THE TAMING OF THE TEXT

EXPLORATIONS IN LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Edited by Willie Van Peer

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EDITOR

Willie Van Peer

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PREFACE

As it is a pleasant duty to acknowledge help, I would first of all like to thank the contributors for their generous and patient cooperation throughout the whole project of preparing the present volume. A sabbatical term from my own university and a fellowship from Clare Hall, Cambridge, have greatly facilitated the final stages of its preparation. Thanks are also due to Andrew Kennedy, for his invaluable comments on the introductory chapter.

Since the 'taming of texts' is essentially an experiment in social learning, I wish to express the hope that readers may *enjoy* the results of this joint enterprise. This is perhaps singularly important, as

> No profit grows where is no pleasure ta'en.
> (*The Taming of the Shrew*, I. i. 39)

W. Van Peer

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INTRODUCTION

Reading (literary) texts does not normally pose serious problems in daily life. Normally we know quite well how to deal with them. Most people, in watching a play, reading a novel, or listening to a poem, will hardly wonder at the nature of the event they are involved in. Unproblematic as such everyday forms of handling literary texts may be, they are not so from a theoretical point of view. For one thing, they do not guarantee a full understanding of the works under consideration. In fact the form and function of these texts make them into complex cultural phenomena, the understanding of which requires a long process of experience, producing knowledge about their structure and meaning as well as intuitive concepts and general expectations as to what such texts are and mean. As a result of this (literary) texts have become an object of study from the earliest times onwards. In our time their academic study is undertaken from a number of different vantage points. Generally, these may be divided into either linguistic or literary approaches. Although there has always been a keen sense of linguistic detail in literary studies, from Aristotle onwards, and although linguists have often displayed an attentive responsiveness to literature, the marriage between the two disciplines has not been a very stable one. While structuralism reigned, it seemed to flourish, especially in the works of eminent scholars

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such as Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukařovský or Claude Lévi-Strauss. The type of linguistic analysis undertaken by them generally appealed to both linguists and literary scholars.

This began to change, however, during the 1960s, when other more formal types of linguistic theory became fashionable. Subsequently, the relationship between linguistics and literature grew much colder, and it has not really been a very close one since. Sometimes happy moments are recorded, especially in the field of stylistics, which genuinely tries to combine both approaches to the study of literary texts. By and large, however, the situation may be characterized as one of mutual mistrust, sometimes of contempt. For instance, literary scholars frown upon linguists and their methods because of their formalism and their stubborn rationality. They feel that somehow the real 'literary' nature of the works studied is not done justice to, and they therefore prefer to exclude linguistics (and linguists) from their field of study altogether. Since literature also deals with emotions and with the irrational side of human existence, they feel that little help is to be expected from an all-too-narrowly-defined rational approach. The linguists, on the other hand, find fault with the looseness of terms and methods adopted by literary scholars, their superficial linguistic knowledge and their lack of system, as a result of which they also question the validity of conclusions arrived at in literary scholarship. They also feel that literary language *is* amenable to linguistic analysis.

Now it may be observed that whenever both disciplines keep within the narrow confines of their own field, no perceptible tension arises. As soon as they interact, however, all sorts of frictions may emerge. One may approach this dispute in a variety of ways. The one which has been tried hardest is that of *persuasion* of the other side. While interesting and sophisticated arguments have resulted from such efforts, the arguments have not been very successful at the job they were meant to do, i.e. to bring about a reconciliation, preferably even a cooperation, of linguistics and literary studies. Alternatively, while this state of affairs continues, one may also raise the question of *why* there is a quarrel in the first place. The results of such an enquiry may reveal underlying forces which bring about the processes of misunderstanding and antagonism. Perhaps one of the best ways to do this is to understand the quarrel in terms of different *definitions* of the field of study itself, involving different concepts of validity and different standards on how to proceed

in its development. At the same time, the tenacity with which the conflict continues reveals a fundamental indeterminacy in *each* of the disciplines concerned.

First of all, as a symptom of such indeterminacy, one may notice that the old pretences of linguists have worn off. When generative grammar emerged as a potential tool, linguists hardly doubted the merit of their contribution to the field of literary scholarship. For a moment it seemed as if a good number of intricate old problems were going to be solved in an efficient and elegant manner. I think it is fair to say that few linguists still hold such grand pretences. The generative approach soon found itself confronted with qualitatively new problems not foreseen in the earlier stages, which called for continuous repair work, involving so much energy that no attention could be spared to literary matters. Perhaps more important still, a number of other approaches were developed, such as psycholinguistics, socio-linguistics, pragmatics, text linguistics, discourse analysis and ethnography of communication, all of which promised a much closer link with the 'social' aspects of language than generative grammar had ever been able to offer. Trying to cope with all these changes was hard enough in itself, let alone their integration with literary studies. Thus the proliferation of methods and theories within linguistics and the failure of its most powerful model to fulfil its earlier promises has led to internal uncertainty, the perception of which has stimulated literary scholars to go their own way instead of waiting for the linguists to sort out their problems.

