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LITERARY TERMS

A DICTIONARY

THIRD EDITION
REVISED AND ENLARGED

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Karl Beckson
and Arthur Ganz



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Preface

In his dictionary of the English language, Dr. Samuel Johnson defined *lexicographer* as a “harmless drudge.” The authors of *Literary Terms: A Dictionary* express the hope that their drudgery has in fact produced relatively little harm, considering the vexed nature of their subjects: literature and its terminology. At any rate, the generous reception of the first two editions of this book led us to assume that we had succeeded in our intention, as stated in the Preface to the second edition: “to provide a guide to literary terminology detailed enough for the writer or teacher yet clear enough for the student or general reader.”

Since the appearance of the second edition in 1975, new developments in literary criticism (with its inevitable efflorescence of fashionable terminology) have grown so alarmingly that we were convinced that a third edition was called for. We have, accordingly, added such new terms as *deconstruction*, *Russian Formalism*, *feminist criticism*, *reader-response criticism*, *hermeneutics*, and *anxiety of influence*. Moreover, we have revised a number of terms to clarify or expand existing discussions. We have also updated bibliographical citations to encourage readers to pursue their interests further.

As in the previous edition, we employ boldface for terms used in the course of defining other terms so that the reader may consult those in boldface for further discussion. In some cases, such as in the entries on rhyme and tragedy, we group several terms together instead of directing the reader to various other parts of the book. Systematic use of this volume is possible by consulting at the back the Selected List of Entries, which arranges terms by subject.

Finally, once again we wish to thank students, teachers, and friends who have generously offered us comments and advice.

K. B.

A. G.

Abbreviations

abbr.	abbreviated
ca.	about
cf.	compare with
<i>e.g.</i>	for example
<i>i.e.</i>	that is

Prosodic symbols

u	either a short vowel or an unaccented syllable
'	an accented syllable
-	a long vowel
`	a light or secondary stress
	a caesura, or pause
/	a virgule, which separates metrical feet

Letters of the alphabet are used to designate rhyming words in verse (as *abab*) and superior numbers, where appropriate, to designate the number of feet in a line (as $a^4b^3a^4b^3$).

LITERARY TERMS: A DICTIONARY

A

abecedarius: See **acrostic**.

ab ovo: Latin: "from the egg." Beginning a narrative from its logical beginning rather than, as in the traditional **epic**, in the middle of things, *in medias res*. Both terms are used in Horace's *Ars Poetica* (ca. 9 B.C.).

abstract: 1. A summary of a book or document. 2. As opposed to *concrete*. A sentence can be described as abstract if it makes a general statement about a class of persons or objects ("Men are weak") or if its subject is an abstraction—that is, a quality considered apart from its object—such as *wealth*, *beauty*, or *deepness*. "Honesty is the best policy" is an abstract statement, but "Hotchkiss is a thief" is concrete. The latter statement refers to a particular object rather than to a general class of objects.

Absurd, Theater of the: See **Theater of the Absurd**.

academic drama: See **school plays**.

acatalectic: A term applied to verse which is metrically complete. If a verse lacks one or more unaccented syllables in its final foot, it is called "catalectic" (noun form, "catalexis"), or "truncated." (A line from which the initial syllable or syllables are missing is called "headless.") If a verse contains an extra syllable, it is called "hypercatalectic," "hypermetrical," "redundant," or "extra-metrical." In the following quatrain by Blake, the first line is headless, the third acatalectic, and the second and fourth hypercatalectic:

When / Sir Josh / ua Rey / nolds died
 All Na / ture was / degrad / ed;
 The King / dropp'd a tear / into / the Queen's Ear,
 And all / his Pic / tures Fad / ed.

accent: The stress placed upon certain syllables in a line of verse. Stresses are determined by word, rhetorical, and metrical accent. *Word accent* refers to the natural stress pattern of the word

itself, as in *conduct*, the noun, or *conduct*, the verb. *Rhetorical accent* is the stress put on a word because of its function or importance in the sentence, and *metrical accent* is the stress pattern established by the meter. When the metrical accent forces a change in the word accent, the phenomenon is called "wrenched accent." This may be the result of simple ineptitude in the poet, but it is also a characteristic of both folk and literary ballads.

