Society and Literatu
1945–1970

THE CONTEXT OF
ENGLISH LITERATURE

Society and Literature 1945–1970

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1 Introduction

ALAN SINFIELD

The study of recent history and literature is crucial to our understanding of current attitudes and events. Of course, present-day society has its roots in earlier history, but our expectations and the institutions through which we frame them were constituted in the recent past, and only through knowledge of that can we assess their influence and adequacy today. Literature, I shall argue, is involved in the process of self-understanding in the past and present. Sillitoe responds to the factory system, Lessing to the position of women, Murdoch to the existentialist movement, by developing, through the refractive lenses of literary conventions, constructions of conceivable lives. These are, inevitably, interpretations and evaluations of perceived possibilities in the real world. And these constructions are not just responses, they are interventions: their publication feeds back possible images of the self in relation to others, helping society (some sectors more than others) to interpret and constitute itself. The social identities so formed in recent history dominate our current perceptions.

Of course, we lack the guidance of a consensus upon what is the 'significant' recent literature (and, indeed, history). Yet the authoritative opinion that has congealed around earlier periods is, in reality, the promotion of a certain view of what is important and, therefore, the denial of other possibilities. Thus the centralizing of the modernism of the first half of the twentieth century serves to marginalize the (relatively) rationalist work of Wells and Shaw. Once the canon has become established (in the full range of that word) it seems 'natural' – so much so that the reader perhaps doubts my seriousness – and even

people with different values will feel obliged to express them through the central 'tradition', though a radical reassessment might be more appropriate. It is therefore useful to examine literature while it is still warm – while we can still question, in even tones, whether Pinter presents the inevitable 'human condition', whether Orton is 'immature', whether 'pop poetry' merits attention. These issues were intensely important in the sixties, and we live in their aftermath. If they are still controversial, it is because they are still active constituents in our world-view today.

Yet the full implications of earlier literature for the present appear only when it is understood in its context. For a graduate to be running a sweet stall in a time of full employment (1956) indicates, depending on your point of view, either that he is a layabout or that without family and Oxbridge backing a graduate in that society had trouble discovering fulfilling work. Nowadays it might indicate either notable enterprise in creating some kind of work opportunity, or the waste of expertise in a recession (or both). The constant factor – a graduate running a sweet stall – we can envisage as well as the original audience of *Look Back in Anger*, but the significance is different: the play assumes, in every nuance, the context of 1956. We may read it without taking this into account, imposing our own context, but we thereby limit ourselves to reinforcing our own assumptions, rather than taking the opportunity to envisage a different kind of society. Although the world of 1956 is not ours, our society is derived from it; and the way to discern that derivation is not to assimilate but to distinguish. The full and specific character of *Look Back in Anger* in its original context challenges and informs our perceptions of ourselves.

If we insist on the context of literature, we must confront the prevalent idea of the artist as individual creator whose vision transcends society, and its corollary, that the proper study of important literature discovers its 'universal' dimension. In a period of such controversy – over standards, obscurity, élitism, political commitment, sexual explicitness, pop culture – we might wonder who is to decide which bits are detachable from their context as 'universal truth'. Like the established canon, the notion looks like a strategy for claiming special authority for one point of view. It appears more and more shaky as traditional wisdom is challenged by people (such as women and blacks) who have not hitherto been allowed to contribute to 'universal truth', and are now asserting their particular truth. Because we question the strategy whereby literature is evaluated separately from its context, this

book has no separate chapters on 'background'. It is not about literature *and* its context, but literature *in* its context.

To speak of literature and context is already to risk separating the two. The writer is not distinct from society, any more than is the bus driver or the bus driver's union or employer. Indeed, like those roles, the very role of 'writer' is established socially, as is clear from the fact that in different societies that role varies considerably and in some societies does not exist at all. Integration in society does not deprive the writer of insight or influence, any more than it does the shop steward, the minister of religion or the student. Rather, it provides the conditions that make insight and influence possible.