Literary studies, however, face their own difficulties too. Their internal cohesion, for instance, is not really very strong either: one finds semiotic studies next to hermeneutics, accompanied by psychoanalysis and historical approaches of various kinds; deconstruction next to structuralism, Marxism next to feminism, and so on. The consensus over what constitutes the right theoretical conceptualization and the most appropriate methods must be deemed very low indeed. Instead literary studies swim with the tide (which is largely driven by extra-literary forces), changing its aims and methodology according to the fashion of the day. And if no great illusions have been shattered in this field it is only because no hopes of integrating these various strands have been raised and no grand promises of solving the ever-present problems have been made. Again the fragmentation of the field into various methods (being partially incompatible) and

the inability to come up with generalizable insights and a coherent and systematic framework has produced a relative degree of uncertainty, and this in turn has strongly eroded the old splendour of literary studies. On close investigation, a number of the so-called 'literary' approaches are even imports from neighbouring fields, such as history, psychology, sociology, philosophy, even linguistics, raising the problem of what constitutes literary studies in its own right.

Thus the past decades have witnessed a growing number of changes in linguistics and literary studies. These have made things less uniform, less coherent and less clear from an overall theoretical point of view, thus introducing uncertainty into their practice. Uncertainty is hard to live with, however, also for scholars: some kind of self-assertion is needed. In a situation in which opposing claims to the definition of study exist, certainty may be gained by discrediting the definition of your opponents. Thus the uncertainty of both linguistic and literary approaches, resulting from internal forces in their respective fields, is projected outwards on to the other competing field, in order to gain back some kind of confidence through a mechanism of dissension. (If we are not that good at our job, we are certainly better than our neighbours.) It is this self-deception that has haunted both linguistic and literary approaches for some decades and which, seen from a distance, is perhaps only a defence mechanism hiding the epistemological unsteadiness that lurks beneath the surface.

It may be just as well, therefore, to analyse somewhat further the fundamental deficiencies revealed by both disciplines. One limitation lies in their *object* of analysis. To start with linguistics, the study of language has largely been confined to issues at the level of word and sentence, with little or no attention given to *supra-sentential* structure and meaning. But literature does not consist of words and sentences, but of texts. Although texts are made up of words and sentences, they also have their own specific structural qualities and their own potential for meaning which cannot be accounted for solely in terms of units at a lower level of organization. As a consequence, most linguistic approaches miss a fundamental ingredient of literature, its *textuality*. This danger is obviously avoided in literary approaches since these deal quite explicitly with texts and their meaning, albeit sometimes at the expense of other linguistic aspects. However, there is reason for concern here too. Literary

approaches by and large take the textuality of their study-object for granted, without much reflection on what exactly texts *are*. And although linguists may hardly have faced the nature of textuality, it is unmistakably the case that texts are largely *linguistic* structures. Thus the escape from linguistics is impossible, while linguistics cannot yet offer the necessary concepts and methods for study. A paradox.

Furthermore, in the same way that linguistics has been confined to the boundary of the sentence, literary studies have largely been limited to the study of individual texts, thereby impeding any progress in our knowledge of *supra-textual* phenomena. Admittedly, some efforts in this direction have been made, for instance in the study and comparison of authors, or of schools and traditions. Generally, however, this has not led to a coherent theoretical insight into the functional differentiation of literary types. What has been gained is a large body of data on individual texts and on some of their interrelationships. What is lacking is a good understanding of how these operate generally. This demands both a unified and a diversified theoretical approach at once: *unified* in the sense that all texts must somehow function in the same or similar way (that is why they are all 'texts'); *diversified* because different texts do different things to people – a satire is not a eulogy, and an epigram is not an epic.

The limitations to sentence and to text, typical of the linguistic and the literary approach, indeed calls for such a unified yet diversified perspective. It calls firstly for a *theoretical* perspective: how to understand textuality and its functioning in society; what institutional constraints operate over it and what forms are generally available for realizing certain of these functions; what general questions are to be framed and how to answer them. As may be appreciated, theory in this stage will be but the *beginning* of raising questions; the formulation of answers is not to be expected overnight. Yet, for all the difficulties involved, the issue of theory can no longer be avoided.

