

## **Theory of Literature**

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Contents

Preface

### I. DEFINITIONS AND DISTINCTIONS

I. Literature and Literary Study 3

II. The Nature of Literature 9

III. The Function of Literature 19

IV. Literary Theory, Criticism, and History 29

V. General, Comparative, and National

Literature 38

### II. PRELIMINARY OPERATIONS

VI. The Ordering and Establishing of Evidence 49

### III. THE EXTRINSIC APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

Introduction 65

VII. Literature and Biography 67

VIII. Literature and Psychology 75

IX. Literature and Society 89

X. Literature and Ideas 107

XI. Literature and the Other Arts 124

### IV. THE INTRINSIC STUDY OF LITERATURE

XII. The Analysis of the Literary Work of Art 139

XIII. Euphony, Rhythm, and Meter 159

x Contents

XIV. Style and Stylistics 177

XV. Image, Metaphor, Symbol, Myth 190

XVI. The Nature and Modes of Narrative Fiction 219

XVII. Literary Genres 235

XVIII. Evaluation 248

XIX. Literary History 263

V. THE ACADEMIC SITUATION

XX. The Study of Literature in the Graduate

School 285

Notes 299

Bibliography 347

Index 389

I

Definitions and Distinctions

**We must** first make a distinction between literature and literary study. The two are distinct activities: one is creative, an art; the other, if not precisely a science, is a species of knowledge or of learning. There have been attempts, of course, to obliterate this distinction. For instance, it has been argued that one cannot understand literature unless one writes it, that one cannot and should not study Pope without trying his own hand at heroic couplets or an Elizabethan drama without himself writing a drama in blank verse. <sup>1</sup> \* Yet useful as the experience of literary creation is to him, the task of the student is completely distinct. He must translate his experience of literature into intellectual terms, assimilate it to a

coherent scheme which must be rational if it is to be knowledge. It may be true that the subject matter of his study is irrational or at least contains strongly unrational elements ; but he will not be therefore in any other position than the historian of painting or the musicologist or, for that matter, the sociologist or the anatomist.

**Clearly, some** difficult problems are raised by this relationship. The solutions proposed have been various. Some theorists would simply deny that literary study is knowledge and advise a "second creation," with results which to most of us seem futile today — Pater's description of Mona Lisa or the florid passages in Symonds or Symons. Such "creative criticism" has usually meant a needless duplication or, at most, the translation of one work of art into another, usually inferior. Other theorists draw rather different skeptical conclusions from our contrast between literature and its study: literature, they argue, cannot be "stud- ied" at all. We can only read, enjoy, appreciate it. For the rest, we can only accumulate all kinds of information "about" litera- \* For the notes, cf. pp. 299-346. 3 4 Theory of Literature Such skepticism is actually much more widespread than one might suppose. In practice, it shows itself in a stress on environ- mental "facts" and in the disparagement of all attempts to go beyond them. Appreciation, taste, enthusiasm are left to the private indulgence as an inevitable, though deplorable, escape from the austerity of sound scholarship. But such a dichotomy into "scholarship" and "appreciation" makes no provision at all for the true study of literature, at once "literary" and "systematic."

**The problem** is one of how, intellectually, to deal with art, and with literary art specifically. Can it be done? And how can it be done? One answer has been: it can be done with the methods developed by the natural sciences, which need only be trans- ferred to the study of literature. Several kinds of such transfer can be distinguished. One is the attempt to emulate the general scientific ideals of objectivity, impersonality, and certainty, an attempt which on the whole supports the collecting of neutral facts. Another is the effort to imitate the methods of natural science through the study of causal antecedents and origins - y in practice, this "genetic method" justifies the tracing of any kind of relationship as long as it is possible on chronological grounds. Applied more rigidly, scientific causality is used to explain lit- erary phenomena by the assignment of determining causes to economic, social, and political conditions. Again, there is the introduction of the quantitative methods appropriately used in some sciences, i.e., statistics, charts, and graphs. And finally there is the attempt to use biological concepts in the tracing of the evo- lution of literature. 2

**Today there** would be almost general recognition that this transfer has not fulfilled the expectations with which it was made originally. Sometimes scientific methods have proved their value within a strictly limited area, or with a limited technique such as the use of statistics in certain methods of textual criticism. But most promoters of this scientific invasion into literary study have either confessed failure and ended with skepticism or have com- forted themselves with delusions concerning the future successes of the scientific method. Thus, I. A. Richards used to

refer to the future triumphs of neurology as insuring the solutions of all literary problems. 3 Literature and Literary Study 5

**We shall** have to come back to some of the problems raised by this widespread application of natural science to literary study. They cannot be dismissed too easily and there is, no doubt, a large field in which the two methodologies contact or even overlap. Such fundamental methods as induction and deduction, analysis, synthesis, and comparison are common to all types of systematic knowledge. But, patently, the other solution commends itself: literary scholarship has its own valid methods which are not always those of the natural sciences but are nevertheless intellectual methods. Only a very narrow conception of truth can exclude the achievements of the humanities from the realm of knowledge. Long before modern scientific development, philosophy, history, jurisprudence, theology, and even philology had worked out valid methods of knowing. Their achievements may have become obscured by the theoretical and practical triumphs of the modern physical sciences but they are nevertheless real and permanent and can, sometimes with some modifications, easily be resuscitated or renovated. It should be simply recognized that there is this difference between the methods and aims of the natural sciences and the humanities.

