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THE THEORY OF READING

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THE THEORY OF READING

Edited by
FRANK GLOVERSMITH



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Introduction

Introducing the postwar publication of his 1916–18 Cambridge University lectures, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch remembers how, while reading them out, his thoughts often strayed to rural classrooms ‘where the hungry sheep look up and are not fed’. *The Art of Reading* (1920) is part of his generous (if massively condescending) effort to give these ‘piteous groups of urchins’ some eventual access to the Humanist heritage. The ‘general redemption’ of English, its language and its literature, must come about through the art of reading, ‘from a poor child’s first lesson in reading up to a tutor’s last word to his pupil on the eve of a Tripos.’ This mingling of the academic-parochial with the wider social concerns lasts through the series: the resolutions are always in terms of reading – English Masterpieces, Tripos texts, the Classics, and (above all) the Bible.

The Introduction and the dozen lectures give the Professor’s own sense of his adversative stance, as the individualist ‘Q’ – his affectionate nickname – skirmishing with the Establishment. But the central concepts and basic assumptions about what the Art of Reading comprises are stolidly traditional, or rather, moralistic, Victorian, unquestioningly élitist. ‘Literature understands man and of what he is capable. . . . All great Literature is gentle towards that spirit which learns of it’ (Lecture II). This makes (great) books into Bibles, and baptizes the classics, fairy tales, and Tripos texts. The neo-mystical hypostatization of Literature is no mere incidental rhetoric, though the urchin sheep might well feel even hungrier. The power that should bring redemption to their remote rural classrooms gets more and more removed, hardly reachable through any skill to be acquired in the school or the Academy.

‘Q’ himself sees no difficulty: ‘comprehension’ is his pejorative term for the deliberative process, that intention to analyse and to grasp meaning that shows man’s arrogance and

intellectual conceit. This hubristic activity – commonly seen in philosophers – is the opposite of learning, which is only by ‘apprehension’. This is Wordsworth’s ‘wise passiveness’, so that the reader of a masterpiece must ‘incorporate it, incarnate it’. The reader becomes the work, the work incarnates itself in him. ‘Q’ repeatedly quotes Emerson on this intensity of identification: ‘It is remarkable that involuntarily we always read as superior beings.’ Intuitive comprehension, involuntary response: where is the space for schoolteacher or Tripos tutor? The exemplary exercise on a Keats Ode (Lecture V) sets up definitions of text, reading, and critical commentary that sharply limit such pedagogic space. Two simple readings give ‘a working idea of the Ode and what Keats meant it to be’. This sets up the absolute, fully intended, self-revelatory text, ‘incorporated’ as a totality, which then controls line-by-line examination of parts and details:

The first obligation we owe to any classic . . . is to treat it *absolutely*: solely to interpret the meaning which its author intended: we should *trust* any given masterpiece for its operation, on ourselves and on others.

Literal and intellectual understanding is distinctly subordinate to recognition, to an accord of spirit, the reading process being defined paradoxically as ‘acquiring an inbred monitor’ (Lecture XII). The reader scrupulously interprets the meaning, but this is simultaneously given by the work’s intrinsic power, its self-clarifying nature.

Literature is ‘a grand patrimony’ handed to us by great men (Lecture VI); it is direct personal communication of its composers: ‘Donne is Donne, Swift, Swift, Pope, Pope . . .’. The individual writer is the sage speaking to moral taste, to the spirit, and interpreting the Common Mind of Civilization. To understand at all, the reader incarnating this wisdom becomes another such superior being, both the Hamlet in the play and the Shakespeare who created him (Lecture V). In the two years of these lectures, this definition of art as timeless, transcendent, taking up the reader into its ideal realm, never takes into account the historicity of specific writing, and never considers the mode of its ‘operation’ on the particular reader. The ‘practical criticism’ – of Traherne, Keats, or of *The Tempest* – is guided

by the initial 'apprehension', the work's self-presentation of its meaning. The 'least tractable' elements of *The Tempest* – such as the Masque of Iris – are quoted (Lecture XII), to illustrate that even a child reading it can genuinely apprehend it, 'being intent on *What Is*, the heart and secret' of its beauty. The various difficulties – linguistic, semantic, thematic, conceptual – are postponable, and 'background' – equated with 'the kind of men for whom Chaucer (or Shakespeare) wrote and the kind of men whom he made speak' – such a background fits in long after the originary moment of aesthetic response.

