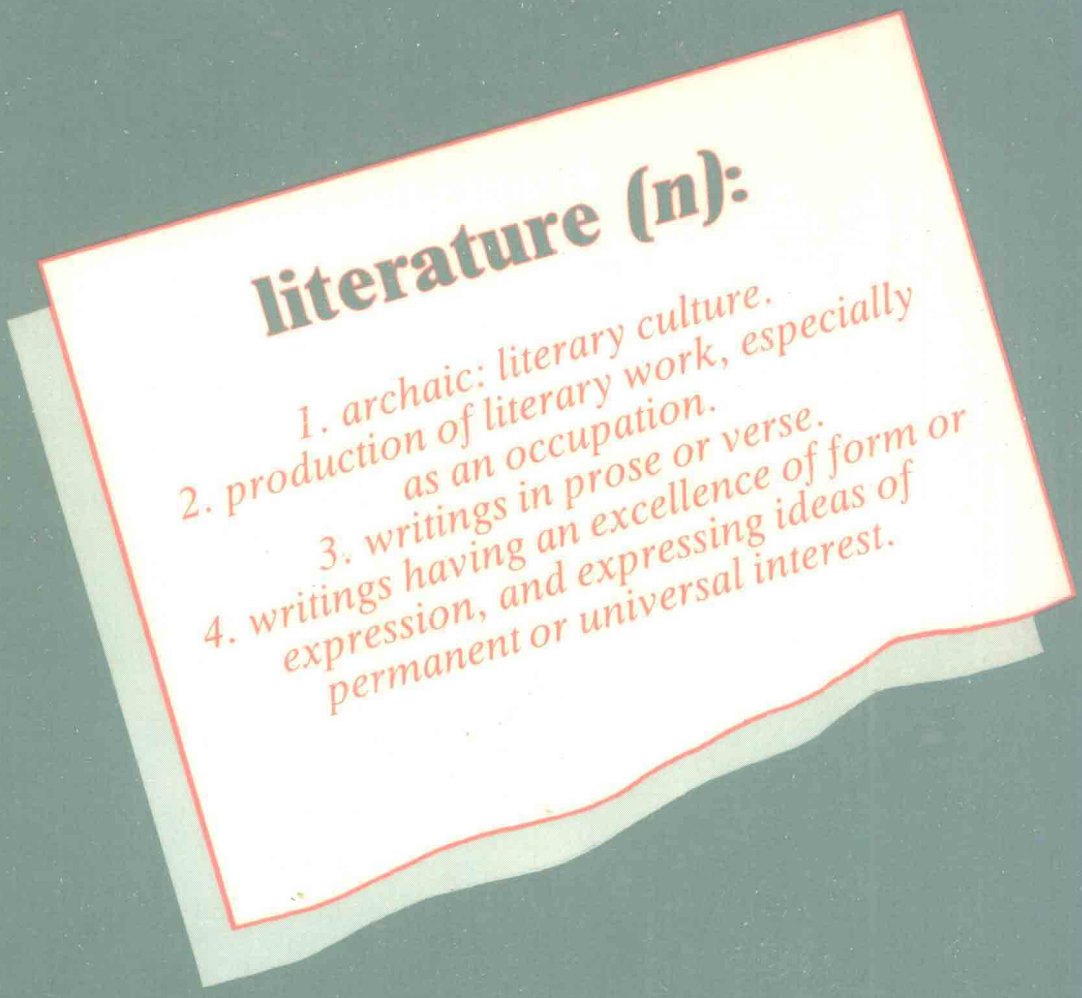

THE·LANGUAGE·OF·LITERATURE

A stylistic introduction to the study of literature

Michael Cummings & Robert Simmons

Pergamon Institute of English

The Language of Literature

A stylistic introduction to the study of literature

by

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for

Elinor M. Cummings

and

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Foreword

This is how the authors describe their purpose in writing the book: it is "to make the student a stylistician, someone who can comprehend literary texts through a comprehension of their language structures. Someone who can say not only 'I know what I like' but also 'I know why I like it, because I know how it works'."

