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Literary Criticism

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Literary Criticism

To define the domain of literary criticism would require some contentious choices and some contended definitions—about what the “literary” is and about what kinds of interventions can be included as “criticism.” The aim of this entry is not to trace the whole history of literary criticism. Nor should it be assumed that modern literary criticism is naturally or necessarily academic. The following discussion will address such matters and operate with such definitions and omissions, always mindful that doing so does not necessarily settle anything.

M. A. R. Habib locates the origins of literary criticism in Greece around the end of the ninth century, where it continued to develop down to the Hellenistic period (Habib, 2005, p. 9). Over the course of these centuries, literary criticism began to address a set of topics, including mimesis, beauty, truth, the organic unity of a literary work, and the social functions of literature as well as rhetoric, the nature of language, audience, figures of speech, the “canon,” and genres (Habib, 2005, p. 10).

Of course, these topics overlap and depend on each other in complex ways. Gregory Nagy (1999) explains that a claim to truth underpins the poet’s authority, and that the claim to truth depends on the poet’s relation to a tradition. Thus, he notes that “the references made by an archaic poem to its composer, or “author,” are not so much a personal attempt by the poet to identify himself but rather a formal reflection of the poetry upon its own importance: the archaic poem presents itself retrospectively as something transmitted by the ultimate poet,” who represents and offers access to the truth of the heroic past (pp. 5–6). This past serves as the object of religious veneration, the embodiment of moral truth, and the basis of Panhellenic society (Nagy, 1999, pp. 6–11 and chapter 12).

So it appears that the formation of a canon, the authority of the poet, and the claim of poetry to truth are mutually determining and fundamentally related to the social and political order. The relation of these conditions to the themes of poetry, having evolved in the course of long tradition, becomes so tight that theme and form (diction, choice of words and phrases) become mutually determining, too (Nagy, 1999, p. 1). As a result, the authority of the poet comes to rely on the deployment of forms, the correct use of which demonstrates the poet’s fidelity to the tradition. Meanwhile, literary effect—the

ability to move or persuade its audience—becomes a fraught issue precisely because of rhetoric's power and in relation to the structure of society. This issue is at work, for instance, in Thersites's encounter with Odysseus in the *Iliad*, as Bruce Lincoln (1994) has explained, in which Odysseus faces off against an interlocutor of a lower class and divides his address to the assembly according to its political composition (pp. 14–27). Later, in the tradition of iambic poetry of the seventh-century poet Archilochos and the sixth-century poet Hipponax, a fictional speaker inverts the poet's place in society (the adoption of a low or despicable persona), which permits a transgressive speech (such as insult). Such formalized transgressions continue to embody the values coded in the tradition, but they require the audience to understand the codes well enough to see them as independent from the actual circumstances of their utterance, even when they may be, and sometimes are, read biographically (Nagy, 1999, pp. 247–248). In various ways, Greek poetry thematizes the difficulty of its correct interpretation and the contingent and exclusive mode of its address to its audience (Nagy, 1999, pp. 238–242).

Thus, Aristotle considered performances of iambic poetry unsuitable for youths whose education was incomplete and who might therefore be harmed by such poems (Hedreen, 2014, p. 12). This problem, that poetry is dangerous precisely because of its claim to truth and the authority it thereby wins, becomes a theme of later Greek philosophy. Plato's *Republic* famously denounces poetry as harmful to the republic (Books 3 and 10). In Plato's *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*, Socrates criticizes the Sophists for teaching rhetoric because it concerns itself above all with persuading its audience rather than with discovering the truth. A rhetorician may convince his listener without believing his own argument (Habib, 2005, pp. 69–71).

Stanley Fish (1970) offers a reading of *Phaedrus* that complicates the critique of Socrates. "Rather than a single sustained argument," Fish claims, "the *Phaedrus* is a series of discrete conversations or seminars, each with its own carefully posed question, ensuing discussion and firmly drawn conclusion; but so arranged that to enter into the spirit and assumptions of any one of these self-enclosed units is implicitly to reject the spirit and assumptions of the unit immediately preceding" ("Literature in the Reader," p. 136). This means that, section by section, the dialogue "bring[s] the reader to the point where he is no longer interested in the issues it treats; no longer interested because he has come to see that the real issues exist at a higher

level of generality. Thus, in a way peculiar to dialectical form and experience, the space of prose and argument will have been the vehicle of its own abandonment” (p. 136). In reaching finally its conclusion, “the rejection of written artifacts,” the reader of the *Phaedrus*, then, does not find a contradiction but rather “an exact description of what the reader, in his repeated abandoning of successive stages in the argument, has been *doing*” (p. 138). Ultimately, then, the truth the text proposes to reveal, its meaning, is not so much stated in the text (in fact, the text would be a series of contradictory proposals *none of which* could be called its meaning) as realized in the reader, in the reader’s experience of the text.