Ezra Pound's no-nonsense, make-it-new extension of his polemical *How to Read in ABC of Reading* (1934) would seem to be literary light-years away from Q's upholstered moral rhetoric. Literary history, literary canons, critical conventions and the major West European texts are treated with the engaging insouciance of the cultural iconoclast taking stock, re-arranging an animated Imaginary Museum (Gavin Douglas, Arthur Golding, Crabbe, Landor, Whitman alongside Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare). But: 'A classic is a classic because of a certain eternal and irrepressible freshness' – this could be 'Q' again. The Professor would certainly have approved of juxtaposing the Icelandic Sagas with bits of Flaubert's writing (Chapter 5). Pound's collocation is one illustration of his current aesthetic doctrine about '*phanopoeia*, the throwing of an image on the mind's retina'. Again, response to writing is defined in terms of the intrinsic action of the art-language itself. It is charged communication that:

- I. throws the object (fixed or moving) on to the visual imagination.
 - II. induces emotional correlations by the sound and rhythm of speech
 - III. induces both the effects by stimulating the associations (intellectual or emotional) that have remained in the receiver's consciousness in relation to the actual words or word groups employed
- (phanopaiea, melopoeia, logopoeia) (Chapter 8)

The aesthetic object projects, throws, and induces: it operates upon a receiver, sifting and stimulating his or her responses. Something similar had been I. A. Richard's historically important account of how poems activate, complicate, and finally harmonize a range of neural impulses in the

responsive reader. Yet his peroration in turn recalls both Quiller-Couch and Ezra Pound:

The great pages are the most constant and dependable sources of moments when we know more completely what we are, and why we are so, and thus 'see into the life of things' more deeply.... We (humbly) partake with (our authors) of wisdom.

(*How to Read a Page*, 1943)

The silent, surely quite astounding elisions in each critic are from details of specific texts to moral universals. None makes any naive claims about general pronouncements or philosophical discourse in artworks: quite the reverse, since Richards calls them 'pseudo-statements', and Pound dismisses them as 'dubious bank-cheques'. The general terminology comes out only in the commentaries themselves. A characteristic shift between textual and moral discourses in the mode of *Scrutiny* (1932-53) is between scrupulous details from the 'words on the page' (the concrete) to concepts of 'sensitivity', 'maturity', 'reverence for life' (also treated as concrete, because non-systematic, non-doctrinal). No differences being articulated, there is no recognition of the need to connect critically the specific (textual) analysis and the general (evaluative) commentary. The axiomatic principle is ignored that critical enquiry (of any kind) can only take place at a distance from the object which is the target of interpretation. Once admitted, this principle would undercut the enabling definitions of a text, of the process of reading or responding to one, and therefore bring into question what literary criticism itself consists of as an exercise of the mind and the sensitivity. It could no longer be blandly assumed to be precisely contoured and guided by the intrinsic nature of an aesthetic text. No artwork can have the mystical (or magical) double nature of being both itself, discrete, an ontological identity; and also of being the transmitter of knowledge *about* itself, auto-declarative, self-interpreting. Criticism is rightly, inevitably interpretive, but is surely confused when it omits (or refuses) to articulate the principles of its analytic procedures.

The very varied work which was produced in the successive phases of New Criticism, in England and America, can now be clearly, historically placed as vitiated by this closed critical

circuit (assessed by David Morse in the second chapter). Insisting on the purity of the analytic procedures, on the complete disengagement of 'Practical Criticism' from any ideology whatsoever, went with disclaimers about the values and beliefs discernible in texts. 'Man' and 'artist' were separate, antipathetic roles: the genius handled ideas with an impersonality and a refinement of sensibility beyond violation by ideologies, commitment, or any particular convictions. (Consider T. S. Eliot's remarks on Shakespeare or Henry James.) So the 'prime and chief function (of literature) is fidelity to its own nature' (Warren and Wellek's dictum, 1948). This, like its riddling counterpart – 'A poem should not mean/But be' – is either a critical ultimatum, wholly prescriptive; or an item of an ascetic, neo-mystical belief about literary texts. As David Morse shows, the modifications and radical strategic changes inside the whole movement signal concern about the irruption into critical discourse, into readers' responses, into the literary discourse itself, of elements resisting incorporation into a contained aesthetic field or separable 'literary' communication. So the verbal icon, free of the touch of any ideas – writer's, critic's, reader's, or the text's own – developed a deep penumbra. This is indicated sometimes as the play of connotation, of wit, paradox, irony, or of ambiguity itself – (at least seven types are classifiable). So the 'intrinsic' continued to expand, to incorporate in ingenious ways what the mode insisted on earlier labelling as extrinsic.

