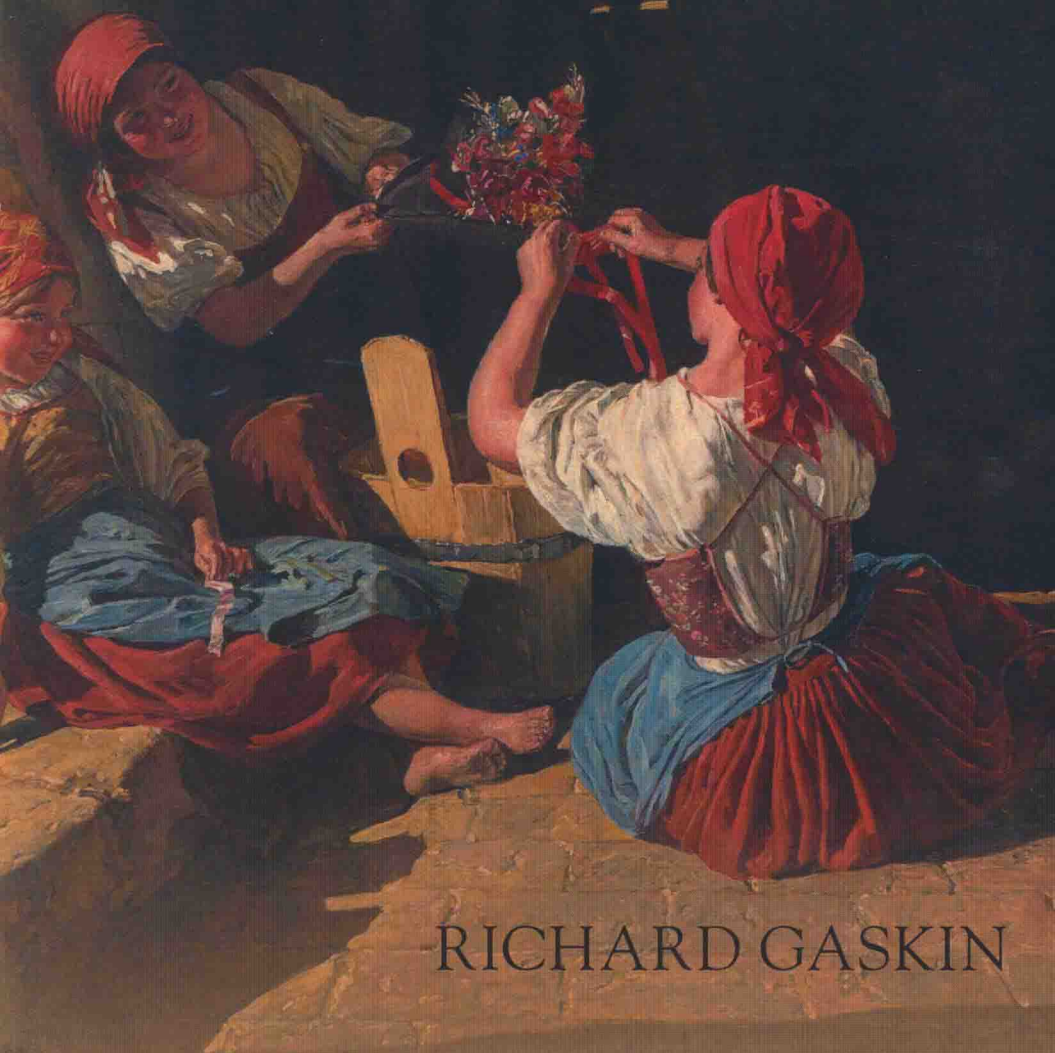# LANGUAGE, TRUTH, AND LITERATURE

A Defence of Literary Humanism

RICHARD GASKIN

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Preface

The expression 'literary humanism' carries a significant evaluative payload in contemporary discussions of literature. Sometimes the label is worn as a badge of honour; more often, perhaps, it figures as a term of abuse. But what is the object of this support or hostility? Anyone who engages seriously with literary theory and the philosophy of literature will quickly discover that, though commentators are willing enough to use the phrase 'literary humanism', it is very hard to find an authoritative statement of what the name actually denotes. Literary critics and theorists may be happy enough to tolerate that kind of vagueness in their key terms, but philosophers yearn for exactitude—or at least for as much exactitude as the subject matter will allow, as Aristotle put it. This book is my attempt to give both precision and plausibility to the doctrine of literary humanism, in the first place by associating it definitionally with a specific group of theses about the nature and effect of what we call 'creative' or 'imaginative' literature, and secondly by defending the position thus defined against some of the more important forms of attack to which it has been subjected by aestheticians and literary theorists in recent decades.

My literary humanist asserts that works of literature have a determinate, objective meaning, fixed at the time of their production, that they may have a cognitive value which is part and parcel of their aesthetic value, and that their having cognitive and aesthetic value, if they do have it, depends essentially on their referring to, and making true statements about, the world. Analytic philosophers who attack literary humanism, so defined, are usually aestheticians or philosophers of language who may be broadly sympathetic to the humanist tradition, but who reject one or more of the theses which I associate with that tradition: for example, they might say that creative literature does not have cognitive value; or that it does have it but not by dint of referring to and making true statements about the world; or that while a work of literature may indeed refer to and make true statements about the world, that achievement is incidental to its having genuine

cognitive or aesthetic value. I shall seek to ward off these philosophers' attacks, and undermine the alternatives they offer to literary humanism as I define it. That task will occupy my first four chapters. I shall then move on to defend literary humanism against the onslaught of those commentators from outside the analytic tradition—in particular, reception theorists and deconstructionists—who either repudiate the whole idea that literary works have a determinate and objective meaning or who, while accepting that such works may indeed have that kind of meaning, reject the humanist's assertion that a work's meaning is fixed, at the time of its production, for all its contemporary and later readers and spectators.