Thus, to sum up: The poet’s authority depends on a claim to truth but that is importantly different from saying that what the poet writes is true. Criticism and poetry itself reflects on the conditions under which an audience can become the true audience for a poem—under which the poem can convey its truth to its audience. The poet’s authority, therefore, depends on, and derives from, the authority of a tradition or canon and the values it embodies—even when, as in the case of Plato’s *Republic* and his *Phaedrus* (on Fish’s reading), the function of the text is to call into question the ontology of the text and the relationship of the text to truth, the literary tradition, and society.

So, whereas the Greek poet was crucial not only as a poet, but also as something like a critic or historian of literature in the formation of a canon of Hellenic literature, literary criticism and history play important roles in defining modern canons or literatures. As Hans Robert Jauss (1982) explains, the modern era, in its discomfort with literary history, seeks some principle according to which to select and organize its literature. Historicist approaches to literature—recognizing that the critic works not by looking back on a finished process but by reporting from within history—undermine the security of the critic’s values and access to works of the past. Writing the history of closed periods, as if from outside them—or producing a class of literature that, because of its greatness, transcends history—offered unsatisfactory solutions once “it was recognized [for instance] that the opposition between creation and imitation characterizes only the literature of the humanist period of art, but can no longer grasp modern literature or even, already, medieval literature” (Jauss, 1982, pp. 7–9). That is to say, not only is the critic unable to take up an objective position vis-à-vis the literature of his or her own period, but also the perspective of the critic who inhabits history cannot fully transcend its own limitations to understand the work of other periods.

Marxist literary criticism sought to meet the challenge of history by recognizing the inescapable relationship of literature to social praxis. This, in Jauss's account, produces accounts of literature as mimetic, that is, as reflective of social realities—or as “*formative of reality*” (p. 11; emphasis in original). The reflectionist kind of account meets difficulties both in explaining the varieties of literary production under any given set of circumstances and in explaining the literary work's survival of “the annihilation of its socioeconomic basis” (Jauss, p. 12).

György (Georg) Lukács would be a prime example. René Wellek (1981) explains: “‘*Widerspiegelung der Wirklichkeit*’ (reflection of reality) is Lukács's obsessive central metaphor. In the first volume of *Aesthetik* the phrase is repeated (I counted) 1,032 times,” and he continues: “I was too bored to count it in volume 2” (p. 40). This interest in the objective representation of real social relations raises the problem of the writer's relationship to history and to history's course, so that “the contemporary writer is asked to depict reality as it is, objectively, realistically, but with his mind on the future society, socialistically, propagandistically,” while the “writer in the prerevolutionary past is asked the same question: Does he have insight into the structure of society and its movement?” (Wellek, 1981, p. 41). If the task of the contemporary writer requires a paradoxical mixture of objectivity and advocacy, the evaluation of the prerevolutionary writer can bracket the explicitly held beliefs of a Tory Walter Scott or a royalist Honoré Balzac if their representation of society reveals structures consistent with a socialist analysis. However, the problem still remains: The claim of the work to truth depends not on correspondence to real persons and events, but on its conformance to an account of the workings of history and the structure of society. Thus, the importance for Lukács of “types,” which are “to quote one of his formal definitions, ‘the innermost essence of a personality as moved and defined by such determinations which belong objectively to a significant tendency of the evolution of society’” (Wellek, 1981, pp. 43–44, citing Lukács, *Probleme des Realismus*, Vol. 1, p. 588).

The other, more recent, approach sees the work of art as part of a historical process, which is understood to include both its production and its effects—the ways it works—by studying its reception.

An important alternative to Marxist approaches, formalism, faces symmetrical problems. Rather than assert the dependence of the work of art on praxis, formalism seeks to study literary phenomena in terms of their devices.