**How to** define this difference is a complex problem. As early as 1883, Wilhelm Dilthey worked out the distinction between the methods of natural science and those of history in terms of a contrast between explanation and comprehension. 4 The scientist, Dilthey argued, accounts for an event in terms of its causal antecedents, while the historian tries to understand its meaning. This process of understanding is necessarily individual and even subjective. A year later, Wilhelm Windelband, the well-known historian of philosophy, also attacked the view that the historical sciences should imitate the methods of the natural sciences. 5 The natural scientists aim to establish general laws while the historians try to grasp the unique and non-recurring fact. This view was elaborated and somewhat modified by Heinrich Rickert, who drew a line not so much between generalizing and individualizing methods as between the sciences of nature and the sciences of culture. 6 The sciences of culture, he argued, are interested in the concrete and individual. Individuals, however, can be discovered and comprehended only in reference to some scheme of values, which is merely another name for culture. In 6 *Theory of Literature* France, A. D. Xenopol distinguished between the natural sciences as occupied with the "facts of repetition" and history as occupied with the "facts of succession." In Italy, Benedetto Croce based his whole philosophy on a historical method which is totally different from that of the natural sciences. 7

**A full** discussion of these problems would involve decision on such problems as the classification of the sciences, the philosophy of history, and the theory of knowledge. 8 Yet a few concrete examples may at least suggest that there is a very real problem which a student of literature has to face. Why do we study Shakespeare? It is clear we are not primarily interested in what he has in common with all men, for we could then as well study any other man, nor are we interested

in what he has in common with all Englishmen, all men of the Renaissance, all Elizabethans, all poets, all dramatists, or even all Elizabethan dramatists, because in that case we might just as well study Dekker or Heywood. We want rather to discover what is peculiarly Shakespeare's, what makes Shakespeare Shakespeare and this is obviously a problem of individuality and value. Even in studying a period or movement or one specific national literature, the literary student will be interested in it as an individuality with characteristic features and qualities which set it off from other similar groupings.

**The case** for individuality can be supported also by another argument: attempts to find general laws in literature have always failed. M. Cazamian's so-called law of English literature, the "oscillation of the rhythm of the English national mind" between two poles, sentiment and intellect (accompanied by the further assertion that these oscillations become speedier the nearer we approach the present age), is either trivial or false. It breaks down completely in its application to the Victorian age. 9 Most of these "laws" turn out to be only such psychological uniformities as action and reaction, or convention and revolt, which, even if they were beyond doubt, could not tell us anything really significant about the processes of literature. While physics may see its highest triumphs in some general theory reducing to a formula electricity and heat, gravitation and light, no general law can be assumed to achieve the purpose of literary study: the more general, the more abstract and hence Literature and Literary Study 7 empty it will seem; the more the concrete object of the work of art will elude our grasp.

**There are** thus two extreme solutions to our problem. One, made fashionable by the prestige of the natural sciences, identifies scientific and historical method and leads either to the mere collection of facts or to the establishment of highly generalized historical "laws." The other, denying that literary scholarship is a science, asserts the personal character of literary "understanding" and the "individuality," even "uniqueness," of every work of literature. But in its extreme formulation the anti-scientific solution has its own obvious dangers. Personal "intuition" may lead to a merely emotional "appreciation," to complete subjectivity. To stress the "individuality" and even "uniqueness" of every work of art — though wholesome as a reaction against facile generalizations — is to forget that no work of art can be wholly "unique" since it then would be completely incomprehensible. It is, of course, true that there is only one Hamlet or even one "Trees" by Joyce Kilmer. But even a rubbish heap is unique in the sense that its precise proportions, position, and chemical combinations cannot be duplicated exactly. Moreover, all words in every literary work of art are, by their very nature, "generals" and not particulars. The quarrel between the "universal" and "particular" in literature has been going on since Aristotle proclaimed poetry to be more universal and hence more philosophical than history, which is concerned only with the particular, and since Dr. Johnson asserted that the poet should not "count the streaks of the tulip." The Romantics and most modern critics never tire of stressing the particularity of poetry, its "texture," its concreteness. 10 But one should recognize that each work of literature is both general and particular, or — better, possibly — is both individual and general.

Individuality can be distinguished from complete particularity and uniqueness. 11 Like every human being, each work of literature has its individual characteristics; but it also shares common properties with other works of art, just as every man shares traits with humanity, with all members of his sex, nation, class, profession, etc. We can thus generalize concerning works of art, Elizabethan drama, all drama, all literature, all art. Literary criticism and literary history both attempt to characterize the individuality of a work, of an author, of a Theory of Literature period, or of a national literature. But this characterization can be accomplished only in universal terms, on the basis of a literary theory. Literary theory, an organon of methods, is the great need of literary scholarship today.

**This ideal** does not, of course, minimize the importance of sympathetic understanding and enjoyment as preconditions of our knowledge and hence our reflections upon literature. But they are only preconditions. To say that literary study serves only the art of reading is to misconceive the ideal of organized knowledge, however indispensable this art may be to the student of literature. Even though "reading" be used broadly enough to include critical understanding and sensibility, the art of reading is an ideal for a purely personal cultivation. As such it is highly desirable, and also serves as a basis of a widely spread literary culture. It cannot, however, replace the conception of "literary scholarship," conceived of as super-personal tradition.

## CHAPTER II The Nature of "Literature"

**The first** problem to confront us is, obviously, the subject matter of literary scholarship. What is literature? What is not literature? What is the nature of literature? Simple as such questions sound, they are rarely answered clearly.

**One way** is to define "literature" as everything in print. We then shall be able to study the "medical profession in the fourteenth century" or "planetary motion in the early Middle Ages" or "Witchcraft in Old and New England." As Edwin Greenlaw has argued, "Nothing related to the history of civilization is beyond our province"; we are "not limited to belles lettres or even to printed or manuscript records in our effort to understand a period or civilization," and we "must see our work in the light of its possible contribution to the history of culture." x According to Greenlaw's theory, and the practice of many scholars, literary study has thus become not merely closely related to the history of civilization but indeed identical with it. Such study is literary only in the sense that it is occupied with printed or written matter, necessarily the primary source of most history. It can be, of course, argued in defense of such a view that historians neglect these problems, that they are too much preoccupied with diplomatic, military, and economic history, and that thus the literary scholar is justified in invading and taking over a neighboring terrain. Doubtless nobody should be forbidden to enter any area he likes, and doubtless there is much to be said in favor of cultivating the history of civilization in the broadest terms. But still the study ceases to be literary. The objection that this is only a quibble about terminology is not convincing. The study of everything

connected with the history of civilization does, as a matter of fact, crowd out strictly literary studies. All distinctions fall; extraneous criteria are introduced into literature; and, by consequence, literature will be judged valuable only so far as it yields results for this or that adjacent discipline. The identification of literature with the history of civilization is a denial of the specific field and the specific methods of literary study.

