring.

But we must go further. Is it possible to separate the taxonomic from the evaluative? There have been schools of criticism (the Chicago Aristotelians, for example) who have firmly answered yes: both discussions are valid, but they are different, and the former must take place before we move to the latter. There have been



others (the *Scrutiny* critics, for instance) who have answered no: it is impossible to have any meaningful discussion of a text unless we ask, all the time, about its quality of felt life, its imaginative vision, its ability to realise its concepts in images. More recently, there have been critics who want to rule out evaluation completely, on ideological grounds: that it 'privileges' some kinds of work over others, and thus some classes of readers over others, and is therefore elitist. Such a critic might also reject the taxonomic concept of literature, on the grounds that no taxonomy is value-free, that the concept of 'literature' is a way of highly valuing (or 'privileging') certain kinds of writing. In this way, F.R. Leavis and Terry Eagleton are at one:<sup>5</sup> both refuse to admit any neutral, non-evaluative way of answering the question, What is Literature? They differ in that for Leavis it is a reason for accepting, in Eagleton a reason for interrogating the concept.

I will try to indicate the position taken by this book about evaluation, but it will not be easy, since in contrast to those above, it is not a clear-cut position. First, it is necessary to point out that value judgements are inescapable for pragmatic purposes. Publishers must decide which books to publish, which to reject; reviewers, which ones to discuss, which to ignore; judges, which to award the prizes to; readers, which are worth their time and money. In a world in which there is more available than one man can ever read, such a sifting process is essential, but evaluation is even more central to literature than that, for the very process of literary composition involves value judgement. Choice is value judgement, and writing is a continual series of choices – include or delete that adjective in the sentence, that sentence in the story, that story in the volume. The choice may be conscious and agonized, or it may be made instantly and unreflectingly, but there is always choice. Everything in a book might have been different, and if the author (or the reader) is satisfied with what there is that means it might have been worse.

But all this applies to any form of writing: historians, too, make choices, readers of history, too, have limited time. There is a second, more central sense in which literature involves questions of value. This is because the very idea of literature involves valuing highly the experience of reading certain books, and thus implicitly rating others lower. It involves, that is, the idea of a canon. A canon is a set of sacred books, and the meaning has become secularized to refer to those works chosen by consensus as embodying what is truly valuable in a subject, so there will be a