Literature, for the formalist, is distinguished by the stylistic devices by which it overcomes the automatization that makes practical language familiar, habitual. Literature's development—the literary series' work—is the continual invention of stylistic devices. At first, it seems, this process is entirely internal to literature. However, since literature defines itself against practical language, and since practical language operates as part of history in general, it seems “possible to place the ‘literary series’ and the ‘nonliterary series’ into a relation that comprehends the relationship between literature and history without forcing literature, at the expense of its character as art, into a function of mere copying or commentary” (Jauss, 1982, p. 18). In the words of Boris Eichenbaum (1965), a leading Russian formalist, the school adopted a “dual perspective: the perspective of theoretical study ..., which centered on a given theoretical problem and its applicability to the most diverse materials, and the perspective of historical studies—studies of literary evolution as such” (p. 132). This dual perspective evolved in the early phases of the movement, developing from an early interest in linguistics (which Roman Jakobson exported to Czechoslovakia in helping to found the “Prague School”) and the difference between poetic and ordinary language toward a historical account of the evolving techniques of literature.

According to Eichenbaum, the key theorist of the Russian formalist school was Viktor Shklovsky. Shklovsky's single most famous and important contribution to criticism is probably the concept of *ostraneniye* (“making strange” or “defamiliarization”). Defamiliarization counters the encroachment of “habitualization,” which, as Shklovsky (1965) explains, “devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war ... And art exists,” he goes on to explain, “that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*” (p. 12). Thus, he affirms: “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (p. 12). Hence, the importance of defamiliarization, which, as a psychological effect produced by literary devices, will operate in real changing, historical circumstances, and its success will be defined by its reception by real readers.

By now, the experience of an empirical, historically situated reader seems indispensable to the task of literary criticism. In the 1920s, work such as that of I. A. Richards focused, via psychological theories of the “impulse” as well as empirical research into the actual responses of ordinary readers, on the

experience of the text. This led to an interest in the “public” sense of texts—an account of meaning as the reaction of a competent member of the reading public. I. A. Richards explores this avenue of thought in his *Practical Criticism* (1929), in which puts into practice theories laid out in his *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1962, originally published in 1924). Richards (1962) offers an account of reading that shifts attention from “meaning” toward a causal account of readers’ reaction: “Thus, the paradoxical fact that so trifling an irritation as the sight of marks on paper is able to arouse the whole energies of the mind becomes explicable” (p. 125). And so when words, with their various senses, “occur in such an intricate whole as a poem ... the responses of competent readers may have a similarity which only its occurrence in such a whole can secure” (p. 10). This impersonal view of poetic expression (or communication), which came to be called the New Criticism, found perhaps its defining expression in a pair of essays by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy” and “The Affective Fallacy” (1954). Famously, Wimsatt and Beardsley argued “that the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (p. 3).

In Europe, a school of criticism that built on the insights of phenomenology began, albeit from different premises, to address the reader’s experience as central to interpretation. Phenomenological criticism, on the account offered by Georges Poulet (1969), sees reading as determined by an awareness of another consciousness made available by the text, “the consciousness of another no different from the one I automatically assume in every human being I encounter, except that in this case the consciousness is open to me, welcomes me, lets me look deep inside itself, and even allows me, with unheard-of license, to think what it thinks and feel what it feels” (p. 54). This surrender to the world of the text, however, must be accompanied in some combination by an awareness of the work as a formal arrangement. This does not mean, however, seeking evidence about the author who arranged the words that make up the text. (To this extent, the phenomenologist agrees with the exponent of the New Criticism.) Rather, it means “going back, within the sphere of the work, from the objective elements systematically arranged, to a certain power of organization, inherent in the work itself, as if the latter showed itself to be an intentional consciousness determining its arrangements and solving its problems” (Poulet, 1969, p. 67). This double relation to the work—of surrender to the fictional world it narrates and of formal analysis—requires a complex of dual relations to the text so that the

reader's experience is both free and wholly his or her own while it is also a complete surrender to the world opened by the text and so that meaning is at all times defined by the successive, immediate, imaginative realizations of the text's fictional world and also by the text's total structure (Ray, 1984, p. 21).

Hence, perhaps, Poulet's paradoxical conclusion: "It seems then that criticism, in order to accompany the mind in this effort of detachment from itself, needs to annihilate, or at least momentarily to forget, the objective elements of the work, and to elevate itself to the apprehension of a subjectivity without objectivity" (p. 68). The answer to the critic's dilemmas—the critic's dual relations to the text—is to forget the objective embodiment of the subjectivity that is the critic's prize, which is to say: to forget the text.