Perhaps the first step towards becoming a stylistician, as the authors envisage the task, will be to recognize that literature is made of language. Not, of course, in the sense that architecture is made out of steel and concrete; steel and concrete are formless until some pattern is imposed on them by the builder. Language on the contrary is not formless, and this suggests that a closer analogy to the way literature is made of language would be the way that dancing is made out of movement of the body. Dancing starts from everyday actions like leaping and balancing and reaching, and these too are not formless; they are already highly orchestrated, "meaningful" patterns of bodily movement. But out of these patterns, further patterns can be created; and it is when we become aware of second-order patterns of this kind that we come to recognize something we call dancing, or bodily art.

To say that literature is made of language, therefore, is in no way to deny that it has a special status as verbal art. We may readily accept that there is some distinctive quality about certain texts which, however difficult it may be to define (as are many of the experiences we find most real), nevertheless stands out: there is a remarkable consensus on the question of what is literature and what is not. It is simply to point out that, whatever the special patterns and properties may be that lead us to refer to something as a literary text, they are there, so to speak, by courtesy; their existence depends on the patterning that already subsists in the (far from raw) material out of which all texts are made. It is also, we should add, to leave quite open the question whether, and in what sense, such special patterns are there at all; whether the property of "being literature" is an attribute of the text itself, or of some aspect of its environment — the context of the situation, perhaps, or the mental set of a particular listener or reader.

Language is meaningful activity. It is often taken to be the paradigm form of the act of meaning — the core of human semiotic, and a model (a descriptive norm) for all other forms of meaningful behaviour. Simply in order to understand the nature of language, whether we have any concept of

literature or not, we have to be sensitive to patterns of meaning on all levels: the arrangement of phonic or graphic symbols, and the lexicogrammatical and semantic organization, present in every kind of text. Categories like rhythm, structural balance, metaphor, even depth of vision, that typically occur in the language of stylistic analysis, are not the monopoly of literature; they are part of the conceptual apparatus that has to be constructed to account for language in any guise. There are few, possibly no, linguistic categories that will appear in the description of literary texts which may not also be found in the analysis of texts of other, non-literary orders.

Students of literature sometimes feel that when linguists maintain that this strongly patterned quality, instead of being distinctive of verbal art, is in fact inherent in all use of language, they are somehow downgrading literature to an uninspired, and uninspiring, level of their own. But this is not so. Rather the contrary: by showing that language is intrinsically patterned in ways which are often thought of as being the prerogative of literature, we are really upgrading language, revealing something of its amazing complexity and depth, and so shedding some light on the otherwise unanswerable question of how it acquires its miraculous powers — including the power of creating literature.

By analysing a literary text as a verbal artefact, we are asserting its status as literature. There is no need for a stylistician to apologize for approaching it in this way. Not so long ago, "stylistics" was often seen as rather threatening; the linguistic analysis of a literary work would be denounced almost as if it was an indecent act, an uncouth violation of its integrity. To study the grammar of a poem was to destroy its vitality and inhibit the natural appreciation of its poetic qualities. Yet the experience of those who learnt to analyse a text proved to be quite the opposite. Far from damaging the object, or one's perception of it, the act of close and thoughtful linguistic analysis turns out to enhance one's awareness and enjoyment. What seemed flat becomes rounded, what was rounded has still further dimensions added to it. We might use this observation to supplement the triad of text, context of situation and reader: a fourth component of "literariness" would be the act of careful analysis. A text becomes literature in part because it is attended to, held up as an object of scrutiny; and since it is made of language, the most creative form of scrutiny is an analysis in linguistic terms, an analysis whereby the sounds and the forms and the meanings of the text are interpreted by reference to the phonology, the lexicogrammar and the semantics of the language of which it is an instance.

To return to our earlier analogy: if we choose to attend to an act of walking, at any comparable level — the physiological processes of a human being in motion, the grammar of troops on parade, the semantics of a religious procession — then by dint of our attention the walking becomes a piece of bodily art. In the same way language that is under attention becomes a piece

of verbal art. And this has important consequences for the stylistician. To analyse any text is, potentially, to treat it as a literary artefact (I say "potentially" because there are also special purpose kinds of text analysis which do not come within this generalization); hence if we take a passage of casual conversation, or an interview, a commercial, a science lesson — a spoken or written text of whatever kind, and give a linguistic interpretation of it, then by treating it like literature we make it comparable to literature, and so we can ask what it is that leads us to deny it the status of literature and what processes would have to take place, what changes in the text and in its environment (including ourselves, in our attitude to it), in order for it to achieve that status. These explorations then serve in their turn as further sources of insight when we shift our attention on to other texts of a recognized literary genre.