The ontologically discrete nature of the text, well-wrought urn or verbal icon, was subsumed at times within the dominant communication model. The author exiled under the Intention Fallacy pronouncement returned silently as the source of insight or its lapses, moral imagination or its failure, and so on. (Consider F. R. Leavis on Hardy, James, Conrad, Lawrence, Woolf.) There had to be a communicator, since the value of literature, accompanying the rapt, intransitive attention of the audience, was somehow formulable in ethical, moral and spiritual effects. The intransitive 'beingness' was simultaneously a specifically transitive meaning. This scholarly, philosophical, and critical handy-dandy usually turns out to have marked traces of positions which are only partly academic and professional defensiveness. Stuart Laing's discussion

of the divisions of serious/popular, traditional/commercial, high art/entertainment shows this element mixing with assumptions about education, class patterns and cultural politics. Alistair Davies' study of the reception of Lawrence's major writing brings out strongly the markedly nationalistic prejudices and chauvinistic antipathies which prompted the contemporary response, and which negatively contour the favourable later accounts by Leavis and *Scrutiny* writers. Homi Bhabha, dealing with colonial texts, has to deconstruct a whole rhetoric of Humanism, moral universality, and individual freedom, as it informs the 'objective' categories of literary style, modes, narrative forms and characterization. This analysis of the problematic of representation and mimesis articulates the necessary imbrication of ideology and art, of politics and literary criticism.

The modern versions of New Criticism, especially those operating loudly and clearly in O. A level classrooms, might credibly demonstrate that reports of its death have been much exaggerated. Certainly, Tripos-tutors young and old, provincial and non-provincial, show surprise, shock and strong distaste for recent forms of criticism that disregard the literariness of literature: sociological studies, Structuralism, Marxist analyses, feminist critiques, Deconstruction strategies applied to texts. Not only Q's urchin-sheep in their Comprehensive folds are bewildered at the rapidity of the -isms and the abstractness of the theoretical discussions. But the contentions at the level of *T.L.S.* reviews and carping correspondence in journals are of no importance in themselves. What is important, surely, for the professors, O-level students, and poetry or novel-readers generally is how the nature and the purposes of reading are theorized; not for the hick-hack of abstruse literary debate, but for consideration of how such concepts affect syllabuses, educational training, the acquisition of reading skills and the politics of culture that permeates all these matters.

The possibility of defining a text is the preoccupation throughout these following chapters: the principles for determining what (if any) contours a text has are coincident with fundamental assumptions about what the reading process is like. Defining a text as an aesthetic monad is to define reading as an

ascesis, an intransitive response or intuitive recognition. Conversely, showing that non-literary ideological presuppositions closely condition the critical and general reception of a text, as several contributors here do, demonstrates how misleading are the notions that author-text-reader transactions are in a free, aesthetic process. There are many forms of contextualism, as Alistair Davies remarks; and there are multiple ways of reading, where variations can be related to historical period, to cultural and to class differentiation, to ideological receptivity, and (not least) to the range of expectations, the mixture of codes, in any one piece of writing. A fiction by Alan Sillitoe projects a sense of its model reader, but clearly not the same model reader as a work by James Joyce. There can be no single theory of reading, obviously, in the sense that disparate kinds of verse or prose narrative have to be yoked together as uniform subjects of such a mode of apprehension. New Criticism did perhaps pursue this chimera, as some forms of Structuralism and some versions of Reader-theory in their differing ways also did. My discussion (in chapter five) of Ortega y Gasset's theories, and of Virginia Woolf's criticism and experiments in fiction suggests some of the contradictions and the mystifications intrinsic to such approaches.