The relation between the objective existence of the text and the contingent imaginative animation of its narrative in the mind of a reader becomes the theme of an existentialist theory of reading, such as Jean-Paul Sartre's, as well as of later reader-response criticism. While Sartre, in his *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, sees the work as the author's way of instigating a limitless creativity in the reader, whose ongoing and creative exercise of freedom, which, as it increases, increases the free creativity thereby imputed to the author (Ray, 1984, p. 13).

On the other hand, William Ray (1984) explains that reader-response theories can range from those that, like the theory of Roman Ingarden, give the text and the reader's imaginative "concretization" of it equal, and in a sense opposed, reality to those that envision a more dynamic relation between the text (as a thing given in advance) and the reader's concretization of it, such as Wolfgang Iser's theory (pp. 33–35). In the latter's view, the progressive concretizations (the experience and response to "gaps" and "negativities") issue in a cumulative, "holistic viewpoint, transcendent of any single perspective" from which "all other points of view projected by the text can be contemplated" (Ray, 1984, p. 36). Either way, the problem of reference arises—which is to say, we are left needing to know whether to verify an interpretation according to the given text or the reader's experience, or, put slightly differently, wanting to know "to whose lived experience the concretization correlates" (Ray, 1984, p. 49).

The question is the crux, really, of the critical process since what distinguishes a reader-response theory like Iser's from others—indeed, what likewise gives other theories their specificity—is this question of referential

authority. According to what authority are we to regulate our readings—according to “form, historical period, rhetorical strategy, or authorial intention” (Ray, 1984, p. 55)? If the imagination’s access to the subjectivity embodied in the text validates the phenomenologist’s reading, and the dialectical modification of the reader’s concretization in the successive experience of the text validates the reader-response critic’s, the codes of the language or the collective ideas of the discipline serve to validate interpretation for Jonathan Culler and E. D. Hirsh (Ray, 1984, pp. 99, 111).

The validity of authorial intention as the source of referential authority has been contested, most especially since the rise of poststructuralism. Many have argued, and well before poststructuralism, that modern writing has opened more and more space for the creative activity of a reader. And, while Wimsatt and Beardsley’s remarks on intention were meant to define the New Critics’ commitment to the work as an object and to evaluation and interpretation as public processes, it was clear at the same time that difficulties of an ontological nature were presenting themselves to criticism—precisely because one’s account of what kind of thing a work of literature *was* (act or object, brute fact or product of interpretation) bore on the issue of referential authority (De Man, 1983; Fish, 1981). Still, it was not until the 1960s that a programmatic refusal of the author’s role in determining the meaning of a text became axiomatic for literary criticism generally. A series of texts, including Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author” (1967), Michel Foucault’s “What Is an Author?” (1969), and Jacques Derrida’s “Signature Event Context” (1971), from roughly the same moment articulate not a pragmatic impatience with illegitimate appeals to biography in the explanation and judgment of literature but principled and closely argued explanations of the irrelevance of authorial intention to reading *per se*.

Perhaps the most prominent exponent of deconstructive literary criticism was Paul de Man. In his work the problem of referential authority gained special centrality. In his *Allegories of Reading* (1982), for instance, de Man explains that “the innumerable writings that dominate our lives are made intelligible by a preordained agreement as to their referential authority” (p. 204), which is embodied in the “subject-metaphor” (p. 18) that is the narrator or the “I” of the text (and *not* in the historical person of the author). But, since de Man argues that this grammatical figure for referential authority only occupies the place of such authority and, being a grammatical figure, cannot exercise it, the “I” of

the text becomes, on his account, an allegory “of the impossibility of reading” (p. 205).

The popularity of reader-response criticism and of deconstruction almost completely succeeded in removing the author from discussions of theories of interpretation when, in 1982 Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels argued that authorial intention was identical with meaning and, further, that (despite the victory of “theory”) attempts to describe the two as anything but identical are incoherent. This is because, at a deep level, Knapp and Michaels (1982) argue, no other principle than authorial intention can supply an adequate account of the ontology, and therefore the identity, of texts (pp. 735–736). “Theory” turns criticism to experience rather than texts and readers rather than authors. The rise, simultaneous with the ascendancy of “theory,” of cultural criticism and of various critical practices organized around identity is, then, not unrelated to developments in theory (e.g., Bérubé, 2004, p. 21; Michaels, 2004, pp. 129–146). With cultural criticism, we leave literary criticism to attend instead to culture per se, and so we leave the scope of this discussion. Certain discourses, of cognitive or affective response, for instance, have brought techniques of cultural or scientific investigation to bear on literary texts but, in doing so, set aside the specificity of the literary (Zunshine, 2010, pp. 5–8).