This Hermit good lives in that wood
Which slopes down to the sea.
How loudly his sweet voice he rears!
He loves to talk with mariners
That come from a far countree.
Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

See **ictus**; **primary and secondary accent**; **thesis**.

accentual verse: See **meter**.

acrostic: A poem in which letters of successive lines form a word or pattern. In a true acrostic, the initial letters form the word; in a mesostich, the middle letters do so, and in a telestich, it is the terminal letters. A cross acrostic forms the pattern with the first letter of the first line, the second letter of the second line, etc. If the pattern consists of the letters of the alphabet in order, the acrostic is called an "abecedarius," as in the following, which is given in part:

An Austrian army awfully array'd,
Boldly by battery besieged Belgrade.
Cossack commanders cannonading come
Dealing destruction's devastating doom.
Alaric Watts

act: One of the major divisions of a play. In Classical theory, a play is divided into five acts, but the number was reduced in the nineteenth century. Most modern plays employ three acts, although many have only two or eliminate act structure entirely and use only scene divisions.

action: Though critics employ the term *action* to refer to the succession of events in a play or novel, a distinction may be made

between the physical action and the psychological action, consisting of a character's internal conflicts or the clash of wills between characters. In *Hamlet*, for example, the physical action is considerable—indeed, it is one of the busiest plays in dramatic literature—but this external action derives from an equally significant inner action involving the self-doubts of both the Prince and Claudius. Between them, there rages a psychological as well as a political struggle, from which the tragic circumstances emerge. The question of whether plot or character—outer action or inner action—is more important has been much disputed; it has not been, nor is it likely to be, settled. See **plot**.

aesthetic distance: The distance that must exist between a work of art and the reader or beholder so that it may achieve its intended effect. Thus “distanced,” the reader experiences the power of the literary work, but his experience is controlled by that work's formal qualities. He does not, therefore, confuse art with “life.” A knowledgeable spectator in the theater may deplore the actions of the villain, but he does not rush onstage to succor the heroine. A problem for the reader, the critic, and the artist may be underdistancing, which can distort the experience by excessive subjectivism, or overdistancing, which may debilitate the artistic experience.

The term *aesthetic distance* is used synonymously with *psychical distance*, coined by Edward Bullough in 1912, when he wrote: “Distance is obtained by separating the object and its appeal from one's own self, by putting it out of gear with practical needs and ends.”

See Edward Bullough, *Aesthetics: Lectures and Essays*, ed. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson (1957).

Aestheticism: A literary and artistic movement of the nineteenth century, emerging in France and developing in England and other European countries. Unlike the mere devotion to beauty that characterizes aestheticism in other historical periods, nineteenth-century Aestheticism generally held that life should be lived as art and that art should be independent of social, political, or moral teaching. Hence, the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* (“art for art's sake”), a concept derived from Kant's view of art as “purposiveness without purpose,” is central to Aestheti-

cism. (The term *l'art pour l'art* was first used by Benjamin Constant in his *Journal intime*, February 11, 1804.)

In France, the divorce of art from utility was enunciated as a manifesto by Théophile Gautier in his preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) and developed by such writers as Baudelaire and Mallarmé. In England, the concept of artistic autonomy had its roots in such early-nineteenth-century writers as Coleridge, Leigh Hunt, and Arthur Hallam; in the United States, Poe, writing in "The Poetic Principle" (1850), spoke of the "poem written solely for the poem's sake."

As a widespread phenomenon in literature, painting, and book design, Aestheticism in England may be traced from the 1870's to the end of the century. The Aesthetes were inspired by such figures as Keats, who had suggested, in an ambiguous phrase in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn," an equivalence between Beauty and Truth; the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly Rossetti, whose devotion to art was legendary; Swinburne, who argued for artistic autonomy and who symbolized the artist in conflict with his society; and Whistler, who brought a new artistic consciousness to painting. In particular, however, the Aesthetes looked to Walter Pater as their "Master," whose *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) Oscar Wilde called his "golden book" and to which Arthur Symons referred as "the most beautiful book of prose in our literature." In the conclusion to his work, Pater urged his readers to live with aesthetic intensity, "to burn always with [a] hard, gemlike flame," and spoke of the "love of art for art's sake." But Pater did not advocate an unbridled hedonism (as Wilde thought he had) but an intellectually passionate aestheticism, which, though opposed to didacticism, did not rule out the moral effect of art; indeed, in "Style" (1888), Pater insisted that great art was possible only if it enlarged "our sympathies with each other."

By the 1890's, Aestheticism became more flamboyant and daring: Wilde's *Salomé* and Aubrey Beardsley's androgynous, perverse figures in his illustrations for the play typify what was called **Decadence**. Yet the Aesthetic Movement, in its opposition to nineteenth-century didacticism, focused attention on the autonomy of art and thus prepared the way for such later developments as **Imagism** and the **New Criticism**.

See Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913); William Gaunt, *The Aesthetic Adventure* (1945); R. V. Johnson, *Aestheticism* (1969); Ruth Temple, "Truth in Labelling: Pre-Raphaelitism, Aestheticism, Decadence, Fin de Siècle," *English Literature in Transition*, 17 (1974), 201-17.

aesthetics: From Greek: *aisthetikos*, "sense perception." A term introduced into philosophical discussion in the mid-eighteenth century to refer to explorations of the nature of art and its place in human experience. As a branch of philosophy, aesthetics is largely concerned with general principles rather than with evaluations of specific works of art.

In the past, aestheticians attempted to define Beauty. The objective view, held by Plato and Aristotle, was that Beauty resided in the object; the subjective view, held by Hume, was that it was that which pleases the beholder. Attempting to resolve the conflict, Kant suggested that subjective views may have universal validity.

Modern aestheticians, however, have devoted their attention to other matters: for example, they have explored the relationship of art to truth, whether subjective or objective, and the nature of the aesthetic experience in the beholder. The idea of Beauty is now usually regarded as a problem for the semanticist rather than for the literary critic and aesthetician, for whom Beauty is not the principal value in judging art.

See Albert Hofstadter, *Truth and Art* (1965); Harold Osborne, ed., *Aesthetics in the Modern World* (1968).

affective fallacy: In *The Verbal Icon* (1954), W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and M. C. Beardsley have defined the affective fallacy as "a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*). . . . It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism. . . . the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear." Wimsatt and Beardsley's work has been influential in reinforcing the New Critics' concentration on actual texts rather than peripheral matter.

In "The 'New Criticism': Some Qualifications," *Literary Essays* (1956), David Daiches questions the validity of the affective

fallacy: "The value of literature surely lies in its actual or potential effect on [experienced and sensitive] readers. . . . To deny this is to fall into the 'ontological fallacy' of believing that a work of art fulfills its purpose and achieves its value simply by *being*, so that the critic becomes concerned only to demonstrate the mode of its being by descriptive analysis." See **New Criticism**.

affective stylistics: See **reader-response criticism**.

afflatus: See **inspiration**.

Age of Reason: See **Enlightenment, the**.

agon: Greek: "a contest." That part of a Greek drama in which two characters, each one aided by half the chorus, indulge in verbal conflict.

Agrarians: See **Fugitives and Agrarians**.

alazon: See *miles gloriosus*.

alba: See *aube*.

alexandrine: 1. In French, a verse of twelve syllables containing four (sometimes three) accents. It is used for elevated verse such as that of the classical tragedies. 2. In English, an iambic hexameter verse is often called an alexandrine.

Alienation Effect: See **Epic Theater**.

allegory: An extended narrative that carries a second meaning along with the surface story. The continuity of the second meaning involves an analogous structure of ideas or events (frequently historical or political); this extended metaphor distinguishes allegory from mere allusion or symbolic ambiguity. Hence, though such a work as *Moby Dick* has a rich symbolic structure accompanying the surface narrative, one that offers multiple interpretations, it lacks the continuity of analogous meanings essential to allegory. In general, then, allegory limits the possibility of interpretation once the surface narrative yields the allegorical analogy.

Landscapes and characters in allegory are usually incarnations of abstract ideas, and characters may even bear such names as Death, Fellowship, Good Deeds, and Beauty (as in the medieval

morality play *Everyman*) and Christian, Faithful, and Mr. Worldly Wiseman (as in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*). In these moral allegories, the narrative "level" provides entertainment while the allegorical "level" instructs.

It is often said that allegory "both conceals and reveals." In political allegory, the author may disguise his criticism or satire for fear of reprisal, but perception of the analogy between the narrative and contemporary events reveals the intended meaning. In Orwell's *Animal Farm*, on the other hand, the political allegory of the Bolshevik Revolution and subsequent Stalinist excesses is little concealed by the surface; discovery of the allegorical design is one of the delights of the fable.

Allegory is not only a literary mode but, by extension, a method of critical analysis as well. Thus, critics sometimes interpret works allegorically where they perceive coherent analogies between characters and abstract ideas. In recent years, critics have used Freudian psychology to interpret allegorically such a work as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (Hester as Ego; Rev. Dimmesdale as Superego; and Chillingworth as Id) and myth to find universal analogies inherent in a concrete narrative, as in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which depicts the cursed wanderer who has offended God.

See Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (1964); John MacQueen, *Allegory* (1970); John Whitman, *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique* (1987).

alliteration: The close repetition of consonant sounds, usually at the beginning of words; also called "head rhyme."