Obviously the process of linguistic analysis is not going to change the text. Putting a text under attention will make it stand out, will make it glow, as it were, by a kind of Hawthorn effect; but it cannot transform it into something that it is not. The act of interpreting a text means treating it with respect, and hence bringing out all that there is within it; I have suggested that this is, in effect, turning it into literature, but it does not turn it into good literature, still less into literature that is lasting or "great". You may after come to feel, about a text that you have analysed, that it is beautiful — patterned like crystal, or like a complex piece of ballet. But beauty that lies solely in the eye of the beholder is strictly private beauty; it is not communicable. What a stylistician is engaged in, on the other hand, is first and foremost a public act. She is saying not only "I know why this text makes an impact on me" but, just as importantly, "I can make this understanding clear to you, and to anyone else who is prepared to follow and check out my reasoning."

Does this mean that the analysis of a text become a purely mechanical operation, or at least purely electronic — one that is fully programmable? I think not. In saying this I am not underestimating the potential of computational systems for carrying out operations of this kind. A great deal of text analysis is already computable; such "parsing" takes an enormous amount of memory and processing capacity, well beyond what was available twenty or even ten years ago, but no longer out of reach — becoming commonplace, in fact — in the eighties. Much work remains to be done before we have adequate parsers for texts of every kind; but we shall certainly get them. This, however, will not change my answer to the question. There are crucial elements in the stylistician's task that lie beyond the domain of parsing.

The analysis of a text *as a piece of literature* — stylistic analysis — always involves acts of interpretation. This does not mean that we lose contact with the text; each hermeneutic step can be ultimately related to what is there on the page. But even for the analytic phase, the operation of "parsing", one is

selecting, out of the thousands of possible linguistic variables, just those features that will repay being studied; and this is far from being an automatic process. Still less automatic is the interpretative phase, when the stylistician is weighing and weighting different parts of the evidence, bringing together diverse features to show how they form a coherent, integrated pattern, and making judgements about the significance of such patterns in relation to the context of the work as a whole. It is not being suggested that analysis and interpretation are two separate portions of the task, to be performed in sequence with one starting only when the other has ended. They may be interleaved one with the other, or they may not even be distinguished operationally at all. In some problems they overlap — where there is more than one possible analysis, and it is necessary to adopt one or the other, or perhaps both. But conceptually they are distinct. An analysis may be wrong; an interpretation is not right or wrong, but more or less convincing, more or less penetrating and deep.

Let me return, then, to the goals of stylistic inquiry. The more immediate goal, as I see it, and one that is unquestionably attainable, is to show why and how the text means what it does. Note that this already requires both analysis and interpretation; and in the process you may, especially with a literary text, find that you have done more than simply show why it means what you knew it meant already. You may have discovered new meanings you had not previously been aware of — at least not consciously aware of, though you might have been reacting to them unconsciously. (In text analysis one is constantly being reminded of the unconscious character of linguistic processes and of the system that underlies them.) To attain this more immediate goal is to be able to say "I can demonstrate why this text means all that I say it means."

Beyond this, if we are treating the text as literature, lies a further goal that is much more difficult to attain: that of showing why the text is valued as it is. This might be taken as an aim that is characteristic of stylistics, as distinct from text analysis in general. Why do you like this poem better that that one? Why has this one been received into the canon of major literary works? Linguists have traditionally pleaded shy of this more daunting goal; but a stylistician will at least affirm that the patterns of language carry value, even while perhaps protesting that we still know very little about how value inheres in the text.

It helps, I think, to remember that value in a text is not to be equated with artistic value. When we analyse classroom discourse, for example, we are usually not just trying to find out how it works. We are interested in the extent to which it succeeds or fails: whether the students have been able to use language successfully as an instrument for learning with, and whether the teacher's verbal strategies have been conducive to their achievement of such success. In both the two major areas of the application of linguistics, educa-

tional and clinical, there is bound to be an evaluative element in almost any analysis of a text. Where stylistic analysis differs it is in the nature and the criteria of evaluation.