In describing the crippling constraints of many forms of autonomy theory, with its unitary and passive sense of what reading comprises, the problem that thrusts itself forward is that of a textual plurality, of multiplying interpretations, of the totally open writing. All the options have been canvassed, from the text of rich but contained ambiguities, to the text of *jouissance*, indeterminate, endlessly re-appropriated, positive because illimitable. Discussing Bakhtin's theories, Allon White outlines the closely related concepts of polyphony, dialogism, and the counterposing of discourses which are elements of a notion of complexity of aesthetic form going well beyond various formalisms, including that opposite, inverted formalism of emptying language of referential power. This last critical strategy, almost incidentally removing the conditions for aesthetic form, open or closed, has some connections with Derridean deconstructionism, and several critics here examine its excesses. But it is ideas such as those of the Bakhtin group that help most to displace notions of the intrinsic/extrinsic in

writing and in speech; that help to renew the sense of the innate sociality and historicity of language and its aesthetic representations; and that demonstrate some of the fundamental interrelations between understanding utterances in daily life, and those *formed* instances of real utterances and discourses which are the poems and narratives we read, or the plays we watch.

Over the last three decades or so, the revolutionary thinking of the Post-Structuralists and the Deconstructionists apparently undermined all notions of referential power not only for the literature, but for written and spoken language generally. A calm world-weariness coloured even the more modest reformulations which took account of Derrida's critique of the 'metaphysics of presence'.

Though dissociation is a fact of our post-lapsarian state, it is assumed that we should still try to pass through the signifier to the meaning that is the truth and origin of the sign... (This view's) inadequacy becomes obvious as soon as we reflect upon writing, and especially literature, where an organized surface of signifiers insistently promises meaning but where the notion of a full and determinate meaning that the text 'expresses' is highly problematic.

Poetry, Culler adds, is really a series of signifiers 'whose signified is an empty but circumscribed space'. (Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 1975.) This is the critical hardening into a binarized opposition – signifier *vs* signified – of what for Saussure had been a tactical, provisional splitting. The notions proliferated imperially: action, person, concept, world – old signifieds barely now to be glimpsed in the discursive networks of textual 'traces'. The signifieds were the ever-ghostlier paradigms whose logocentric masquerade could no longer suppress the joyful dance of endless chains of signifiers. Whether the instance is a poem – *Sailing to Byzantium* for Elder Olson – or a novel – *Lord Jim* for J. Hillis Miller – it serves to make the overarching point: texts are shut into a self-reflexive language system which allows no purchase for the extrinsic, for the authority of author, of ideology, of the historical moment or process. This logocentric critique takes in all human utterance, for 'parole' – speech acts, dialogue – (having had a long, long day of privilege) – are second-order instances of what goes on in 'langue'/'écriture/

writing, in their local sense of producing texts and in their grander sense of the cultural codes that constrain all social practice and exchange.

Though the fallacies have all been re-categorized for twenty years – as the metaphysical, the logocentric, the psychological, the historicist – the exile of the signified was never totally enforceable. Among much else, Marxist and feminist criticism and philosophy have checked the colonizing of all knowledge by the increasingly confident groups and schools using notions from Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, and Deconstruction. But, as Valentine Cunningham shows (chapter one), most of the confidence and success depended on a single-minded, ideologically-grounded choosing between a synthetic couplet, the signifier/signified. Saussure's tactics finally produced a bogus, invalid separation.

In any case, the ludic play of language – *Finnegans Wake* must be its ultimate, an historic apogee? – has always been a vital, fundamental contributor to the production of humanly significant utterance: it's clear in Anglo-Saxon recitation of verse, as in Lancelot Andrewes' sermons; it's acknowledged by Dr. Samuel Johnson as by Jorge Luis Borges. The anti-concept of *différance* has focused our sense of how elusive, how labile meaning is, spoken or written. But it is no proof that meaning slides ever away, in accelerating, vertiginous regression. Derrida's own texts are a counter-proof: things can get said, reference is made, language and history speak in and through one another. Johnson's *Preface* to his Dictionary replaces the stone he kicked (to refute Idealism) as part-refutation of the notion that language is self-evacuating. Here, Cunningham's detailed analysis of Joyce's text, recondite, offering itself as a self-generating, self-substantive Logos, shows how that astonishingly imploding writing is able, *ab novo*, to shape metonym, the signified, referentiality. They perpetually return from exile, they are always re-arriving: history saturates the text. Signifiers are ineluctably the shapes formed as the signified moves into that space and motion where we make the meanings we prefer.