For literary criticism committed to the internal relation of ascriptive categories (identities) to meaning, on the other hand, Edward Said (1975) affirms that “texts are a system of forces institutionalized at some expense by the reigning culture” (pp. 21–22). Thus, we return to notions with which we began, such as “the critic’s role in writing as dialectically creating the values by which art might be judged and understood” (Said, 1975, p. 21). But this activity is not like that of the ancient poet, whose self-reflexive engagement with literature derived its authority from its privileged relation to the truth, namely, the tradition transmitted to its people. Rather, according to the postcolonial critic Said, modern textual criticism, which replaces “God as author-authority,” “enables the appearance of European ethnocentrism” (pp. 15–16). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, writing at roughly the same time, explain that the connection between the figure of the author and authority is deeply implicated in the construction of the author as a patriarchal/male figure, which reaffirms its maleness by constructing woman as inferior and unable to create. And that means that even women’s literature comes to be shaped by the metaphors and types defined by the dominant male literature, and the representation of

women by men becomes a matter internal to the possibility of women's writing: "the creative 'I AM' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 17). Thus literary criticism's task comes to entail (once again, as it did for the ancient Greeks) considering the relation of the poet's place in society to the forms his *or her* words can take.

Likewise, in Said's words, the literary critic plays a "role in creating the processes of the *present*, as process and inauguration, the actual conditions by means of which art and writing bear significance" (p. 21). Said calls on the critic to use this function for "the articulation of those voices dominated, displaced, or silenced by the textuality of texts" (p. 21). Yet, he notes, following Lukács and taking Socrates as his example, that the literary critic's form par excellence, the essay, guarantees him "an ironic destiny with regard to the great questions of life" (p. 20). Said affirms that, like Socrates, whose "death perfectly symbolizes in its arbitrariness and irrelevance to those questions he debates," the critic's essay "is patently insufficient in its intellectuality with regard to living experience" (p. 20).

Perhaps Said and Fish, in their recourse to the figure of Socrates, correctly signal a crisis in modern literary criticism that echoes the crisis that closes its development in classical Greece—a crisis in the authority of both poet and critic, a crisis of meaning. Fish offers another reading, of a sentence from the "Conclusion" of Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*. The sentence, Fish (1970) explains, "does not, at first sight, afford much scope for the critic's analytical skill": "That clear perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours" ("Literature in the Reader," p. 129). In the end, however, after taking the sentence word by word, it shows itself to be an act of conjuring and vanishing. Fish affirms: "Now you see it (that), now you don't" (p. 130).

Lately, some literary critics have written more optimistically. Ellis Hanson (2012) offers his own reading of Pater, describing (in a way not unlike Fish's) the experience of the prose's unfolding in the reader's time (p. 558ff). The result, however, is not the self-consuming "Now you see it (that), now you don't" that Fish narrates. Rather, Hanson's experience of Pater's prose is of a prose that defers its object, a "languorousness" that "surrenders a certain objectivity, a certain activity and will-to-possess, in favor of a wistfully amorous expansion of subjective effects of impression, contemplation, and imagination, under the pressing influence of the beloved object, of experience itself, in its continual departure" (p. 562). To this "new aesthetic criticism," Michael Clune opposes another possibility: that an antitheatrical impulse,

following Samuel Beckett in texts such as *Malloy* (1951) and along the lines described by Michael Fried in a series of critical and art-historical texts beginning with “Art and Objecthood” (1967), has pressed toward a nonrelational mode of writing, which denies both the politics of recognition and the claims of the “new aesthetic criticism.” The value addressed in this criticism is a refusal of the reader, of the claims of social relations, of truth and value as arising from such relations, and a reorganization of the enterprise of writing around the “satisfaction” of the writer, and (*pace de Man and Archilochos*) the radical recommitment of the “I” to a relationship of identity with the person of the writer (Clune).

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