**Another way** of defining literature is to limit it to "great books," books which, whatever their subject, are "notable for literary form or expression." Here the criterion is either aesthetic worth alone or aesthetic worth in combination with general intellectual distinction. Within lyric poetry, drama, and fiction, the greatest works are selected on aesthetic grounds; other books are picked for their reputation or intellectual eminence together with aesthetic value of a rather narrow kind: style, composition, general force of presentation are the usual characteristics singled out. This is a common way of distinguishing or speaking of literature. By saying that "this is not literature," we express such a value judgment; we make the same kind of judgment when we speak of a book on history, philosophy, or science as belonging to "literature." Studies are written with such an assumption behind them: Henry Hallam's *Introduction to the Literary History of the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries* discusses books on theology, logic, and jurisprudence, and even mathematics; only — and for unaccountable reasons — historiography is left out.

**Though Hallam's** dividing line may seem peculiarly arbitrary, most literary histories do include treatment of philosophers, historians, theologians, moralists, politicians, and even some scientists. It would, for example, be difficult to imagine a literary history of eighteenth-century England without an extended treatment of Berkeley and Hume, Bishop Butler and Gibbon, Burke and even Adam Smith. The treatment of these authors, though usually much briefer than that of poets, playwrights, and novelists, is rarely limited to their strictly aesthetic merits. In practice, we get perfunctory and inexpert accounts of these authors in terms of their speciality. Quite rightly, Hume cannot be judged except as a philosopher, Gibbon except as a historian, Bishop Butler as a Christian apologist and moralist, and Adam Smith as a moralist and economist. But in most literary histories these thinkers are discussed in a fragmentary fashion without the proper context, — the history of their subject The Nature of Literature 1 1 of discourse — without a real grasp, that is, of the history of philosophy, of ethical theory, of historiography, of economic theory. The literary historian is not automatically transformed into a proper historian of these disciplines. He becomes simply a compiler, a self-conscious intruder.

**The study** of isolated "great books" may be highly commendable for pedagogical purposes. We all must approve the idea that students — and even beginning students — should read great or at least good books rather than compilations or historical curiosities. 2 We may, however, doubt that the principle is worth preserving in its purity for the sciences, history, or any other accumulative and

progressing subject. Within the history of imaginative literature, limitation to the great books makes incomprehensible the continuity of literary tradition, the development of literary genres, and indeed the very nature of the literary process, besides obscuring the background of social, linguistic, ideological, and other conditioning circumstances. In history, philosophy, and similar subjects, it actually introduces an excessively "aesthetic" point of view. There is obviously no other reason than stress on expository "style" and organization for singling out Thomas Huxley from all English scientists as the one worth reading. It is further to be remarked that this criterion must, with very few exceptions, favor popularizers over the great originators: it will, and must, prefer Huxley to Newton, Bergson to Kant.

**The term** "literature" seems best if we limit it to the art of literature, that is, to imaginative literature. There are certain difficulties with so employing the term; but, in English, the possible alternatives, such as "fiction" or "poetry," are either already pre-empted by narrower meanings or, like "imaginative literature" or *belles lettres*, are clumsy and misleading. One of the objections to "literature" is its suggestion (in its etymology from *Utera*) of limitation to written or printed literature; for, clearly, any coherent conception must include "oral literature." In this respect, the German term *Wortkunst* and the Russian *slovesnost* have the advantage over their English equivalent.

**The main** distinctions to be drawn are between the literary, the everyday, and the scientific uses of language. A recent discussion of this point by Thomas Clark Pollock, *The Nature of Literature*, though true as far as it goes, seems not entirely satisfactory, especially in defining the distinction between literary and everyday language. The problem is crucial and by no means simple in practice, since literature, in distinction from the other arts, has no medium of its own and since many mixed forms and subtle transitions undoubtedly exist. It is fairly easy to distinguish between the language of science and the language of literature. The mere contrast between "thought" and "emotion" or "feeling" is, however, not sufficient. Literature does contain thought, while emotional language is by no means confined to literature: witness a lovers' conversation or an ordinary argument. Still, the ideal scientific language is purely "denotative": it aims at a one-to-one correspondence between sign and referent. The sign is completely arbitrary, hence can be replaced by equivalent signs. The sign is also transparent; that is, without drawing attention to itself, it directs us unequivocally to its referent.

**Thus scientific** language tends toward such a system of signs as mathematics or symbolic logic. Its ideal is such a universal language as the *characteristica universalis* which Leibniz had begun to plan as early as the late seventeenth century. Compared to scientific language, literary language will appear in some ways deficient. It abounds in ambiguities; it is, like every other historical language, full of homonyms, arbitrary or irrational categories such as grammatical gender; it is permeated with historical accidents, memories, and associations. In a word, it is highly "connotative." Moreover, literary language is far from merely referential. It

has its expressive side; it conveys the tone and attitude of the speaker or writer. And it does not merely state and express what it says; it also wants to influence the attitude of the reader, persuade him, and ultimately change him. There is a further important distinction between literary and scientific language: in the former, the sign itself, the sound symbolism of the word, is stressed. All kinds of techniques have been invented to draw attention to it, such as meter, alliteration, and patterns of sound.