The project of involving literature fully in its context seems unsatisfactory so long as we maintain a formulation like 'the individual versus society' – in which the individual is imagined as essentially autonomous and society is envisaged as an undifferentiated external force. But this formulation seems inadequate in each of its parts. First, the individual exists and makes sense of himself or herself within society. To imagine otherwise is like trying to imagine yourself dead: you think you're doing it but actually you've reincluded yourself in the scene, watching, impossibly, from one side. Surely, since we come to consciousness within a language and set of social arrangements, there can be no self separable from social being.

Second, society is neither monolithic nor static; it is composed of diverse groups whose interests, opportunities and attitudes interact in complex ways in accordance with their relative power at different points. To be sure, there are dominant ideologies which tend to legitimate some attitudes and disqualify or suppress others. In a society which heaps indignities on certain of its members and often persuades them that it is for the best, we could hardly suppose otherwise. But there will also be scope for new kinds of relationships and understanding, for ideology is put together piecemeal during the process of living, from the various components as they currently lie to hand. Otherwise there would be no change; whereas in fact the contours of a dominant ideology shift all the time, and its relationship with subordinate tendencies is continually revised. Often these movements are ways of heading off significant change, but sometimes they present genuine new possibilities for living.

The relationship of the literary text to the particular pressures and limits that condition it is identified through contextual study, which demonstrates the relevance of the text to how people have actually

lived and thus helps us to appreciate its implications for ourselves. We might think of the literary work as a particularizing pattern laid across the (changing) grid of social possibilities. Through the mediation of literary conventions and cultural institutions, we may discern the work's emphases, as it heightens and affirms some customary structures, disconfirms others, and perhaps discovers new lines of force. We must not claim too much privilege for literature. The assertion of some theorists – that it always reveals the progressive potential in a culture, or that it always exposes crucial contradictions in the dominant ideology – cannot be sustained. What it does is vividly to represent certain possibilities; further, it draws us into those possibilities and makes us re-create their structures as we follow them through. It invites our assent that reality is *thus* or *thus* and so helps us to develop, by agreement, rejection or negotiation, our own understanding of the world and ourselves in it.

The *Evening News* saw in Jimmy Porter 'a character who could only be shaken into sense by being ducked in a horse pond or sentenced to a lifetime of cleaning latrines'; whereas Kenneth Tynan in the *Observer* welcomed 'the drift towards anarchy, the instinctive leftishness, the automatic rejection of "official" attitudes, the surrealist sense of humour'.[1] One critic identifies and sustains his own ideology by despising Jimmy, the other does so by celebrating him. The play is recognized as offering, through sympathetic involvement in an unaccustomed stance, a possible world-view; critics and then audiences reconstitute (in minute ways, perhaps) their senses of themselves in relation to a changed perception of possible personal and social identities. The range of negotiation is apparent in the reaction of Harold Hobson, who headed off disagreeable implications by concentrating upon Alison's predicament as 'the truly moving part of the play'.[2] (Interestingly, a feminist critique now might make the same point as Hobson's traditionalism. New contexts sometimes reassert old interpretations, though the implications will be different.)

Look Back in Anger provided a focus around which a new class fraction – educated and upwardly mobile but (as yet) without power – defined its frustrations (see Chapter 6). The origin of the process is discernible in Tynan's review, which refers to grant-aided students, *Lucky Jim*, the non-U intelligentsia, classlessness and youth, and sets them against Somerset Maugham, colonial injustice, racism, emotional inhibition and good taste. Similarly, Eliot's *Four Quartets* provided an acceptable self-image – conservative but questioning, liturgical but

personal, mystifying but of intellectual repute – which helped an enfeebled Anglicanism to envisage its own continuance. The literary work is among the myriad pressures nudging people (in some instances decisively) into a particular way of thinking.

However, the cultural identification afforded by literature depends upon the mediation of literary forms and cultural institutions. The world-views that literature elaborates are not direct transcriptions of life, and the writer does not gain influence by reading out his or her work on the street corner. In these respects too the individual does not work independently of society, which is experienced, again, as both opportunity and confinement, with scope for negotiation in between. Of course, you probably won't be allowed to read your work out on the street corner, and whether you will be able to bring it to the notice of a significant audience depends upon institutions that are beyond the control of all but a few individuals. The point does not need labouring. Certain kinds of work will get published – not necessarily those that immediately match the dominant ideology, but those that find their way through an intricate network of predilections and decisions. Some of these involve explicit or implicit censorship, many are related to market forces, none is independent of social forces; their specific workings in the post-war period are discussed in Chapter 5.

