

Geoffrey Strickland

STRUCTURALISM OR CRITICISM?

Thoughts on how we read



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GEOFFREY STRICKLAND

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE

MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park, Melbourne 3206, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1981

First published 1981

Printed in Great Britain by
Western Printing Services Ltd, Bristol

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Strickland, Geoffrey

Structuralism or criticism?

1. French Literature – History and criticism
2. Criticism
3. English Literature – History and criticism

I. Title

840'.9 PQ71 80-40721

ISBN 0 521 23184 1

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For Nicholas and Peter

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book began to take shape during a series of weekly discussions in the University of Reading in 1974 among students of literature in various departments. We called our meetings an 'inter-departmental course on criticism' and they were meant to air problems of common concern. Few of those who came would, I imagine, say they were an unqualified success. The claims of various 'isms', including what was known for convenience as 'traditionalism', were debated for hours on end. And though good feeling prevailed and people seemed to want to agree or at least persuade others to see their own point of view, many meetings ended with our having nothing to take away but an agreement to differ. We weren't using words in the same way.

My conviction – which I certainly wasn't alone in holding – that there was something wrong with such a situation and that a remedy ought to be found led me to set out the reflections which follow. I have done so in the possibly quixotic belief that, despite our frequent failure to identify them, there must be certain things on which those who read and talk about what they read can agree, for all their often salutary differences; that certain common assumptions are possible and hence a common language in which even the differences can be expressed. My first acknowledgment must therefore be to colleagues and students who, unintentionally, convinced me that the book was worth writing.

Two colleagues in particular helped me to rewrite the first drafts by telling me at length what they thought of them: Michael Proudfoot of the Department of Philosophy, who also gave me valuable advice for further reading, and Walter Redfern of the Department of French. I have also received help and advice from Professor E. D. Hirsch, from Dr Jan Horvat and from Professor W. W. Robson. For painstaking and valuable assistance in rewriting and planning the final drafts, I am indebted to Mr Michael Black of the Cambridge University Press. For typing this and previous versions

I must thank Mrs Mava Quinlan, who has had to see her beautiful typing vandalised several times, and Mrs Erika Stockbridge.

Much of Chapter 2 appeared originally in *The Cambridge Quarterly* and whole paragraphs in the concluding chapter of the book are taken from a broadcast lecture I gave on the criticism of F. R. Leavis in 1976 for the Open University. Permission to reproduce these is gratefully acknowledged here.

Finally, I should express my gratitude to the Leverhulme Foundation for a Fellowship which enabled me to spend a year writing the book in its present form.

GEOFFREY STRICKLAND

Department of French
University of Reading
November 1979

A NOTE ON THE QUOTATIONS

Many quotations from French authors are given here in my own translation. Page references are to the French originals. Where page references are to an English translation of a foreign work, the translation is not my own.

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PART I

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION READING AS DISTINCT FROM TALKING OR WRITING ABOUT BOOKS

Understanding is silent, interpretation extremely garrulous.

(E. D. Hirsch)

It is generally assumed that there is what has been called an art – some would say a science – of reading that can be acquired over many years of training in schools and universities and is exemplified in good criticism. Reading, of course, in a restricted sense. It is something more highly developed than the elementary skills of literacy, yet, at the same time, no one would claim that it is a matter of interpreting any piece of writing with expertise. The good critic, it is acknowledged, may be a poor linguist and capable of reading fewer foreign languages and understanding them less well than a professional interpreter, an air hostess or a German politician. Nor will he be expected to understand a manual of electronics or even a piece of ordinary technical philosophy. His skill will be apparent in what he says or writes about poetry, fiction, drama and those works of history or philosophy which call for no specialised knowledge and no other kind of skill for their interpretation. It may be apparent too, according to those who have been influenced by the writings of F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson in England or Roland Barthes in France, in his reading of newspapers, advertisements, politicians' rhetoric and the catch-phrases of popular culture.

It would be absurd to deny that such a skill could exist or that different people might possess it in varying degrees. But what is difficult, on any level of sophistication, is to answer the question: how do you know it is being exercised and that a particular reading of the words on the page is correct, especially if by 'the words on the page' we mean the words understood as the author intended them to be? It is true that disagreements as to how one should read them are often resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned, and one may be grateful to a teacher, a friend or the work of a critic for having opened one's eyes to what one now sees as the true or full meaning of a poem. But it is unlikely that anyone who has enjoyed this

experience will be able to say what general principle or rule he happened to violate when he misread the poem in the first place, and how he might avoid making such a mistake again. This is probably why, though many attempts have been made to formulate such rules and principles, there is none, apart from simple caveats such as Plutarch's reminder that poets tell deliberate lies, which has commanded for long any general assent.¹