I conceive this book as being, in the main, a philosophical treatise. Considerable use is made of literary examples, and I have tried to deploy my examples in such a way as to provide a linkage from one theme to the next: so the reader will find that I draw on some authors repeatedly, and sometimes discuss these authors in detail. But the literary agenda is subordinate to the philosophical. It is for this reason that I have made so much of the thesis of linguistic idealism, which is expounded in my first chapter and then recurs at various points throughout the book. I rely on this doctrine for the following reasons. First, it is one of my intellectual ambitions to convince the philosophical public of its truth: the present study takes its place alongside my earlier books *Experience and the World's Own Language* and *The Unity of the Proposition*, in which I began on a defence of linguistic idealism, and is offered as a further (but still partial) adumbration of my favoured theory of the relation between language and the world. I hope in due course to complete the argument for linguistic idealism—I had better add: insofar as an argument can ever be completed in philosophy—in a separate work dedicated to that subject. Secondly, in defending literary humanism, and in examining the bearing that works of literature have on the world, I cannot avoid setting the discussion in the context of the metaphysical position concerning the relation between language and the world that I believe to be true. Thirdly, I spend a considerable amount of time in the book attacking certain manifestations of modern literary theory, and in particular receptionism and deconstruction; it would be disingenuous of me not to provide the reader with a serious theoretical alternative to these rejected doctrines. Fourthly, it would be impossible to do so: for one can only reject a substantial metaphysical position—and both receptionism and deconstruction are, for all their faults, such positions—on the basis of an appeal to what one takes to be the truth. It follows that my defence of

literary humanism in the pages that follow is in a number of respects quite specific, even limited. I identify literary humanism with a particular set of theses, and defend it on the basis of a particular metaphysical and epistemological point of view. Not everyone will like my tactics; but I figure that a measure of particularity is preferable to a more abstract approach. Of course in saying that I do not mean to imply that I have deliberately left dialectical lacunae: I hope I have argued what needs to be argued, and only left unargued what does not need argument. On that matter, however, readers will be the judge.