**These distinctions** from scientific language may be made in different degrees by various works of literary art: for example, the sound pattern will be less important in a novel than in certain lyrical poems, impossible of adequate translation. The expressive element will be far less in an "objective novel," which may disguise and almost conceal the attitude of the writer, than in a "personal" lyric. The pragmatic element, slight in "pure" poetry, may be large in a novel with a purpose or a satirical or didactic poem. Furthermore, the degree to which the language is intellectualized may vary considerably: there are philosophical and didactic poems which cannot be excluded from literature, which yet approximate, at least occasionally, the scientific use of language. Still, whatever the mixed modes apparent upon an examination of concrete literary works of art, the distinctions between the literary use and the scientific use seem clear: literary language is far more deeply involved in the historical structure of the language; it stresses the awareness of the sign itself; it has its expressive and pragmatic side which scientific language will always want so far as possible to minimize.

**More difficult to** establish is the distinction between everyday and literary language. Everyday language is not a uniform concept: it includes such wide variants as colloquial language, the language of commerce, official language, the language of religion, the slang of students. But obviously much that has been said about literary language holds also for the other uses of language excepting the scientific. Everyday language also has its expressive function, though this varies from a colorless official announcement to the passionate plea roused by a moment of emotional crisis. Everyday language is full of the irrationalities and contextual changes of historical language, though there are moments when it aims at almost the precision of scientific description. Only occasionally is there awareness of the signs themselves in everyday speech. Yet such awareness does appear — in the sound symbolism of names and actions. No doubt, everyday language wants most frequently to achieve results, to influence actions and attitudes. But it would be false to limit it merely to communication. A child's talking for hours without a listener and an adult's almost meaningless social chatter show that there are many uses of language which are not strictly, or at least primarily, communicative.

**It is thus** quantitatively that literary language is first of all to be differentiated from the varied uses of every day. The resources of language are exploited much more deliberately and systematically. In the work of a subjective poet, we have manifested a "personality" far more coherent and all-pervasive than persons as we see them in everyday situations. Certain types of poetry will use

paradox, ambiguity, the contextual change of meaning, even the irrational association of grammatical categories such as gender or tense, quite deliberately. Poetic language organizes, tightens, the resources of everyday language, and sometimes does even violence to them, in an effort to force us into awareness and attention. Many of these resources a writer will find formed, and preformed, by the silent and anonymous workings of many generations. In certain highly developed literatures, and especially in certain epochs, the poet merely uses an established convention: the language, so to speak, poeticizes for him. Still, every work of art imposes an order, an organization, a unity on its materials. This unity sometimes seems very loose, as in many sketches or adventure stories but it increases to the complex, close-knit organization of certain poems, in which it may be almost impossible to change a word or the position of a word without impairing its total effect.

**The pragmatic** distinction between literary language and everyday language is much clearer. We reject as poetry or label as mere rhetoric everything which persuades us to a definite outward action. Genuine poetry affects us more subtly. Art imposes some kind of framework which takes the statement of the work out of the world of reality. Into our semantic analysis we thus can reintroduce some of the common conceptions of aesthetics: "disinterested contemplation," "aesthetic distance," "framing." Again, however, we must realize that the distinction between art and non-art, between literature and the non-literary linguistic utterance, is fluid. The aesthetic function may extend to linguistic pronouncements of the most various sort. It would be a narrow conception of literature to exclude all propaganda art or didactic and satirical poetry. We have to recognize transitional forms like the essay, biography, and much rhetorical literature. In different periods of history the realm of the aesthetic function seems to expand or to contract: the personal letter, at times, was an art form, as was the sermon, while today, in agreement with the contemporary tendency against the confusion of genres, there appears a narrowing of the aesthetic function, a marked stress on purity of art, a reaction against pan-aestheticism and its claims as voiced by the aesthetics of the late nineteenth century. It seems, however, best to consider as literature only works in which the aesthetic function is dominant, while we can recognize that there are aesthetic elements, such as style and composition, in works which have a completely different, non-aesthetic purpose, such as scientific treatises, philosophical dissertations, political pamphlets, sermons.

**But the** nature of literature emerges most clearly under the referential aspect. The center of literary art is obviously to be found in the traditional genres of the lyric, the epic, the drama. In all of them, the reference is to a world of fiction, of imagination. The statements in a novel, in a poem, or in a drama are not literally true they are not logical propositions. There is a central and important difference between a statement, even in a historical novel or a novel by Balzac which seems to convey "information" about actual happenings, and the same information appearing in a book of history or sociology. Even in the subjective lyric, the "I" of the poet is a fictional, dramatic "I." A character in a novel differs from a historical figure or a

figure in real life. He is made only of the sentences describing him or put into his mouth by the author. He has no past, no future, and sometimes no continuity of life. This elementary reflection disposes of much criticism devoted to Hamlet in Wittenberg, the influence of Hamlet's father on his son, the slim and young Falstaff in Maurice Morgann's absurdly overpraised essay, "The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines," the question of "how many children had Lady Macbeth." 4 Time and space in a novel are not those of real life. Even an apparently most realistic novel, the very "slice of life" of the naturalist, is constructed according to certain artistic conventions. Especially from a later historical perspective we see how similar are naturalistic novels in choice of theme, type of characterization, events selected or admitted, ways of conducting dialogue. We discern, likewise, the extreme conventionality of even the most naturalistic drama not only in its assumption of a scenic frame but in the way space and time are handled, the way even the supposedly realistic dialogue is selected and conducted, and the way characters enter and leave the stage. 5 Whatever the distinctions between *The Tempest* and *A Doll's House*, they share in this dramatic conventionality.