In the analytic phase, there is no difference between the treatment of a literary text and the treatment of any other kind of text: the categories and the methods are the same. Indeed it is essential for the stylistician's purposes that they should be. We started with the observation that literature is made of language; to this we could add, more specifically, that English literature (i.e. literature in English) is made of the English language, French literature is made of the French language and so on. The most important fact about any English literary text is that it is a text in English. Its meanings are derived from the system of the English language; and this remains true whatever innovations may be brought about by a creative writer — or a creative reader. Innovation, in fact, is only possible because there is something to innovate on; new meanings cannot evolve except by reference to old ones — that is, to the language in which they are created. Just as you can not understand a piece of English literature if you do not know English, so you will not be able to explain "how it works" if you do not relate it to the system of the English language.

Thus it is not from deviation but from conformity that a text derives its meaning; and this is as true of a literary text, however linguistically innovative, as it is of one in any other register. If a text is "deviant", then given that the deviation is meaningful only with respect to some norm shared by writer and reader alike, it will certainly be of interest to record and explain it. But the vast majority of literary works, whether prose or verse, do not bend the grammar of English in any way at all; and conversely texts in which "rules" are "broken" are generally not what we would think of as literary ones. The sensational headlines of mass circulation newspapers have more deviant grammar than will be found in a typical selection of modern poetry. Very few literary texts depend for their impact on a departure from the norms of the language in which they are composed.

If I want to know why I like a particular English poem, the first reason must be because I understand English. Appreciating a literary work requires an understanding of the language in which it is written — or languages, if it happens to be a multilingual work. This does not mean that we can have no appreciation of all of something that is written in a language we do not know: many people can enjoy listening to poetry in a language of which they understand nothing at all, reacting purely to the rhythms and the melodies and to the patterns of vowels and consonants. But this kind of appreciation is limited; it is not something from which one could derive a satisfactory interpretation of the work as a whole — except in the special case of poetry that consists purely of patterns of sounds or of written symbols, and even here one cannot appreciate the phonological or graphological patterning if

one does not know the systems from which they are derived.

So the analysis of an English text will be in terms of the categories of the English language — English grammar, semantics, phonology and graphology — for a literary text just as for a child's composition, a weather report or a recipe. The task in each case is to show how the text is a product of the linguistic system, an instantiation of the semiotic processes that constitute the "meaning potential" of English. We cannot, however, analyse in respect of all possible features up to the limits of possible delicacy; it is here that the analytic strategies will begin to be differentiated, according to the register of the discourse and the purposes of the analytic enterprise. In analysing any text we try to ascertain what features will most repay analysis. In the language of advertising, for example, we are likely to be interested in the tactics of persuasion as these relate to the ideology and value systems of the potential customers. In a technical report our attention will probably be on the content, as represented in the grammar through logical structures and transitivity patterns. What makes the analysis of literature different, from this point on, is that we do not know in advance what features are the ones on which to focus attention. We cannot say "because this is a literary text, the interest will lie mainly in this feature or that". The distinctive qualities of the text may lie anywhere, in any areas of the linguistic system; very probably in the combination of features from different areas, and in their grouping into unique patterns of arrangement.

And this leads us to a second consideration which sets stylistic analysis apart from text analysis in general: in stylistics, we are likely to be concerned with the uniqueness of the text we are studying. With most types of discourse what is of interest is how the text under scrutiny is *not* unique; it has been selected because it is typical of its kind, and what we are trying to characterize is the register, using this particular text as a representative specimen. For example, there have been various studies of the verbal interaction between doctors and patients, studies that are undertaken as a way of helping to make clinical practice more effective or to improve the quality of medical education. In such instances the aim of the linguistic analysis is to characterize the register of doctor–patient communication in general. The investigator is not trying to establish the uniqueness of one dialogue between a particular doctor and one of his patients.