FRANK GLOVERSMITH

July 1983

Falmer, Sussex

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1 Renoving That Bible: The Absolute Text of (Post) Modernism

Valentine Cunningham

Depuis l'époque où elles sont devenues l'objet d'une observation suivie, les espèces de plantes et d'animaux n'ont presque pas d'histoire: pour prendre les termes de la scolastique, on les étudie dans leur *esse*, non pas dans leur *fieri*. Il n'est pas de même du langage: le langage ne doit point être comparé à l'espèce, immuable par son essence, mais à l'individu, qui se renouvelle sans cesse.

Ernest Renan, *De L'Origine du Langage*. Préface, 1864.

L'activité ou la productivité connotées par le *a* de la *différance* renvoient au mouvement génératif dans le jeu des différences. Celles-ci ne sont pas tombées du ciel et elles ne sont pas inscrites une fois pour toutes dans un système clos, dans une structure statique qu'une opération synchronique et taxonomique pourrait épuiser. Les différences sont les effets de transformations et de ce point de vue le thème de la *différance* est incompatible avec le motif statique, synchronique, taxonomique, anhistorique, etc., du concept du structure.

Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, 1972.

It appears, however, that this concept/of *écriture*/, as currently employed, has merely transposed the empirical characteristics of an author to a transcendental anonymity. The extremely visible signs of the author's empirical activity are effaced to allow the play, in parallel or opposition, of religious and critical modes of characterization. In granting a primordial status to writing, do we not, in effect, simply reinscribe in transcendental terms the theological affirmation of its sacred origin or a critical belief in its creative nature? To say that writing, in terms of the particular history it made possible, is subjected to forgetfulness and repression, is this not to reintroduce in transcendental terms the religious principle of hidden meanings (which require interpretation) and the critical assumption of implicit significations, silent purposes, and obscure contents (which give rise to commentary)? Finally, is not the conception of writing as absence a transposition into transcendental terms of the religious belief in a fixed and

continuous tradition or the aesthetic principle that proclaims the survival of the work as a kind of enigmatic supplement of the author beyond his own death?

... The disappearance of the author – since Mallarmé, an event of our time – is held in check by the transcendental.

Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* ed. Donald F. Bouchard, 1977.

The post-structuralist battle-lines could not be drawn up more clearly. Nor, in many of the critical practices currently making the running in university literature faculties – and so among what pass for our most educated readers – could they be drawn up with, seemingly, more absoluteness. The sharpest of readers and readings of texts in the academy keep declaring that they're interested mainly, or only, in the text itself: in the text's internalised and ever imploding selfhood and life, in the 'how' of meaning as opposed to the 'what' of meaning. In other words a rising orthodoxy is opposed to that idea of content, the world, the signified – and beyond that, the *signatum* – towards which texts were once supposed to lead and to point. Reference is a much thinned idea. The old polemics of the once 'new' criticism of the mid-twentieth-century have now risen again from the death to which a lot of us had thought they'd been banished in some discredit: risen refreshed, refurbished, energised as the ancient Biblical strong man ready to run his race. Neo-formalism rules.

It has always been a tricky operation to split signs away from referents, words on the page (or in the mouth, in the ear, in the head) from meanings out there in the world, to divide form absolutely from content. And even the most devoted of splitters have had to acknowledge in some sort the existence of the world, of origins, presences, meanings, beyond, behind, around or within the world – (the prepositions, like the imaginable relationships, vary). The metaphors in Ferdinand de Saussure's masterful *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (ed. Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye and Albert Rielinger; critically ed. Tullio de Mauro, 1969; translated into French by Louis-Jean Calvet, Paris 1972: the English translation by Wade Baskin, New York, 1959, is the one I use).¹ Saussure's metaphors vividly struggle and grope, as is the way of the best metaphors, for the truth of the linguistic case. 'Le phénomène