**If we** recognize "nationality," "invention," or "imagination" as the distinguishing trait of literature, we think thus of literature in terms of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Balzac, Keats rather than of Cicero or Montaigne, Bossuet, or Emerson. Admittedly, there will be "boundary" cases, works like Plato's *Republic* to which it would be difficult to deny, at least in the great myths, passages of "invention" and "fictionality," while they are at the same time primarily works of philosophy. This conception of literature is descriptive, not evaluative. No wrong is done to a great and influential work by relegating it to rhetoric, to philosophy, to political pamphleteering, all of which may pose problems of aesthetic analysis, of stylistics and composition, similar or identical to those presented by literature, but where the central quality of fictionality will be absent. This conception will thus include in it all kinds of fiction, even the worst novel, the worst poem, the worst drama. Classification as art should be distinguished from evaluation.

**One common** misunderstanding must be removed. "Imaginative" literature need not use images. Poetic language is permeated with imagery, beginning with the simplest figures and culminating in the total all-inclusive mythological systems of a Blake or Yeats. But imagery is not essential to fictional statement and hence to much literature. There are good completely imageless poems; there is even a "poetry of statement." Imagery, besides, should not be confused with actual, sensuous, visual image-making. Under the influence of Hegel, nineteenth-century aestheticians such as Vischer and Eduard von Hartmann argued that all art is the "sensuous shining forth of the idea," while another school (Fiedler, Hildebrand, Riehl) spoke of all art as "pure visibility." 6 But much great literature does not evoke sensuous images, or, if it does, it does so only incidentally, occasionally, and intermittently. 7. In the depiction even of a fictional character the writer may not suggest visual images at all. We scarcely can visualize any of Dostoevsky's or Henry James's characters, while we learn to know their states of mind, their motivations, evaluations, attitudes, and desires very completely.

**At the most**, a writer suggests some schematized outline or The Nature of Literature I J one single physical trait — the frequent practice of Tolstoy or Thomas Mann. The fact that we object to many illustrations, though by good artists and, in some cases (e.g., Thackeray's), even by the author himself, shows that the writer presents us only with such a schematized outline as is not meant to be filled out in detail.

**If we** had to visualize every metaphor in poetry we would become completely bewildered and confused. While there are readers given to visualizing and there are passages in literature where such imaginings seem required by the text, the psychological question should not be confused with analysis of the poet's symbolic devices. These devices are largely the organization of mental processes which occur also outside of literature. Thus metaphor is latent in much of our everyday language and overt in slang and popular proverbs. The most abstract terms, by metaphorical transfer, derive from ultimately physical relationships {comprehend, define, eliminate, substance, subject, hypothesis}. Poetry revives and makes us conscious of this metaphorical character of language, just as it uses the symbols and myths of our civilization: Classical, Teutonic, Celtic, and Christian.

**All these** distinctions between literature and non-literature which we have discussed — personal expression, realization and exploitation of the medium, lack of practical purpose, and, of course, fictionality — are restatements, within a framework of semantic analysis, of age-old aesthetic terms such as "unity in variety," "disinterested contemplation," "aesthetic distance," "framing," and "invention," "imitation." Each of them describes one aspect of the literary work, one characteristic feature of its semantic directions. None is itself satisfactory. At least one result should emerge: a literary work of art is not a simple object but rather a highly complex organization of a stratified character with multiple meanings and relationships. The usual terminology, which speaks of an "organism," is somewhat misleading, since it stresses only one aspect, that of "unity in variety," and leads to biological parallels not always relevant. Furthermore, the "identity of content and form" in literature, though the phrase draws attention to the close interrelationships within the work of art, is misleading in being overfacile. It encourages the illusion that the analysis of any element of an artifact, whether of content or of technique, must be equally useful, and thus absolves us from the obligation to see the work in its totality. "Content" and "form" are terms used in too widely different senses for them to be, merely juxtaposed, helpful; indeed, even after careful definition, they too simply dichotomize the work of art. A modern analysis of the work of art has to begin with more complex questions: its mode of existence, its system of strata. 8

### CHAPTER III The Function of Literature

**The nature** and the function of literature must, in any coherent discourse, be correlative. The use of poetry follows from its nature: every object or class of objects

is most efficiently and rationally used for what it is, or is centrally. It acquires a secondary use only when its prime function has lapsed: the old spinning wheel becomes an ornament, or a specimen in a museum; the square piano, no longer capable of music, is made into a useful desk. Similarly, the nature of an object follows from its use: it is what it does. An artifact has the structure proper to the performance of its function, together with whatever accessories time and materials may make it possible, and taste may think it desirable, to add. There may be much in any literary work which is unnecessary to its literary function, though interesting or defensible on other grounds.

**Have conceptions** of the nature and the function of literature changed in the course of history? The question is not easy to answer. If one goes far enough back, one can say yes. One can reach a time when literature, philosophy, and religion exist undifferentiated: among the Greeks, Aeschylus and Hesiod would perhaps be instances. But Plato can already speak of the quarrel between the poets and the philosophers as an ancient quarrel and mean by it something intelligible to us. We must not, on the other hand, exaggerate the difference made by doctrines of "art for art's sake" at the end of the nineteenth century or more recent doctrines of "poesie pure." The "didactic heresy," as Poe called the belief in poetry as an instrument of edification, is not to be equated with the traditional Renaissance doctrine that the poem pleases and teaches or teaches through pleasing.

**On the whole**, the reading of a history of aesthetics or poetics leaves one with the impression that the nature and the function of literature, so far as they can be put into large general conceptual terms, for comparison and contrast with other human activities and values, have not basically changed.

**The history** of aesthetics might almost be summarized as a dialectic in which the thesis and counterthesis are Horace's dulce and utile: poetry is sweet and useful. Either adjective separately represents a polar heresy with regard to the function of poetry — probably it is easier to correlate dulce et utile on the basis of function than on that of nature. The view that poetry is pleasure (analogous to any other pleasure) answers to the view that poetry is instruction (analogous to any textbook). The view that all poetry is, or should be, propaganda is answered by the view that it is, or should be, pure sound and image — arabesque without reference to the world of human emotions. The opposing theses reach their subtlest versions, perhaps, in the views that art is "play" and that it is "work" (the "craft" of fiction, the "work" of art). Neither view, in isolation, can possibly seem acceptable. Told that poetry is "play," spontaneous amusement, we feel that justice has been done neither to the care, skill, and planning of the artist nor to the seriousness and importance of the poem. But told that poetry is "work" or "craft," we feel the violence done to its joy and what Kant called its "purposelessness." We must describe the function of art in such a way as to do justice at once to the dulce and the utile.