Opportunities for expression vary with institutional changes. On a national scale, television, state subsidy and paperbacking develop while the cinema declines. In detail, a publisher decides that he or she can afford to encourage new work, while two firms merge and an outlet disappears; it is discovered that people will watch plays at lunchtime in pubs but not in the evening at repertory theatres; that people will listen to poetry if it is presented with jazz, folk or rock music, but that not many will buy slim volumes. And, almost without noticing, the writer tailors his or her work within the available options. Everyone knows that a long poem or novel is unlikely to be accepted, that television plays are rarely longer than 90 minutes, that a stage play's chances decrease hugely if it has more than a few characters and one or two simple sets, that sex helps to sell a book. It would be revealing to study specifically the conjunctures at which the prevailing 'rules' are broken, sometimes with lasting consequences.

The reception of literary works is also socially mediated. One has to know and respect the code of a particular form. The novel is not a 'natural' way of representing reality, as is clear from the fact that it has not always existed, even in Europe. To understand a novel – to

appreciate and assess its version of reality – requires both practice and willingness. Novel reading is not equally distributed through society, though it is probably more widespread than theatre-going, which requires social skills not possessed or valued by everyone, and the reading of poetry, which requires linguistic skills that are actually an object of suspicion to many people. Literary practices are not ideologically neutral (very little is): they are part of the apparatus through which people demarcate their identities within society.

The concept of 'literature' is itself socially determined: its dominant modern meaning emerged in the eighteenth century, and even now widely different ideas of it are current. Does it include seventeenth-century sermons? *Fanny Hill*? Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*? Science fiction? Barbara Cartland? Television plays? Bob Dylan? These are not marginal questions; they imply divergent definitions of the whole enterprise, and different groups will prefer different answers. 'Literature' is not essentially *this* or *that* – a self-selecting line of poets (for instance) running from Chaucer to Eliot and awaiting the judgement of 'time' to decide the continuation – but a specialized sub-category of writing or (to include electronic media) communications, whose existence and content is socially defined and redefined by particular groups in relation to specific social forces (see Chapter 5).

For many people the placing of literature among other social practices involves the same kind of cultural break as happened in 1956 with the idea that Jimmy Porter might exist and have a point. Chapter 5 analyses the dominance of F. R. Leavis's view of culture: 'In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends.'[3] But this élitist position has lost credibility. Literary culture is like going to church, football matches, popular or classical concerts; like having gnomes in your garden, health foods in your kitchen, punk records in your bedsit or gold-plated taps in your bathroom. It is developed by certain groups in ways that enable them to identify themselves through it; to others it is a matter of indifference and, to some, an object of detestation. While the prevailing literary culture offers great signifying power to its adherents, those who do not share its codes may actually define themselves in opposition to it. The privilege that is claimed for literature is actually the privilege, real or aspirant, of its enthusiasts.

If you were brought up to participate in literary culture or are in the process of acquiring it, it may be difficult to accept that it has only the same kind of validity as other cultural practices. But this analysis does

not mean that the rich significance you might find in certain books is an illusion. On the contrary, they present probably the most highly and sensitively organized meanings experienced by the people who share their codes, and the present volume is partly concerned with investigating those meanings. Nor does it mean that value judgements are inappropriate. But we should recognize that the criteria we deem appropriate to the code of literature may not be transferable to the other cultural codes through which various groups of people interpret the world and their places in it.

The diversity of codes is probably healthy. What is not, I should say, is the tendency of each group to insist upon the exclusive validity of its particular mode. Looked at in this light, the privileging of literary over popular culture in schools is of a piece with Mrs Whitehouse's attempts to suppress work dealing with certain kinds of sexual experience, and with skinhead resentment of immigrant culture. Instead of availing ourselves of the unprecedented opportunities in modern society, we retreat into limited and exclusive identifications. These are often ratified institutionally (Radio 1/2/3/4; imagine bingo in the Covent Garden opera house in the afternoons), presumably following the tendency of commerce in seeking brand loyalty, increased market share and the destruction of competitors. So conflicts that are ultimately political are fought out at the level of culture.