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I began thinking about this project many years ago, when I had occasion to write a review of Bernard Harrison's tantalizing but frustrating *Inconvenient Fictions: Literature and the Limits of Theory*. The progress of the book has been subject to continual interruptions, some of a sensible intellectual kind, others of a less helpful nature. It is becoming increasingly difficult to do serious philosophical work at British universities while simultaneously carrying out normal teaching and administrative duties. This is not just because of the expansion of the higher-education sector, and the consequent ballooning of the administrative claims on one's time. More especially, and less tolerably, it is because the atmosphere of the modern university is increasingly inimical to the Humboldtian ideal of a symbiosis between teaching and scholarship. Over recent decades there has been, as everyone knows, a revolution in the way British universities conceive their role and function in society: the new ethos is driven by a management culture which has come to dominate the thinking of government and of many senior academics who occupy positions of administrative responsibility.[1] For these zealots everything must be formalized, monitored, subject to 'quality control': the system must not only work, but there must be documentary evidence, down to the minutest detail, to prove that it is working. There are several problems with this strategy, of which the main one is that it is actually counter-productive: continuous self-monitoring has a high psychological cost (quite apart from the economic cost, which is surprisingly ignored), and a cost which is less tangible but for all that real, a forfeiture of the kind of meditative space and quietude in which alone the pursuit of learning thrives.

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1. Cf. Good, *Humanism Betrayed: Theory, Ideology, and Culture in the Contemporary University*, p. 103.

In particular, there is a loss of something that is necessary for any meaningful engagement with our literary and philosophical heritage, namely a distancing of oneself from one's immediate environment and a correlative spiritual reliving of the past. Humanistic inquiry demands, and always will demand, that one confront, and understand, our human past; and one cannot understand that past if one does not, at least to some extent, live in it, ignoring the importunities of the present. Scholarship tugs one away from the here and now; that is an imperative that should be respected, not undermined. Tradition, as T. S. Eliot said, cannot be simply inherited, but must be obtained 'by great labour', and requires one to cultivate what he called 'the historical sense': 'and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence'.[2] We used to laugh at older dons for their other-worldliness, their absent-mindedness, their pre-occupation with remote intellectual concerns to the exclusion of what was going on in the world around them. We mocked them for knowing more about the popular culture of the eighteenth century than that of their own time. We were annoyed when they walked out of tutorials while the presenter was still reading out his essay, or when the prose that one had handed in was not marked and returned promptly but emerged months later, crumpled into a tight ball, from the pocket of our tutor's frayed and possibly slightly aromatic jacket. Those distrait and unkempt figures so familiar from our undergraduate days have now gone: there are no out-of-touch professors in the modern business-model university. The age of quality control has swept them into the garbage can of history; at least on that score, students have nothing to complain about now. That is a good thing, surely? Not unequivocally. Consider the case of philosophy. The pressures on lecturers to specialize and publish from the very earliest stages of their careers, while displaying continuous innovation in their teaching methods and volunteering for all manner of distracting administrative roles, leaves them with little time to educate themselves, broadly and historically, in their discipline, little time to immerse themselves, without ulterior motives, in all its richness, strangeness, and variety. I did not publish my first article until I was nearly thirty; throughout the period of my graduate studies it did not occur to me to publish, and no one suggested that I should.

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2. *Selected Essays*, p. 14. So too Goethe: 'Tiefe Gemüter sind genötigt, in der Vergangenheit so wie in der Zukunft zu leben' (*Aus meinem Leben Dichtung und Wahrheit*, p. 302).

I profited profoundly from having the freedom to explore the highways and byways of the discipline of philosophy, not to mention other intellectual areas, without feeling myself under a compulsion to reach hasty conclusions and rush into print with them; I now appreciate what a valuable gift that freedom was, for it would be unthinkable today.