**The Horatian** formula itself offers a helpful start if, remembering that precision in the use of critical terms is very recent, we give the Horatian terms an extension

generous enough to encompass Roman and Renaissance creative practice. The usefulness of art need not be thought to lie in the enforcement of such a moral lesson as Le Bossu held to be Homer's reason for writing the Iliad, or even such as Hegel found in his favorite tragedy, Antigone. "Useful" is equivalent to "not a waste of time," not a form of "passing the time," something deserving of serious attention. "Sweet" is equivalent to "not a bore," "not a duty," "its own reward."

**Can we** use this double criterion as a basis of definition of literature, or is it rather a criterion of great literature? In older discussions, the distinctions between great, good, and "subliterary" literature rarely appear. There may be real doubt whether subliterary literature (the pulp magazine) is "useful" or "instructive." It is commonly thought of as sheer "escape" and "amusement." But the question has to be answered in terms of subliterary readers, not in those of readers of "good literature." Mortimer Adler, at least, would find a noetic element in the interest of the least intellectual novel reader. And as for "escape," Kenneth Burke has reminded us how facile a charge that may become. The dream of escape may "assist a reader to clarify his dislike of the environment in which he is placed. The artist can . . . become 'subversive' by merely singing, in all innocence, of respite by the Mississippi." <sup>2</sup> In answer to our question, it is probable that all art is "sweet" and "useful" to its appropriate users: that what it articulates is superior to their own self-induced reverie or reflection; that it gives them pleasure by the skill with which it articulates what they take to be something like their own reverie or reflection and by the release they experience through this articulation.

**When a** work of literature functions successfully, the two "notes" of pleasure and utility should not merely coexist but coalesce. The pleasure of literature, we need to maintain, is not one preference among a long list of possible pleasures but is a "higher pleasure" because pleasure in a higher kind of activity, i.e., non-acquisitive contemplation. And the utility — the seriousness, the instructiveness — of literature is a pleasurable seriousness, i.e., not the seriousness of a duty which must be done or of a lesson to be learned but an aesthetic seriousness, a seriousness of perception. The relativist who likes difficult modern poetry can always shrug off aesthetic judgment by making his taste a personal preference, on the level of crossword puzzles or chess. The educationist may falsely locate the seriousness of a great poem or novel, as in the historical information it purveys or the helpful moral lesson.

**Another point** of importance: Has literature a function, or functions? In his *Primer for Critics*, Boas gaily exposit a pluralism of interests and corresponding types of criticism; and, at the end of his *Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Eliot sadly, or at least wearily, insists on the "variety of poetry" and the variety of things the kinds of poetry may do at various times. But these are exceptions. To take art, or literature, or poetry seriously is, ordinarily at least, to attribute to it some use proper to itself. Considering Arnold's view that poetry could supersede religion and philosophy, Eliot writes: ". . . nothing in this world or the next is a substitute for anything else. . . ." <sup>3</sup> That is, no real category of value has a

real equivalent. There are no real substitutes. In practice, literature can obviously take the place of many things — of travel or sojourn in foreign lands, of direct experience, vicarious life; and it can be used by the historian as a social document. But has literature a work, a use, which nothing else does as well? Or is it an amalgam of philosophy, history, music, and imagery which, in a really modern economy, would be distributed? This is the basic question.

**The defenders** of literature will believe that it is not an archaic survival but a permanence, and so will many who are neither poets nor teachers of poetry and who therefore lack the professional interest in survival. The experience of unique value in literature is basic to any theory concerning the nature of the value. Our shifting theories attempt to do progressively better justice to the experience.

**One contemporary** line asserts the use and seriousness of poetry by finding that poetry conveys knowledge — a kind of knowledge. Poetry is a form of knowledge. Aristotle had seemed to say something like that in his famous dictum that poetry is more philosophical than history, since history "relates things which have happened, poetry such as might happen," the general and probable. Now, however, when history, like literature, appears a loose, ill-defined discipline, and when science, rather, is the impressive rival, it is, rather, contended that literature gives a knowledge of those particularities with which science and philosophy are not concerned. While a neoclassical theorist like Dr. Johnson could still think of poetry in terms of the "grandeur of generality," modern theorists, of many schools (e.g., Gilby, Ransom, Stace), all stress the particularity of poetry. Says Stace, the play *Othello* is not about jealousy but about Othello's jealousy, the particular kind of jealousy a Moor married to a Venetian might feel. 4

**The typicality** of literature or the particularity: literary theory and apologetics may stress one or the other; for literature, one may say, is more general than history and biography but more particularized than psychology or sociology. But not only are *The Function of Literature* 23 there shifts in the stress of literary theory. In literary practice, the specific degree of generality or particularity shifts from work to work and period to period. Pilgrim and Everyman undertake to be mankind. But Morose, the "humorist" of Jonson's *Epi-coene*, is a very special and idiosyncratic person. The principle of characterization in literature has always been defined as that of combining the "type" with the "individual" — showing the type in the individual or the individual in the type. The attempts at interpreting this principle, or specific dogmas derived from it, have not been very helpful. Literary typologies go back to the Horatian doctrine of decorum, and to the repertory of types in Roman comedy (e.g., the bragging soldier, the miser, the spend-thrift and romantic son, the confidential servant). We recognize the typological again in the character books of the seventeenth century and in the comedies of Moliere. But how to apply the concept more generally? Is the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* a type? If so, of what? Is Hamlet a type? Apparently, for an Elizabethan audience, a melancholiac, something as described by Dr. Timothy Bright. But he is many other things also, and his melancholy is given a particular genesis and context. In some sense, the character

which is an individual as well as a type is so constituted by being shown to be many types: Hamlet is also a lover, or former lover, a scholar, a connoisseur of the drama, a fencer. Every man is a convergence or nexus of types — even the simplest man. So-called character types are seen "flat," as all of us see people with whom we have relations of a single kind ; "round" characters combine views and relations, are shown in different contexts — public life, private, foreign lands. 5

