AN INTRODUCTION TO LITERARY STUDIES

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ROUTLEDGE

An Introduction to Literary Studies

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For Bernadette, Johanna and Moritz

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Preliminary remarks

This concise introduction provides a general survey of various aspects of textual studies for college students who intend to specialize in English or American literature and want to acquire a basic familiarity with the entire field. The book targets both the European and American college market: it is not only designed for beginners in the European system, where students have to specialize in one or two disciplines upon entering university, but it also meets the requirements for American undergraduates who have opted for a major in English and need an introduction to the more scholarly aspects of literary studies, one which goes beyond freshman Introduction to Literature courses. It therefore serves as a textbook for Introduction to English Literature classes at all major European universities or advanced undergraduate English (honors) courses in the USA and as an independent study guide. Its simple language and accessible style make the book equally apt for English native speakers as well as

students of English Literature whose native language is other than English.

Unlike most of the existing American textbooks geared toward freshman Introduction to Literature courses, which emphasize the first-hand reading of primary texts, this book targets a slightly more advanced audience interested in the scholarly aspects of literature. The book does not include entire literary texts, but rather draws on a number of very short excerpts to illustrate major issues of literary studies as an academic discipline.

An Introduction deals with questions concerning the nature of "literature" and "text," discusses the three major textual genres, as well as film and its terminology, gives an overview of the most important periods of Literatures in English, and raises issues of literary theory. A separate section explains basic research and composition techniques pertinent for the beginner. An extensive glossary of the major literary and cinematic terms gives easy and quick access to terminological information and also serves as a means to test one's knowledge when preparing for exams.

In order to meet the expectations of contemporary textual studies, major emphasis is placed on the accessibility of literary theory for beginners. All major schools and approaches, including the latest developments, are presented with reference to concrete textual examples. Film is integrated as a fourth genre alongside fiction, poetry and drama to highlight the interdependence of literature and film in both artistic production and scholarly inquiry. The chapters on basic research and composition techniques explain today's standard computational facilities such as the online use of the *MLA International Bibliography* as well as the most important rules of the *MLA Style Sheet* and guidelines for research papers.

The book owes a great deal to my interaction with students in the Introduction to Literature classes which I taught at the American Studies and Comparative Literature Departments of the University of Innsbruck. I also owe thanks for suggestions and critical comments to friends and colleagues, including Sonja Bahn, Gudrun M. Grabher, Monika Messner, Wolfgang Koch and Elliott Schreiber. Large parts of the book were written during an Erwin Schrödinger Fellowship at the *Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities* in Santa Monica

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Chapter 1

What is literature, what is a text?

Look up the term **literature** in any current encyclopedia and you will be struck by the vagueness of its usage as well as an inevitable lack of substance in the attempts to define it. In most cases, literature is referred to as the entirety of written expression, with the restriction that not every written document can be categorized as literature in the more exact sense of the word. The definitions, therefore, usually include additional adjectives such as "aesthetic" or "artistic" to distinguish literary works from texts of everyday use such as telephone books, newspapers, legal documents and scholarly writings.

Etymologically, the Latin word "litteratura" is derived from "littera" (letter), which is the smallest element of alphabetical writing. The word **text** is related to "textile" and can be translated as "fabric": just as single threads form a fabric, so words and sentences form a meaningful and coherent text. The origins of the two central terms are, therefore, not of great help in defining literature or text. It is

more enlightening to look at literature or text as cultural and historical phenomena and to investigate the conditions of their production and reception.

Underlying literary production is certainly the human wish to leave behind a trace of oneself through creative expression, which will exist detached from the individual and, therefore, outlast its creator. The earliest manifestations of this creative wish are prehistoric paintings in caves, which hold "encoded" information in the form of visual signs. This visual component inevitably remains closely connected to literature throughout its various historical and social manifestations. In some periods, however, the pictorial dimension is pushed into the background and is hardly noticeable.

Not only the visual – writing is always pictorial – but also the acoustic element, the spoken word, is an integral part of literature, for the alphabet translates spoken words into signs. Before writing developed as a system of signs, whether pictographs or alphabets, "texts" were passed on orally. This predecessor of literary expression, called "oral poetry," consisted of texts stored in a bard's or minstrel's memory which could be recited upon demand. It is assumed that most of the early classical and Old English epics were produced in this tradition and only later preserved in written form. This oral component, which runs counter to the modern way of thinking about texts, has been revived in our century through the medium of radio and other sound carriers. Audio-literature and the lyrics of songs display the acoustic features of literary phenomena.