What we are nowadays pleased to call academic research—though in philosophy's case the word 'research' is an egregious misnomer, and that in itself should have been a sufficient hint that our willingness to submit everything we do to the scrutiny of auditors was an error—is an essentially open-ended, creative process which can no more sensibly be managed and audited than can the productions of composers, novelists, and poets. And, like the outputs of creative artists, the 'outputs' of philosophical 'research' cannot be sensibly evaluated: for there can be no final calculation of the value of a given philosophical publication until all the facts are in, which will never be; and a provisional evaluation is of interest only to accountants and those who take an immature delight in rankings and league tables. A philosopher's *œuvre* might be ignored for a generation, then recognized as work of brilliance, or it might be lionized in its time, but forgotten after a few decades; and these later judgements, superseding the reactions of contemporaries, are themselves only stepping stones along the intellectual journey, not ultimate resting places. There is and can be no final assessment of the value of a piece of philosophy; but only a final assessment would, so to speak, *be* of any value. So the only thing to do in the meantime (which is where we always are) is to forget about the whole question of comparative value and engage, as readers and writers, in doing the kind of philosophy that we find helpful. 'For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.' If government responds that it needs a basis on which to distribute monies for teaching and research, then it should be countered that almost any basis would be better than the current regime of time-wasting, expensive, demoralizing, and intellectually spurious comparative assessment exercises.

Not the least ignominy to which, in the UK, universities have descended in recent years is the pusillanimity they have displayed in the face of government's ludicrous 'impact agenda': anyone who thinks that economic or cultural 'impact' can sensibly be measured in the short term—which is of course all that interests our rulers—would do well to consider the story of complex numbers, applications of which now pervade our lives in multifarious and extraordinary ways. Our current knowledge of these highly

peculiar entities is based on centuries of patient theoretical groundwork[3]—
work which would never have been undertaken had the mathematicians
who courageously investigated the strange case of the number i been
subjected by their employers and patrons to today's 'impact' regime. We
know now that complex numbers are useful, and we think we have
therefore learnt the lesson of the past. We pride ourselves on having
understood what the past has to tell us because we no longer make the
mistakes of our forebears. True, we no longer make *those* mistakes. But the
lesson is a general one. It applies just as much to transfinite set theory or to
the metaphysics of future contingency or to the philosophy of literature as it
does to complex numbers. If we had really learnt the lesson of history, we
would be expecting the applications of tomorrow to come from areas such
as these, or from others yet unconceived.

Another illustration of the idiocy of 'impact', from which we can learn
much, is afforded by the career of Leibniz.[4] The co-discoverer of the
infinitesimal calculus and early pioneer of the computer was obliged by
the terms of his employment with the House of Hanover to expend much
of his energy writing a history of the Guelf family in obedience to the Duke
of Brunswick's ambition to associate his familial origins with the House of
Este, and in furtherance of his desire to become an Elector. There's impact
for you: setting aside the merely academic repercussions of Leibniz's work,
what could be of more significance than that a German Duke should be
elevated to the status of *Kurfürst* in the Holy Roman Empire, and be
demonstrated to descend from one of the oldest and most distinguished
aristocratic families in Europe? Certainly the political culture of Leibniz's
day would have recognized his contribution to this project as an important
service 'beyond the Academy'. If we now find that ridiculous, and if we
deplore the waste of Leibniz's genius in the interests of his master's vanity,
what confidence can we have that in thrusting their shiny new 'impact
agenda' on our universities the politicians of today are not similarly expos-
ing themselves to the scorn of tomorrow?

Ultimately, academics must blame themselves for their descent into the
hell of permanent and inappropriate audit: they have wantonly allowed
university administration to fall into the hands of people who either do not
know what scholarship is, or who do not care about it, or both. I am aware

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3. For an entertaining guide, see Nahin, *An Imaginary Tale: the Story of* $\sqrt{-1}$.
4. See here E. C. Hirsch's excellent account in his *Der Berühmte Herr Leibniz: Eine Biographie*.