Something else that is difficult – in fact, practically impossible – is to know whether the academic study of literature has proved, on balance, a blessing or a curse.² A blessing of course, it would be said by many of the academics themselves and by those who assume that people in their position must know what they're talking about. Yet is there any way in which this is obvious? At least, it might be said, it has ensured that the great poets and novelists of the past continue to be read, just as the schools of the Greek and Roman *grammatikoi* helped to preserve the reputation of a canon of poets, dramatists, orators and historians. Possibly. But the reputation of Shakespeare in England spread and became established centuries before he became the object of 'commentary' and 'appreciation' in universities and schools. That of Dickens was made by his unschooled readers, and it was not to university or adult education audiences that he delivered his public readings.³ The idea of a canon of literary classics is, in any case, becoming increasingly unfashionable in schools and universities themselves. Literature is coming more and more to be regarded as a branch of sociology or linguistics. Writings of avowedly ephemeral interest are coming to dominate the syllabus, to the point where in America, according to E. D. Hirsch (*The aims of interpretation*, p. 136), 'little remains that the underground can call its own'. In some universities, it is now possible for a student to take a good degree in French without having read either Racine or Flaubert. Even among those who profess to take the idea of the literary classic seriously, there is an understandable tendency to question established reputations or to want to add to the list, and it would be outrageous to wish that things should be otherwise. As a result, the list of 'major authors' now far exceeds any possible syllabus, and the idea of the 'well-read' man or woman comes to seem increasingly unreal as the years go by. It may be impossible to revive the customs and pieties of antiquity, but there was a purely practical advantage in the creation of a canon which included only ten works in every genre. It ensured, if nothing else, the existence of a common culture

among the literate classes of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds and one extending over many generations.

The question whether the so-called teaching of literature has been of general benefit to humanity is, of course, impossible to answer. There is no conceivable form of investigation that would enable us to weigh the cost against the advantages and only a biased or unquestioning mind will reply unhesitatingly in the negative or – dare I say? – affirmative. Someone may ask, of course, ‘What harm can it do?’ And the question needs to be asked, but if anyone doubts that it can do harm, he ought perhaps to read John Newton’s article in *The Cambridge Quarterly*, ‘Literary criticism, universities, murder’. Newton points out, with copious illustrations, how much better, from any point of view, a first-year undergraduate can write on the poetry of Donne than his or her elders and betters, reputed academic critics for whom the prolonged study of literature seems to have become only a conventional chore. Matthew Arnold says somewhere that one can read too much poetry, and anyone who believes that enforced exposure to literature is, at the worst, harmless should consider how often intelligent young people are dismayed by its apparent effect on the minds of those who have been exposed to it for years; also how often a normally sensitive boy or girl has been made to hate poetry by being made to write or talk about it in words which have then been held up for kindly or unkind ridicule. The love of poetry can be an intensely private affair.⁴ Glibness is not the guarantee of either insight or sensitivity.

However, it is not with the possible consequences of the universal and compulsory study of literature during the last hundred years that this book is concerned, valuable though it might be to know more than we do of the history of that particular educational reform. My purpose is rather to suggest what, by the nature of things and at any time, reading and critical discussion is able and unable to achieve.

Among the objects which critical discussion is unable to achieve, we are often told, is the communication to someone else of anything resembling a fact or a precept; that is, an addition to knowledge to be taken on trust. This has been said with some firmness by, for example, Roland Barthes, in his *Leçon inaugurale prononcée au Collège de France*; F. R. Leavis, who happened for this reason to dislike even referring to himself as a ‘teacher’ and John Newton in the article I have already mentioned. Newton writes:

Poetry can be studied, but the study of it can't be taught. So it had better *not* be taught. Some people would say that in that case it has no place in a university. I'm inclined to say that, on the contrary, it is therefore an ideal study for a university. The idea of a university that is being taken for granted by those people who think the opposite is a widespread one but seems to me barbaric . . .
 ('Literary criticism, universities, murder', p. 348)

That 'study', one may agree, involves constant discussion and exchange. Otherwise, the university would only be what it often is in reality, a university merely in name. Yet is discussion and exchange of what one has seen and understood *indispensable* to understanding? Newton doesn't assume this, nor can I think of any reason why one should.

Jane Austen or John Clare would not have needed to be told that the ability to read well has nothing necessarily to do with anything one writes or says or anything else one does, apart from reading. If this is not always obvious in our age of compulsory literary appreciation, it is because of the tenacity of the view I am questioning: that the study of literature in schools and universities is, *ipso facto*, worthwhile in that it consists in something more than mere solitary reading. A student of chemistry, it is assumed, can only become proficient by performing experiments, a mathematician by solving mathematical problems and a student of literature by writing critical commentaries and essays.