In literature too, where there are generalized registers or genres, broad categories such as "the novel" with perhaps a taxonomy of more specific types, the stylistician may be interested in the characteristics of a whole genre, and to that extent will treat a particular text as specimen rather than as object. A few genres — most notably certain forms of narrative — have been studied fairly extensively from a linguistic viewpoint; but we are far from having any general picture of the language of English literary forms: like other registers, literary genres are likely to be describable in terms of pro-

babilities, for example lyric poetry as having an orientation to certain combinations of transitivity and mood; but in order to study these we have to go one step further and treat the text as a *sample*, make systematic quantitative comparisons between one bank of texts and another.

A third component of literary analysis is tracking the relation of a text to other texts that form part of its environment. Every text has some context of situation; but it has been pointed out that a literary text, unlike most other texts, largely creates a context for itself: it determines its environment, rather than being determined by it. This gives a degree of self-sufficiency to literature that is not shared by other forms of discourse. In one respect, on the other hand, a literary text is anything but self-sufficient: this is in respect of what is sometimes called "intertextuality" — the way it resonates with other texts that make up its own genre, or even with other texts outside its genre, including giant texts from the past like the Bible and Shakespeare in English. The latter are, in some way or other, part of the context for many registers of modern English, both literary and non-literary; their looming presence is often felt, but is for that very reason usually rather obvious. Less obvious are the various intertextual experiences that a writer brings, and that a writer expects a reader to bring, to the construing of a text on the basis of a shared awareness of what each has read before (otherwise they would probably not be meeting each other as writer and reader in the present instance). The recognition of intertextual resonance is a major factor in the critical tradition; but it imposes a different requirement on the stylistician, since the relationship of one text to another needs to be interpreted in linguistic terms, and this is by no means easy.

There is one other special feature of a literary text which affects the stylistician's task. In many instances a literary text has accumulated a number of satellite texts over time: critical commentaries, reviews, exegeses of various kinds; and these affect the nature of the text as an object, since if we are explaining how it means what it does, and how it comes to be valued as it is, we need to encompass in our explanations what other people have thought it meant and what values other people have said they found in it. What can a grammatical analysis suggest, we might ask, about a particular actor's interpretation of a part? How does our linguistic approach throw light on the text as used by a historian or judged by a literary critic? Every text except perhaps the most formulaic ones is a highly complex object; but a literary text is very often one that has had time to grow, with new dimensions of complexity added to it as it has become a host to further texts which would not have existed without it.

In case all this seems to make the task of stylistician too formidable ever to be attempted, let me finish with two kinds of reassurance. One is that, although the ultimate goals are high, the rewards begin coming in early; even the first stages are likely to be found challenging and revealing. The other is

that not all the special features of literary texts are ones that are additionally problematic. For example, unlike many other texts, a literary artefact usually has clear boundaries: it has a beginning and an end, and we know what is part of it and what is not, which is not at all the case with a conversation or even with an interview or a diary. Furthermore, just because a work of literature is largely constitutive of its own environment, the text itself must occupy the central place in our attention. With a text of a pragmatic kind, we may have to describe a significant slice of the context of culture before we begin to focus on the words; whereas in the analysis of a literary work we can get straight down to business, confident that the meaning is there in front of us in the text. There is undoubtedly a world of meaning that lies beyond the wording on the page; but it is a world that is defined by the text, not a prefabricated construct into which the text must fit. This does not mean that the text is treated as an isolated thing, unrelated to the cultural, historical or other circumstances surrounding it; on the contrary, the interpretation attempts always to bring it into relation with its sociocultural environment. But a literary text enters in as an independent creation; it is not something that will ever become predictable, in the way that texts in other registers become partially predictable once we have given a detailed account of what these circumstances are.

What has been lacking up to now has been a book that will guide students systematically through the principles and methods of stylistic analysis. *The Language of Literature* has been written to meet this need.

M. A. K. HALLIDAY

Preface

The Language of Literature is an introduction to literature. The aim of any introduction to literature is to develop in a student an intuitive sense for what is important in a work, and to teach him to find and describe the sources of his intuition in the text. The object of this book is to develop the student's intuition of what is significant in the language of literature, and to teach him how to describe literary language stylistically. Since the means given to the student to describe literary language is the technique of linguistic description, this introduction to literature is also an introduction to the basic tools and basic concerns of linguistic analysis. However, linguistic principles are introduced here under what we feel are the most favourable conditions: as an adjunct to the study of literature. At the end of the course employing this textbook, the student should be able to do a thorough stylistic analysis of a literary text with a fair degree of technical sophistication. More important, he should know, in a much fuller sense of the word, what that text "means".