The visual in literary texts, as well as the oral dimension, has been pushed into the background in the course of history. While in the Middle Ages the visual component of writing was highly privileged in such forms as richly decorated handwritten manuscripts, the arrival of the modern age – along with the invention of the printing press – made the visual element disappear or reduced it to a few illustrations in the text. "Pure" writing became more and more stylized as an abstract medium devoid of traces of material or physical elements. The medieval union of word and picture, in which both components of the text formed a single, harmonious entity and even partly overlapped, slowly disappeared. This modern "iconoclasm" not only restricts the visual dimensions of texts but also sees writing as a

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medium which can function with little connection to the acoustic element of language.

It is only in drama that the union between the spoken word and visual expression survives in a traditional literary genre, although this feature is not always immediately noticeable. Drama, which is – traditionally and without hesitation – viewed as literature, combines the acoustic and the visual elements, which are usually classified as non-literary. Even more obviously than in drama, the symbiosis of word and image culminates in film. This young medium is particularly interesting for textual studies, since word and picture are recorded and, as in a book, can be looked up at any time. Methods of literary and textual criticism are, therefore, frequently applied to the cinema and acoustic media. Computer hypertexts and networks such as the *Internet* are the latest hybrids of the textual and various media; here writing is linked to sounds, pictures or even video clips within an interdependent network. Although the written medium is obviously the main concern in the study of literature or texts, this field of inquiry is also closely related to other media such as the stage, painting, film, music or even computer networks.

As a result of the permeation of modern textual studies with unusual media, there have been major controversies as to the definition of "text." Many authors and critics have deliberately left the traditional paths of literature, abandoning old textual forms in order to find new ways of literary expression and analysis. Visual and acoustic elements are being reintroduced into literature, and media, genres, text types and discourses are being mixed.

1 Genre, text type and discourse

Literary criticism, like biology, resorts to the concept of evolution or development and to criteria of classification to distinguish various genres. The former area is referred to as *literary history*, whereas the latter is termed *poetics*. Both fields are closely related to the issue at hand, as every attempt to define text or literature touches not only upon differences between genres but also upon the historical dimensions of these literary forms of expression.

The term **genre** usually refers to one of the three classical literary forms of *epic, drama,* or *poetry*. This categorization is slightly confusing as the epic occurs in verse, too, but is not classified as poetry. It is, in fact, a precursor of the modern novel (i.e., prose fiction) because of its structural features such as plot, character presentation and narrative perspective. Although this old classification is still in use, the tendency today is to abandon the term "epic" and introduce "prose," "fiction" or "prose fiction" for the relatively young literary forms of the novel and the short story.

Beside the genres which describe general areas of traditional literature, the term **text type** has been introduced, under the influence of linguistics. Texts which cannot be categorized under the canonical genres of fiction, drama and poetry are now often dealt with in modern linguistics. Scholars are looking at texts which were previously regarded as worthless or irrelevant for textual analysis. The term text type refers to highly conventional written documents such as instruction manuals, sermons, obituaries, advertising texts, catalogues, and scientific or scholarly writing. It can, of course, also include the three main literary genres and their sub-genres.

A further key term in theoretical treatises on literary phenomena is **discourse**. Like text type, it is used as a term for any kind of classifiable linguistic expression. It has become a useful denotation for various linguistic conventions referring to areas of content and theme; for instance, one may speak of male or female, political, sexual, economic, philosophical and historical discourse. The classifications for these forms of linguistic expression are based on levels of content, vocabulary, syntax, as well as stylistic and rhetorical elements. Whereas the term text type refers to written documents, discourse includes written and oral expression.

In sum, *genre* is applied primarily to the three classical forms of the literary tradition; *text type* is a broader term that is also applicable to "non-canonical" written texts, i.e., those which are traditionally not classified as literature. *Discourse* is the broadest term, referring to a variety of written and oral manifestations which share common thematic or structural features. The boundaries of these terms are not fixed and vary depending on the context in which they appear.

2 Primary and secondary sources

Traditional literary studies distinguish between the artistic object, or *primary source,* and its scholarly treatment in a critical text, or *secondary source*. **Primary sources** denote the traditional objects of analysis in literary criticism, including texts from all literary genres, such as fiction, poetry or drama.