**One cognitive** value in the drama and novels would seem to be psychological. "The novelists can teach you more about human nature than the psychologists" is a familiar kind of assertion. Horney recommends Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Balzac as inexhaustible sources. E. M. Forster (*Aspects of the Novel*) speaks of the very limited number of persons whose inner life and motivations we know, and sees it as the great service of the novel that it does reveal the introspective life of the characters. 6 Presumably the inner lives he assigns his characters are drawn out of his own vigilant introspection. One might maintain that the great novels are source books for psychologists, 24 *Theory of Literature* or that they are case histories (i.e., illustrative, typical examples). But here we seem to come back to the fact that psychologists will use the novel only for its generalized typical value: they will draw off the character of Pere Goriot from the total setting (the *Maison Vauquer*) and context of characters.

**Max Eastman**, himself a minor poet, would deny that the "literary mind" can, in an age of science, lay claim to the discovery of truth. The "literary mind" is simply the unspecialized, amateur mind of prescientific days attempting to persist and taking advantage of its verbal facility to create the impression that it is uttering the really important "truths." Truth in literature is the same as truth outside of literature, i.e., systematic and publicly verifiable knowledge. The novelist has no magic short cut to that present state of knowledge in the social sciences which constitutes the "truth" against which his "world," his fictional reality, is to be checked. But then, believes Eastman, the imaginative writer — and especially the poet — misunderstands himself if he thinks of his prime office as that of discovering and communicating knowledge. His real function is to make us perceive what we see, imagine what we already, conceptually or practically, know. 7

**It is difficult** to draw the line between views of poetry as realization of the given and views of poetry as "artistic insight." Does the artist remind us of what we have ceased to perceive or make us see what, though it was there all the time, we had not seen? One remembers the black and white drawings in which there are concealed figures or faces composed of dots and broken lines: they were there all the time, but one did not see them as wholes, as designs. In his *Intentions*, Wilde cites Whistler's discovery of aesthetic value in fog, of the Pre-Raphaelite discovery of beauty in types of women hitherto not seen as beautiful or as types. Are these instances of "knowledge" or "truth"? We hesitate. They are discoveries of new "perceptual values," we say, of new "aesthetic qualities."

**One sees** generally why aestheticians hesitate to deny "truth" as a property and a criterion of art: 8 partly, it is an honorific term, and one registers one's serious respect for art, one's apprehension of it as one of the supreme values, by the attribution; and partly, one is illogically fearful that if art isn't "true" it is The Function of Literature 25 a "lie," as Plato, in violence, called it. Imaginative literature is a "fiction," an artistic, verbal "imitation of life." The opposite of "fiction" is not "truth" but "fact" or "time and space existence." "Fact" is stranger than the probability with which literature must deal. 9

**Among the arts**, literature, specifically, seems also to claim "truth" through the view of life (*Weltanschauung*) which every artistically coherent work possesses. The philosopher or critic must think some of these "views" truer than others (as Eliot thinks Dante's truer than Shelley's or even than Shakespeare's) 3 but any mature philosophy of life must have some measure of truth — at any event it lays claim to it. The truth of literature, as we are now considering it, seems to be the truth in literature — the philosophy which exists, in systematic conceptual form, outside of literature but may be applied to or illustrated by or embodied in literature. In this sense, the truth in Dante is Catholic theology and scholastic philosophy. Eliot's view of poetry in its relation to "truth" seems essentially of this sort. Truth is the province of systematic thinkers; and artists are not such thinkers, though they may try to be if there are no philosophers whose work they can suitably assimilate. 10

**The whole** controversy would appear, in large measure, semantic. What do we mean by "knowledge," "truth," "cognition," "wisdom"? If all truth is conceptual and propositional, then the arts — even the art of literature — can't be forms of truth. Again: if positivist reductive definitions are accepted, limiting truth to that which can be methodically verified by anyone, then art can't be a form of truth experimentally. The alternative to these seems some bi-modal or pluri-modal truth: there are various "ways of knowing" 5 or there are two basic types of knowledge, each of which uses a language system of signs: the sciences, which use the "discursive" mode, and the arts, which use the "presentational." X1 Are these both truth? The former is what philosophers have ordinarily meant, while the latter takes care of religious "myth" as well as poetry. We might call the latter "true" rather than "the truth." The adjectival quality would express the distinction in center of balance: art is substantively beautiful and adjectively true (i.e., it doesn't conflict with the truth). In his "Ars Poetica," MacLeish at- 26 Theory of Literature tempts to adjust the claims of literary beauty and philosophy by the formula, a poem is "equal to: not true": poetry is as serious and important as philosophy (science, knowledge, wisdom) and possesses the equivalence of truth, is truth-like.