The present volume is, of course, implicated in the confusion consequent upon such a radical contextualizing of literature: pointing out the social construction of certain categories and institutions does not release one from them. In this introduction I have used the term 'literature' in the way I imagine to be accepted by most readers. As long as we stay within our own circle, we all 'know what we mean' by it (that is what meaning is – an agreement within a community to use words in a certain way). It is when we move outside (perhaps into the Stock Exchange or a football crowd) that we find the concept of literature regarded quite differently (if it is regarded at all). 'The Context of English Literature' series is designed for students of literature following broadly traditional courses and for a portion of the general public which shares that orientation.

This book is therefore stretched across a cultural rift. It focuses, in great measure, upon high-cultural 'literature', charting its development as a partially autonomous practice and acknowledging its contribution to our understanding of ourselves in the post-war period. At the same time, it proposes a theory of context that undermines the currently

privileged status of 'literature'. However, such a split focus is hard to avoid at a time when literary and cultural studies are changing rapidly, and new modes of understanding can be developed only through current categories and institutions. By treating the disjunction in attitudes to 'literature' explicitly and systematically, we intend to make it productive. The book represents in its structure the two main forms of contextualization. We may start with society and move towards literature, observing how events and attitudes in the real world are drawn (with all the indirection I have described) into writing. And we may start with literature and move towards the conditions by which it functions as a social practice.

Chapters 2–4 attempt the first of these approaches, taking society as their starting-point. They are organized round national experience in the period 1945–70, as this was perceived and lived – in domestic and world affairs, sexual and family relationships, and ideas of the nature of humanity and the universe. The literary text is not assumed to 'mirror' society or to be representative; it is regarded as the writer's interpretation of and intervention in the world as he or she perceived it. Chapter 2 discusses the attitudes of writers to particular events and more general movements in domestic and international affairs, finding in literature diverse projects within several broad concerns. Chapter 3 sets out the ideological parameters within which sexuality was conceived in the period, scrutinizes the major debates that took place and discusses how sexuality was constructed through a range of literary approaches. Chapter 4 considers how writers manifested and responded to a decline in religion and a crisis in secularism, describing how these issues were conceptualized through existentialism, and analysing the sixties 'counter-culture'. There is no complete uniformity of structure or emphasis in these chapters; they are breaking new ground in content and method, and an enforced orthodoxy would falsify the possibilities. But the organization throughout this part of the book is by themes and chronology of the period at large and not by specific literary institutions. Thus the same text may appear in more than one chapter, and in Part II as well; it is therefore possible to compare the different perspectives within which the same work may be regarded.

Part II starts from literature and moves towards the conditions of its production in society. Chapter 5 is about the processes by which literature comes about – both its material production and its production as a concept. The effects of market forces and public-sector interventions are analysed, and special attention is given to education and the mass

media; finally, attempts to evolve alternative forms are considered. With this in view, chapters on theatre, poetry and novels call into question the autonomy and continuity of the genres and the constitution of the established canons. The dominant versions of how these things developed are regarded as themselves products of the period – as constructions placed upon experience in order to comprehend it and influence its future direction. In the case of the novel, these constructions are shown to have obscured what was in fact an uneven and diverse history, and to have fed back into further writing as disturbance and stimulus. With poetry, the establishment of a powerful orthodoxy is revealed, and the extent to which it becomes difficult to see or conceive of other kinds of work is discussed. With theatre, where audiences and institutions can be identified fairly specifically, the dominant movement is related to the development and growth of a particular class fraction, and its political significance is re-examined.

Is this radical contextualizing of literature not sawing off the branch we are sitting on? Quite probably, but that is better than sitting on the fence upon which the branch is going to fall anyway! To put it less facetiously, our project may contribute to the emergence of other, better places to stand.

Notes

1 Quoted in John Russell Taylor (ed.), *John Osborne, Look Back in Anger: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 43, 50.
2 Ibid., p. 48.
3 F. R. Leavis, *Education and the University* (1943; London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), p. 143.

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Part I
Society in literature