Secondly, the situation calls for a *typological* differentiation. The problem of how literature is distinct from other text types, for instance, is still largely unsolved. The fact that some non-literary texts display 'literary' characteristics poses complex problems. Yet this does not logically entail that the very concept of literature has thereby become empty. Most people can quite easily tell the difference between a romance and a recipe. Comparisons of

literary and non-literary texts make us consider the similarities and (apparent) differences, as well as their distinctive features with greater scrutiny and caution. But literature is not a monolithic concept in itself either. Instead it is composed of different genres (narrative, drama, poetry), each of which itself consists of various sub-genres (folk-tale, epic, novel, short story...) and further subdivisions which at all levels may combine into amalgamated forms. What is needed, then, is a range of different text types, literary and non-literary, to be analysed from a theoretical perspective. Needless to say, such an approach will have to face the basic issue of textuality and its social functioning, and will have to try to overcome the traditional limits imposed by the linguist's concentration on sign and sentence, and the literary student's virtually exclusive attention to individual texts or authors.

The limitation to sentence and text, and its consequences for the theoretical and typological study of literature, as outlined in the previous paragraphs, is only one shortcoming of these approaches. A second one lies in their often unidimensional view of the communication process itself. A simple face-to-face interaction, in which a speaker communicates a message to an addressee is taken as a *model* for written forms of (literary) discourse, without much reflection on how adequate such a model might be. Looked at in detail, however, all sorts of problems arise from this analogy. First of all, it presupposes some direct relationship between thought and language, so that the words uttered by the speaker are only the verbal wrapping of the ideas that make up the 'message'. It is obvious that the application of such a concept runs into serious problems when applied to complex cultural phenomena, such as literary texts. Secondly, the assumption that there is a direct relationship between speaker (author) and addressee (reader) is simply to be refuted on empirical grounds. It is typical for written texts to be communicated across time and space, regardless of the intention of writer and reader. Thirdly, the model assumes a uniformity and substantiality of its components that may be highly idealized and therefore shows little correspondence to the situation in reality. Is the author really only one 'voice'? Certainly in the novel various voices are heard, not only of characters but also of narrators. Who are we then to associate with the author's voice? Often this may be unproblematic, but that does not dispose of the tricky cases. Irony and satire illustrate the point, as does Shakespeare's theatre; the debates surrounding the interpretations of his plays demonstrate that the application of a simple

communicative model, even when modified or enriched (for instance in contemporary semiotics), must be largely misconceived. That the readership of literary texts is similarly multifarious is so evident that it need not be demonstrated here. But the same is true of the 'message', i.e. the text itself. Its uniformity is certainly a chimera in narrative and drama. There a multitude of styles, registers and dialects may be heard. In poetry, as well, the situation may not be so simple: conflicting norms and conventions may put the poet under the obligation to meet contradictory demands, resulting in choices that still bear the traces of the stylistic conflicts the author was involved in.

In this sense the title of the present volume already presents an ambiguity: the text may be either the subject or the object of the 'taming'. As various contributions show, texts may also function as instruments of conservative or repressive ideologies. What these studies do, then, is open up such conventions and expose these practices, while simultaneously demonstrating the texts' potential for creating *new* modes of experience. Studying texts from such a perspective reveals all sorts of taming. It is with the description and analysis of these processes, their origins and their outcomes, at different levels, and relating to different domains, that the present collection of studies is concerned.

In sum, then, the *model* of textual communication that is often taken for granted must be viewed with suspicion, if not replaced by more realistic ones. Again, such a model may need subtle adaptations for various text types. In order to refine our knowledge in this respect, then, a concentration on *methods* to study the texts can hardly be avoided. The traditional linguistic model, be it of a Jakobsonian or Chomskyan type, will not do. Nor will more recent cognitive or semiotic models as long as they take the basic 'sender-message-receiver' picture as their underlying model. But the literary approach, concentrating on the historical author and his personality, or on interpreting the text as a 'message' the author wished us to share in, similarly falls into the trap of oversimplifying the real nature of literary discourse. The methods for avoiding such traps are perhaps few at the moment, and one might do well to be reasonably eclectic on this side. Traditional linguistic and literary methods should be combined (and not felt to be at odds) with more recent developments in text-linguistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis and reception theory. Admittedly, these are but young twigs growing on an old tree; yet their contribution may be of high importance for the vitality of the tree as a whole.

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