**Mrs. Langer** stresses the plastic arts and, still more, music, rather than literature, in her plea for presentational symbolism as a form of knowledge. Presumably she thinks of literature as in some way a mixture of "discursive" and "presentational." But the mythic element, or archetypal images, of literature would correspond to her presentational. "Men who follow the sea," she writes, "have often a deep love for

that hard life. But in their dangerous calling they feel secure; in their comfortless quarters they are at ease. Waters and ships, heaven and storm and harbor, somehow contain the symbols through which they see meaning and sense in the world. . . ." 12

**From views** that art is revelation or insight into the truth we should distinguish the view that art — specifically literature — is propaganda, the view, that is, that the writer is not the discoverer but the persuasive purveyor of the truth. The term "propaganda" is loose and needs scrutiny. In popular speech, it is applied only to doctrines viewed as pernicious and spread by men whom we distrust. The word implies calculation, intention, and is usually applied to specific, rather restricted doctrines or programs. 13 So limiting the sense of the term, one might say that some art (the lowest kind) is propaganda, but that no great art, or good art, or Art, can possibly be. If, however, we stretch the term to mean "effort, whether conscious or not, to influence readers to share one's attitude toward life," then there is plausibility in the contention that all artists are propagandists or should be, or (in complete reversal of the position outlined in the preceding sentence) that all sincere, responsible artists are morally obligated to be propagandists.

**According to Montgomery** Belgium, the literary artist is an "irresponsible propagandist." That is to say, every writer adopts a view or theory of life. . . . The effect of the work is always to persuade the reader to accept that view or theory. This persuasion is always illicit. That is to say, the reader is always led to believe something, and that assent is hypnotic — the art of the presentation seduces the reader. . . ." Eliot, who quotes Belgium, replies by distinguishing "poets whom it is a strain to think of as propagandists at all" from irresponsible propagandists, and a third group who, like Lucretius and Dante, are "particularly conscious and responsible" propagandists 5 and Eliot makes the judgment of responsibility depend on both auctorial intention and historic effect. 14 "Responsible propagandist" would seem to most people a contradiction in terms ; but, interpreted as a tension of pulls, it makes a point. Serious art implies a view of life which can be stated in philosophical terms, even in terms of systems. 15 Between artistic coherence (what is sometimes called "artistic logic") and philosophical coherence there is some kind of correlation. The responsible artist has no will to confuse emotion and thinking, sensibility and intellection, sincerity of feeling with adequacy of experience and reflection. The view of life which the responsible artist articulates perceptually is not, like most views which have popular success as "propaganda," simple; and an adequately complex vision of life cannot, by hypnotic suggestion, move to premature or naive action.

**It remains** to consider those conceptions of the function of literature clustered about the word "catharsis." The word — Aristotle's Greek, in the Poetics — has had a long history. The exegesis of Aristotle's use of the word remains in dispute; but what Aristotle may have meant, an exegetical problem of interest, need not be confounded with the problems to which the term has come to be applied. The function of literature, some say, is to relieve us — either writers or readers — from the pressure of emotions. To express emotions is to get free of them, as Goethe is

said to have freed himself from Weltschmerz by composing *The Sorrows of Werther*. And the spectator of a tragedy or the reader of a novel is also said to experience release and relief. His emotions have been provided with focus, leaving him, at the end of his aesthetic experience, with "calm of mind." 16

**But does** literature relieve us of emotions or, instead, incite them? Tragedy and comedy, Plato thought, "nourish and water our emotions when we ought to dry them up." Or, if literature relieves us of our emotions, are they not wrongly discharged when they are expended on poetic fictions? As a youth, St. Augustine confesses, he lived in mortal sin; yet "all this I wept not, I who wept for Dido slain. . . ." Is some literature in- 28 Theory of Literature citory and some cathartic, or are we to distinguish between groups of readers and the nature of their response? 17 Again: should all art be cathartic? These are problems for treatment under "The Relation of Literature to Psychology" and "The Relation of Literature to Society" ; but they have, preliminarily, to be raised now.

**That, for proper readers,** literature does not and should not incite the emotions is our hypothetical answer. Emotions represented in literature are, neither for writer nor for reader, the same as emotions in "real life"; they are "recollected in tranquillity" ; they are "expressed" — that is, released — by analysis ; they are the feelings of emotions, the perceptions of emotions.

**To conclude:** the question concerning the function of literature has a long history — in the Western world, from Plato down to the present. It is not a question instinctively raised by the poet or by those who like poetry; for such, "Beauty is its own excuse, for being," as Emerson was once drawn into saying. The question is put, rather, by utilitarians and moralists, or by statesmen and philosophers, that is, by the representatives of other special values or the speculative arbiters of all values. What, they ask, is the use of poetry anyhow — *cm bono*? And they ask the question at the full social or human dimension. Thus challenged, the poet and the instinctive reader of poetry are forced, as morally and intellectually responsible citizens, to make some reasoned reply to the community. They do so in a passage of an *Ars Poetica*. They write a Defense or *Afology* for poetry: the literary equivalent of what is called in theology "apologetics." 18 Writing to this end and for this prospective audience, they naturally stress the "use" rather than the "delight" of literature; and hence it would be semantically easy today to equate the "function" of literature with its extrinsic relations. But from the Romantic movement on, the poet has often given, when challenged by the community, a different answer: the answer which A. C. Bradley calls "poetry for poetry's sake"; 19 and theorists do well to let the term "function" serve the whole "apologetic" range. So using the word, we say, poetry has many possible functions. Its prime and chief function is fidelity to its own nature.

This is a survey of the main trends in twentieth-century literary theory. For more information about Professor Fry's book *Theory of Literature*, <http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/book.asp?isbn=9780300180831>. Course Materials. Download all course pages [zip - 10MB]. Syllabus. Professor. Paul H. Fry, William Lampson Professor of English. Description. This is a survey of the main trends in twentieth-century literary theory. Theories of ancient times on literary types. Stream of consciousness. Special concept of the individual as the basis of essays by M.N. Epstein. The division of labor in the literature. Origin of literary genres. Epos as the story of the characters. Theories of ancient times on literary types. Stream of consciousness. Special concept of the individual as the basis of essays by M.N. Epstein. "Theory", we are told, has radically changed the nature of literary studies, but people who say this do not mean literary theory, the systematic account of the nature of literature and of the methods for analysing it. When people complain that there is too much theory in literary studies these days, they don't mean too much systematic reaction on the nature of literature or debate about the distinctive qualities of literary language, for example. Far from it. They have something else in view.