To sit in solemn silence in a dull, dark dock,
In a pestilential prison, with a life-long lock,
Awaiting the sensation of a short, sharp shock,
From a cheap and chippy chopper on a big, black block!
W. S. Gilbert, *The Mikado*

Anglo-Saxon prosody was based on alliteration rather than rhyme.

allusion: A reference, usually brief, to a presumably familiar person or thing. For example, the poem below contains, and depends upon, a reference to the phrase "in Abraham's bosom."

Mary Ann has gone to rest
 Safe at last on Abraham's breast,
 Which may be nuts for Mary Ann,
 But is certainly rough on Abraham.

Anonymous

altar poem: See *carmen figuratum*.

ambiguity: In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1938; rev. ed., 1947), William Empson uses this word to refer not to carelessness that produces two or more meanings where a single one is intended but to the richness of poetic speech which can be brought about by "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language." Although Empson does not demand that his distinctions be regularly observed, for purposes of classification he groups his ambiguities into seven categories:

1. A word or syntax can be effective in several ways at once.
2. Two or more meanings may make up the single meaning of the writer.
3. In a pun two ideas can be given simultaneously.
4. Different meanings can combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the writer.
5. An image or figure may lie halfway between two ideas.
6. The reader may be forced to invent interpretations because the things said are contradictory.
7. Two meanings may be contradictory and show a fundamental division in the author's mind.

Because of the pejorative connotations of the term *ambiguity*, other critics have suggested *multiple meaning* and *plurisignation* as alternate terms.

amphiboly (-e; -ogy; -ogism): An ambiguity induced either by grammatical looseness (in the sentence "I stood by my friend crying," we do not know who cried) or by the double meanings of words (the sentence "A dark horse has won the triple crown" may refer either to a rare achievement in horse racing or to an obscure cardinal's election to the papacy). Prophecies with double meanings, such as those made by the witches to Macbeth, may also be called amphibolies.

amphibrach: A metrical foot of three syllables, consisting of one long syllable flanked by two short ones or, in accentual poetry, of one accented syllable flanked by two unaccented ones.

Ī sprang to / the stirrup, / and Jōris, / and hē;
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three . . .

Browning,

“How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix”

anphimac: A metrical foot of three syllables, consisting of one short syllable flanked by two long or, in accentual poetry, of one unstressed syllable flanked by two stressed.

Live thy life,
Young and old,
Like yon oak,
Bright in spring,
Living gold.

Tennyson, “The Oak”

anabasis: Greek: “a going up.” The rising of an action to its climax.

anachronism: Something placed in an inappropriate period of time. An anachronism may be unintentional, such as the clock in *Julius Caesar*, or deliberate, such as Shaw’s reference to the Emperor in *Androcles and the Lion* as “The Defender of the Faith.”

anacoluthon: A sentence which does not maintain a consistent grammatical sequence. In the following sentence, which contains an example of the fabled dangling participle, the subject is *water* when it should be *Hotchkiss*: “Going down for the third time, the water closed over Hotchkiss’s head.”

anacreontic verse: Verse in praise of wine, women, and Epicurean pleasures generally, after the manner of Anacreon, sixth-century-B.C. Greek poet, as in the following stanza of Alexander Brome’s “To His Friend That Had Vowed Small Beer”:

Leave off, fond hermit, leave thy vow,
And fall again to drinking:
That beauty that won’t sack allow,
Is hardly worth thy thinking.
Dry love or small can never hold,
And without Bacchus Venus soon grows cold.

anacrusis: An extra unaccented syllable or group of syllables at the beginning of a verse which regularly starts with an accented syllable, *e.g.*, *To* in line four below:

Seamen three! What men be ye?
 Gotham's three wise men we be.
 Whither in your bowl so free?
To rake the moon from out the sea.

Thomas Love Peacock, "Three Men of Gotham"

anagnorisis: See **tragedy**.

anagogical: See **four levels of meaning**.

anagram: A word or name resulting from the transposition of letters. For example, the title of Samuel Butler's satirical narrative *Erewhon* is an anagram for the word *nowhere*.

analects: A group of short passages, usually collected from the works of one author.

analogy: A resemblance between two different things, sometimes expressed as a simile.

'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none
 Go just alike, yet each believes his own.
 Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*

analytic bibliography: See **bibliography**.

anapest: A metrical foot consisting of two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable. Except for the first foot of lines two and three, all the feet in the following stanza are anapests:

Oh, he flies / through the air / with the great / est of ease.
 This daring young man on the flying trapeze.
 His figure is handsome, all girls he can please,
 And my love he purloined her away.

anaphora: The repetition of an identical word or group of words in successive verses or clauses.

I gave her Cakes, and I gave her Ale
 I gave her Sack and Sherry;
 I kissed her once and I kissed her twice,
 And we were wondrous merry.

Anonymous