that this assertion will appear overstated to some readers, but something like that must be right: for otherwise university administrators would have resisted the suffocating burden of ever more 'quality control', not conspired in it. After all, the current *Gleichschaltung* of the universities is based on a simple prisoners' dilemma, and everyone knows what the practical solution to a prisoners' dilemma is: all that is required of our Vice-Chancellors is that they collectively refuse to go along with what government is seeking to impose on us. Since the quality-control regime depends on the co-operation of the universities, that refusal would put a stop to it at once. But university managers do not consider this option; I have never seen it even mentioned as a possibility. Given that our administrators are not stupid, and given that they have no difficulty in collaborating when it suits them—witness the creation of such divisive and invidious blocs as the so-called 'Russell group' of universities—the only remaining conclusion to be drawn is that they approve of the new dispensation. In his essay on the stage production of Shakespeare's tragedies, Charles Lamb wrote of the actor David Garrick:

> I am almost disposed to deny to Garrick the merit of being an admirer of Shakspeare. A true lover of his excellencies he certainly was not; for would any true lover of them have admitted into his matchless scenes such ribald trash as Tate and Cibber, and the rest of them, that
>
> > With their darkness durst affront his light,
>
> have foisted into the acting plays of Shakspeare?[5]

Likewise, we may say, our managers cannot, in view of their deeds, be lovers of scholarship. This upshot is perhaps what you would expect: for administrative posts have to be actively applied for, and so are almost bound to fall into the wrong hands—the hands of people who find the prospect of exercising power over others, devising vacuous political agendas, and commanding superior salaries more attractive than the daily and unsung grind of teaching and scholarship, both of which precisely require their practitioners to surrender power to the authority of the work and the idea.

For those who care about linguistic standards—who might even be concerned 'to purify the dialect of the tribe'—one of the more depressing effects of the managerial revolution that has swept British universities in the last twenty years or so has been the degradation of spoken and written

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5. *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, vol. 1, p. 105.

English that has accompanied it. Revolutionaries like to commandeer language to serve their purposes, as Thucydides observed long ago,[6] and one of the reasons for this is that it enables them to tell who is on their side and who is against them: what to outsiders might appear as sheer sloppiness, or even as legitimate linguistic change, in fact has a very astute political objective. You are shown up not just by what you say, but almost more importantly by how you say it: the new jargon has the same function as the military Identity-Friend-or-Foe (IFF) code.[7] So it is that anyone who rejects the approved argot can be conveniently branded as an enemy of progress: for linguistic change is itself an essential prerequisite of material improvement—or so they would have us believe—and if you want to achieve the end, you must embrace the means. In this respect as in others present-day universities increasingly resemble toy totalitarian regimes: not only is dissent ruthlessly stamped out, but everyone must be visibly and enthusiastically 'on message'; the message that everyone must be on is set out in strategy documents and position papers that consist of nothing but bullet-point bullshit.[8] Interestingly, this trend has gone hand in hand (rather suspiciously so) with the increasing dominance of IFF jargon in literary theory—the language of anxiety, indirection, occlusion, negotiation, inter-rogation, appropriation, recuperation, and so on through the rest of the unlovely litany:[9] you need to use these words if you wish to be identified as being on the right side. There appears to be an unholy terminological congruence between the bureaucratic inanities of the managers and the pseudo-intellectual vapourings of the Derridean literary theorists.

Apart from its lucky property of distinguishing friends from enemies, of helping supporters of the revolution recognize one another in the crowd and of enabling reactionaries to condemn themselves out of their own

6. *Historiae* III, §82, a text that J. G. Griffith, who taught me Greek, loved to cite (see also Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, p. 154). I am not sure what John would have made of the audit-obsessed culture of today's universities. I cannot believe that he would not have condemned it for the madness it is; yet he had such a touching faith in the ability of my generation to 'do things better', as he said, than his.

7. Cf. Levin, *Looking for an Argument: Critical Encounters with New Approaches to the Criticism of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, p. 227.