The term **secondary source** applies to texts such as **articles** (or *essays*), *book reviews* and *notes* (brief comments on a very specific topic), all of which are published primarily in scholarly journals. In Anglo-American literary criticism, as in any other academic discipline, regularly published **journals** inform readers about the latest results of researchers (see Chapter 5). Essays are also published as **collections** (or *anthologies*) compiled by one or several editors on a specific theme. If such an anthology is published in honor of a famous researcher, it is often called a **festschrift**, a term which comes from the German but is also used in English. Book-length scholarly treatises on a single theme are called **monographs**. Most dissertations and scholarly books published by university presses belong to this group.

In terms of content, secondary literature tries to uphold those standards of scholarly practice which have, over time, been established for scientific discourse, including objectivity, documentation of sources and general validity. It is vital for any reader to be able to check and follow the arguments, results and statements of literary criticism. As the interpretation of texts always contains subjective traits, objective criteria or the general validity of the thesis can only be applied or maintained to a certain degree. This can be seen as the main difference between literary criticism and the natural sciences. At the same time, it is the basis for the tremendous creative potential of this academic field. With changes of perspective and varying methodological approaches, new results in the interpretation of texts can be suggested. As far as documentation of sources is concerned, however, the requirements in literary criticism are as strict as those of the natural sciences. The reader of a secondary source should be able to retrace every quotation or paraphrase (summary) to the primary or secondary source from which it has been taken. Although varying and subjective opinions on texts will remain, the scholarly documentation of the

sources should permit the reader to refer back to the original texts and thus make it possible to compare results and judge the quality of the interpretation.

As a consequence of these conventions in documentation, a number of formal criteria have evolved in literary criticism which can be summarized by the term **critical apparatus**, which includes the following elements: *footnotes* or *endnotes*, providing comments on the main text or references to further secondary or primary sources; a *bibliography* (or *list of works cited*); and, possibly, an *index*. This documentation format has not always been followed in scholarly texts, but it has developed into a convention in the field over the last several centuries (see also Chapter 6).

forms of secondary sources	**publishing media**
essay (article)	journal
note	anthology (collection)
book review	*festschrift*
review article	book
monograph	

formal aspects of secondary literature	**aspects of content**
footnotes	objectivity
bibliography	lucid arguments
index	general validity of thesis
quotations	

The strict separation of primary from secondary sources is not always easy. The literary **essay** of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is a historical example which shows that our modern classification did not exist in rigid form in earlier periods. This popular genre treated a clearly defined, abstract or theoretical topic in overtly literary language, and thus possessed the stylistic features of primary sources; however, the themes and questions that it dealt with are typical for scholarly texts or secondary sources. From a modern perspective, therefore, the literary essay bridges two text types.

In the twentieth century, the traditional classification of primary and secondary sources is often deliberately neglected. A famous example from literature in English is T.S. Eliot's (1888–1965) modernist poem *The Waste Land* (1922), in which the American poet includes footnotes (a traditional element of secondary sources) in the primary text. In the second half of the twentieth century, this feature has been further developed and employed in two ways: elements of secondary sources are added to literary texts, and elements of primary sources – e.g., the absence of a critical apparatus or an overtly literary style – are incorporated in secondary texts. The strict separation of the two text types is therefore not always possible.

Vladimir Nabokov's (1899–1977) novel *Pale Fire* (1962) is an example of the deliberate confusion of text types in American literature. *Pale Fire* consists of parts – for instance, the text of a poem – which can be labeled as primary sources, but also of other parts which are normally characteristic of scholarly treatises or critical editions of texts, such as a "Foreword" by the editor of the poem, a "Commentary" with stylistic analysis as well as critical comments on the text, and an "Index" of the characters in the poem. In the (fictitious) foreword signed by the (fictitious) literary critic Charles Kinbote, Nabokov introduces a poem by the (fictitious) author Francis Shade. Nabokov's novel borrows the form of a *critical edition*, in which the traditional differentiation between literary text and scholarly commentary or interpretation remains clearly visible. In the case of *Pale Fire*, however, all text types are created by the author Vladimir Nabokov himself, who tries to point out the arbitrariness of this artificial categorization of primary and secondary sources. The fact that this text is named a novel, even though it has a poem at its center, calls attention to the relativity inherent in the traditional categorization of genres.

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