A textbook in stylistics runs the risk of making a dynamic field of research seem definable. In fact, contemporary approaches to stylistics are extremely varied because of the extraordinarily rapid growth of interest in the field over the last 25 years. Consequently, in this book we have tried to avoid giving the student and the general reader the impression that stylistics is simply a set of procedures. Certainly *The Language of Literature* attempts to impart a basic knowledge of stylistics, but it also tries to develop an appreciation of stylistics' openness to literary insight through the abundant use of student-oriented exercises in practical stylistics. Our hope is that the student will come to appreciate literature more, as, through stylistics, he learns to talk about it more articulately.

Even if it were possible to do stylistics without reference to modern linguistics, it would not be possible to do stylistics without reference to language. Because linguistic procedures remain such an important part of stylistics we have designed this textbook for use at the third- and fourth-year college and graduate levels, where a certain amount of basic linguistic information will be seen as an asset, not an additional burden. Nevertheless our interest in literature is primary. Therefore we have chosen to approach the English language within the framework of the "systemic" school of modern linguistics. Systemic linguistics affords the advantages of a grammar

which is less complex than some of the alternatives, and an approach to lexis which we have found intriguing to students and useful in the analysis of texts. In addition systemic linguistics has always been very text-oriented and empirical in its approach, and this pays off in stylistic applications.

Our aim in designing this book was to produce a workable textbook with a lively and entertaining style. The tenor of our writing therefore tends to the informal, and we hope to have been able to gain the confidence as well as the interest of the student and the general reader. As a workable textbook, *The Language of Literature* has a well-defined plan of execution. The book progresses through the systemicists' "levels of language": that is, we begin with the role of phonology and graphology in literary texts, proceed to consider literary play with the formal structures of grammar and lexis, and end with analysis of literary context. Chapter divisions in the book reflect this orientation to the levels of language. However, each chapter contains one or more "Unit" divisions. It is the Unit which represents each successive self-contained lesson in the book. Our text is therefore a set of eleven Units also, each one building on the knowledge gained so far, each one introducing a new step in the stylistic understanding of literary texts.

Each Unit has the same format. Our basic aims are to show the student how stylistics is done, to give him the linguistic principles that allow him to do stylistics himself, to set him to work doing stylistics, and to review with him his knowledge of the material. Each Unit carries out these jobs in four separate parts. The "Analysis" part contains a short stylistic essay on a significant literary text. The "Framework" part is an exposition of the linguistic principles which were employed in the stylistic analysis. The "Application" part asks the student to read another significant literary text, and to complete a stylistic analysis of it which has already been begun for him. The "Questions for Review" part takes him back to the material of the Analysis and the Framework, and offers the student another opportunity to write a stylistic essay of his own.

This textbook could be used as a parallel workbook for some other introduction to literature, linguistics or stylistics, because it is full of practical exercises. But we intended it primarily as a classroom teaching textbook, and that is how we have used it ourselves. Each Unit is intended to provide the focus for several seminars. The content of the Unit is designed to serve various functions. First, it presents the student with a body of material which can be studied before the seminar. Second, it provides texts which the student can analyze as a preparation for the seminar. Third, it presents questions and exercises by which the student can test his own grasp of the material. Fourth, the topics presented in the material can serve as points of departure for in-class discussion or lecture. Fifth, some or all of the texts can be used for in-class analysis and

discussion. Sixth, some or all of the questions and exercises can be reserved for controlled in-class testing. We have tested the eleven separate Units in a 3-hour per week course covering 26 weeks, in which the textbook material was integrated with other work, such as additional literary texts for written analysis, periodic tests, and the like.

Perhaps we should reaffirm that the aim of literature is still enjoyment. Stylistics is not intended to replace the enjoyment of literature with mere comprehension. Rather it is an avenue leading to increased enjoyment through the understanding of the ways in which texts have been put together.

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