8. In a slightly different sense of this term from the one explored by Harry Frankfurt in his *On Bullshit*.

9. I have taken these examples from Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext: The Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry*, and Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. Often the chic terminology consists of perfectly good terms that are nevertheless misused, as Hinds, for example, misuses 'reifying', 'essentialist', and 'tendentious'.

mouths, managerial jargon has another highly desirable feature, which is of some interest to the philosopher of language and literature: the best cant phrases are, in J. L. Austin's terminology, *performative*. Thus, to use the word 'proactive', without conscious irony, is already to be proactive; similarly, to speak, with a straight face, about 'ramping up' some desirable activity is already to start the process of ramping up whatever it is that is desired to be ramped up; the sincere use of the phrase 'we will be enhancing our performance' itself counts as an enhancement of one's performance, and so on. Ironically enough, as this last example illustrates, some traditional performatives are disappearing from unispeak: 'we plan to . . .' and 'we intend to . . .' are being unceremoniously ousted—I recall seeing an internal memorandum circulated before one of the Research Assessment Exercises which expressly discouraged the use of such phrases—by 'we will . . .'. Presumably the latter phrase is to be understood as a prediction rather than as a statement of intent—though, in the absence of the relevant intention it could hardly be a very reliable prediction, one would have thought, and it has not yet been made clear how 'research outputs' can emerge without first undergoing a process of planning and incubation. The same memorandum, incidentally, forbade the use of phrases of the form: 'NN is continuing his/her work on . . . .' After all, continuation is not either inception or completion; banish it therefore from the roster of our scholarly activities. You must not simply *carry on* doing what you have been doing, but either start a project in a blaze of encouraging buzz-words (preferably with a large research grant to fund it), or complete it with a fanfare of (preferably collaborative) publications and met targets. Best of all, do both at the same time: one infers that the 'research outputs' of the future will comprise a staccato series of spontaneously generated, instantaneous eructations.

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Many people have assisted me in the preparation of this book. Earlier versions of parts of it were read to audiences at Liverpool, Luxembourg, Stirling, and Sussex universities: I am grateful to the participants on those occasions for their questions and remarks. I thank the Press readers for their criticisms and suggestions for improvement, and Eleanor Collins at the Press for her excellent supervision of the book. Stephen Clark and Richard Shield both looked at the entire typescript in draft and commented on it most helpfully, as also did Mark Rowe, who indeed read the book in more than one version, and produced a large number of detailed suggestions,

criticisms, and challenges, from all of which I benefited considerably. I also received advice on drafts of individual parts from John Butterworth, Cathrin Boerckel, Barry Dainton, Daniel Hill, Mary Leng, Michael McGhee, Stephen McLeod, Alan Weir, and Daniel Whistler. Arif Ahmed, Bruce Gibson, David Langslow, and Lucy Newlyn obligingly answered queries I had on specific points. It remains to say that the responsibility for the result of all these interactions and influences is mine alone; and to express the regret that my father, who from the first maintained an active and supportive interest in the progress of the book, did not live to see its completion.

Contents

I

Language, Text, and World

1 The context principle

All inquiry must begin somewhere; my investigations into the relation-ship between the world and language—including literary language, which will be the main focus of this study—begin with the context principle. This principle has been formulated by a number of thinkers over the ages, most notably by Ockham,[1] in medieval times, and in modern times by Schleiermacher, Bentham, and Frege. Frege's version is the one that currently dominates philosophical reflections on language, at least in the analytic tradition; it states that words have meaning only in the context of a sentence.[2] Unfortunately, Frege's discussion of the context principle is all too brief: ironically enough, he fails to give it the sort of contextualization that would bring it to life. More fruitful are Schleiermacher's remarks in his *Hermeneutik*, where the principle forms his second canon of interpretation,[3] and especially Bentham's animadversions in his *Essay on Language*, where the principle is defended on the score of the evident absurdity of supposing that words can be anything other than an abstraction from sentences. The mistake in the Aristotelian tradition, according to Bentham, was to treat words as conceptually prior to sentences. If one slips into that error, one will entertain as a perfectly realistic genealogy of meaning the ridiculous scenario in which the earliest speakers started with a stock of individual terms, and then 'finding these terms endowed, each of them, somehow or other, with a signification of its own, at a subsequent period some ingenious persons took them in hand, and formed them into propositions' (that is, into sentences).[4] But to suppose that words came first and that sentences were

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1. See my *The Unity of the Proposition*, p. 35.   2. *Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, §62.
3. *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, p. 116.   4. *Essay on Language* VI, §1.