Yet for the student of literature, the equivalent – if one can talk of an equivalent at all – of solving the problem is the act of reading itself. As E. D. Hirsch has argued (cf. pp. 27–8 below), there is a sense in which the often effortless deciphering of the words on the page entails the solving of problems, even if these are solved instantaneously and unselfconsciously. We hear a great deal, especially in the rubric of examination papers, about something called literary 'analysis'. But analysis here is something very different from analysis in other academic disciplines and the reason seems to lie in what Roland Barthes has spoken of ('Ecrivains, intellectuels, professeurs', p. 9) as a characteristic of the human as distinct from the physical sciences: the impossibility of a 'method' to which one could attribute a 'result'. Barthes slightly over-simplifies the matter and seems to forget that there are such things as statistical surveys and word-counts. These, however, can only be used to answer certain types of question, questions of characteristic usage and authorship notably. Where the analysis of a text does not involve counting,

the answer to any question one asks about it is a matter of simple confirmation or otherwise – yes, there is ambiguity here; no, this reading is syntactically impossible – and this seems to be true of literary analysis even at its most searching and subtle. In F. R. Leavis's commentary on Thomas Hardy's 'After a journey', for example (*The living principle*, pp. 127–34 and pp. 174–5 below), we are shown how all the elements in the poem combine to give reality to an experience of a remarkable kind, the remarkableness lying in the effective presence of the intelligence and character of a man reliving his past. I know of no piece of criticism which shows with such precision the complexity and coherence of effect which characterise the reading of a major poem. When I deny that criticism of this kind resembles in any way the performance of an experiment, I am not trying to say that Leavis merely tells us what he happened, without search or reflection, to notice when he was reading Hardy's poem. He himself reminds us constantly how much discussion and exchange are part of 'what we call analysis' (e.g. *English literature in our time and the university*, p. 48) and those who knew him may agree that his best thoughts seemed to come to him when he was thinking and reading aloud in discussion with a congenial audience. I have sometimes been asked to explain the Leavisian 'method', but Leavis himself never claimed that his way of expounding something, with its constant implicit appeal for confirmation, even if 'deliberate' and sustained by a concern for what he called 'relevance', was either methodical or systematic.

There are, of course, other kinds of literary 'analysis'. It may be a matter of pedagogic drill, a way of ensuring that no one in the classroom is left behind, as in the reading of a passage in a Greek or Roman school, calling for the establishment and correction of a common written text; the recitation of the passage; the *exegesis* or explanation of etymologies, learned and technical allusions and the genealogies of gods and heroes; the *krisis* or drawing of a moral from the tale. Something similar has survived into our own lifetimes in the French *explication de texte*, again a schoolroom exercise whose continued practice in the university can be partly explained by the fact that the conclusion of a student's university career is the oral examination of the *agrégation*, in which his examiners include school inspectors and he is judged for his pedagogic as well as intellectual gifts. Analysis here too is (explicitly) a matter of explanation rather than discovery and the rules of the exercise a matter of convention.

It would be absurd to pretend that they are any more than conventions and as absurd to object to them as such as to quarrel with the conventions of polite behaviour that enable strangers to know where they are with one another, to feel at ease and communicate freely.

It is, however, with reading that may or may not give rise to critical discussion that the reflections which follow are concerned. I prefer to leave open the question whether or how the ability to read can be taught and I do not presume to offer any method of criticism. I hope simply that what I am saying will help to clear away some of the current misconceptions surrounding the uniquely human gift for communicating over space and time.

It may be noticed that I have avoided using the word 'literature' in the title of this book, though the reading of novels, poetry and drama is what I mainly discuss and though it will interest mainly those who like myself are students of literature. The word is indispensable. We all know, broadly speaking, what it means in its various contexts, including that of the last lines of Verlaine's *Art poétique*. And misunderstanding only arises when we try to define it more precisely than anyone else: when we try to discover some necessary and sufficient condition which is met by, say, Shelley's 'Masque of Anarchy' or Gorki's autobiography and not by the national anthem or the memoirs of Sir Harold Wilson.

It is debatable whether, strictly speaking – that is from the point of view of philosophy – literature exists. It certainly has not existed for some of the greatest philosophers. This is why attempts to delimit rigorously a realm of what has been described as 'literary understanding' or 'literary communication' have generally failed to carry conviction, command general assent or achieve anything comparable to a breakthrough in molecular biology. How we understand what we read is the concern of philosophy but it is a matter here of what we understand in general. I shall not be arguing therefore as if I thought that the study of literature gave rise to philosophical problems not encountered when considering other, non-literary, kinds of writing or utterance; just as I shall not be assuming that the study of literature is a specialised study calling for specialised skills. The belief that it is such a study and that the ability to understand and appreciate one author – say Racine – necessarily implies an ability to read others – say Shakespeare – has been, as we know, in the past, one of the main causes of blindness and pedantry. This can be seen