

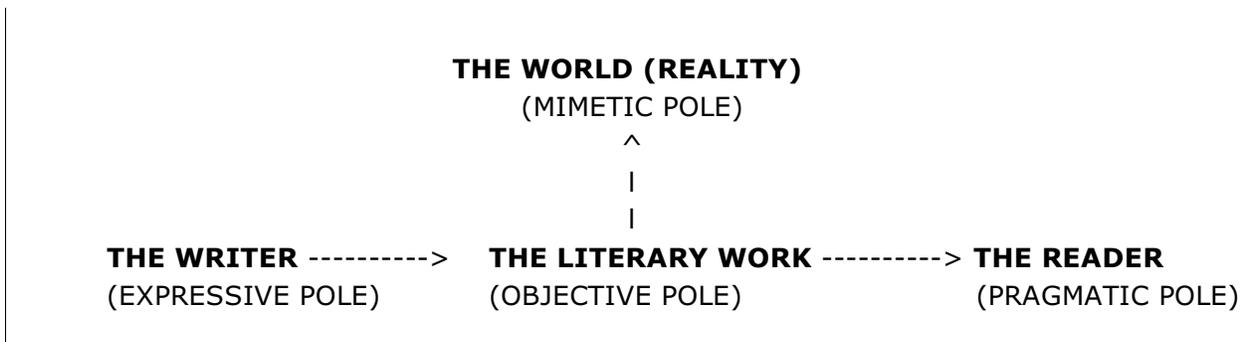
LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM

Richard L. W. Clarke

Literature is a form of verbal expression (most often written but sometimes oral, as in the case of drama) which offers a fictional representation of some aspect(s) of the world. *Literary criticism* is the practice of reading and writing about literary works. The term 'criticism' is derived from the German word *kritik*. Sometimes also translated as 'critique' (e.g. Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason), it signifies an *objective* (but also, in some cases, *negative*) judgment on, tantamount to a true understanding of, some state of natural or human affairs, including artworks. Those who engage in literary criticism are called *literary critics*. Their task is to judge literary works. Literary criticism is, in short, a practice, something which literary critics do. If literary criticism is *what* literary critics do, *literary theory* explores the underlying assumptions and principles which inform precisely *how* literary critics do what they do as they read, strive to make sense of and pass judgment on literary works.

ABRAMS' FOUR 'POLES' OF LITERARY CRITICISM

M. H. Abrams argues, in what remains quite a useful, albeit flawed, overview of the basic approaches to literary criticism (see the "Introduction: Orientation of Critical Theories" to his seminal The Mirror and the Lamp [1953]), that there are at least four main ways of criticising literature. Each 'pole,' as Abrams puts it, of or approach to criticism focuses mainly on one particular aspect or dimension of the literary work. What he terms the 'mimetic' pole trains its attention on the object of representation, that is, the world depicted by the work; the 'expressive' pole on the author of the work and, by extension, the social and historical context in which s/he lived and the work was produced; the 'objective' pole on the structure or form of the work, that is, its verbal properties; and the 'pragmatic' on the impact which the literary work has on the reader. The following diagram encapsulates Abrams' four 'orientations' of literary criticism:



JAKOBSON ON THE FACTORS AND FUNCTIONS OF DISCOURSE

Roman Jakobson offers, in "Linguistics and Poetics" (1960), a more complex and nuanced version of this schema. Although the theory which he offers is one applicable to all forms of utterance, its implications for literary theory and criticism ought to be obvious. He argues that every verbal 'message' or utterance (*parole*) has the following elements in

Such emphases would evidently sit well with those whom Abrams terms 'objective' critics. Jakobson's views on this matter are entirely in keeping with the premises and emphases which he inherited from his association with the Russian Formalists and the influence of Structuralist linguistics on his thinking. They are part and parcel, too, of the largely formalist mindset which dominated literary criticism as a whole in the first half of the twentieth century and which frowned upon any attempt to focus on any aspect of the literary work other than its form or structure.

Of course, anyone even remotely acquainted with the history of literary criticism would realise that not all theorists have agreed that this should be the emphasis of literary criticism. 'Mimetic' critics ranging from Plato and Aristotle in fifth century BCE Athens to Samuel Johnson and Joshua Reynolds in the eighteenth century and beyond, stress what Jakobson terms the *referential* function of literature, that is, its capacity to represent reality. Note, in this regard, Jakobson's failure to distinguish between the social and historical context in which an utterance is made and its object of representation per se. These do not necessarily coincide because not all authors write about the time and place in which they live. An illustration of the necessity of such a distinction is underlined by the case of science fiction where the reality depicted (located temporally more often than not in the future) is to be distinguished from the time and place in which the work was composed (the author's present). 'Expressive' critics (not least the Romantics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) emphasise what Jakobson terms the *emotive* function of literature: their focus is on the relationship between the work and its author as a result of which literature is viewed as a form of self-expression and, by extension, a vehicle for socio-historical investigation. Last but not least, 'pragmatic' critics, including Plato and Aristotle once more and later theorists such as Sir Philip Sidney in the Renaissance, Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century and Leo Tolstoy in the nineteenth, among others, stress the *conative* dimension of literature, that is, its moral and emotional impact on the reader.

REPRESENTATION: THE 'MIMETIC' POLE

The most obvious and perhaps commonsensical way to think of literature is as a verbal *representation* of the real world. Abrams terms this approach the 'mimetic' pole of criticism. Literary works, especially prose fiction and drama, are deemed realistic if they (note the variety of metaphors used in this regard) reflect, mirror, imitate, correspond to, depict, portray, capture, describe, in short, *re-present* 'nature,' the 'world,' 'reality,' 'life' or 'society' as it really is (note once more how the precise nature of the *object* of representation has been conceptualised in various ways). Moreover, in the view of some theorists and critics, the fictional characters, their actions, their location(s) in time and space, etc. depicted by a literary work *can* offer, at least ideally, an undistorted reflection of, or (to use a different metaphor) a transparent lens through which the reader is able to view, not necessarily real (in the sense of *actual*, people) events and circumstances (in such cases, we might be dealing with other genres of discourse altogether, such as history) but, rather, realistic (in the sense of typical or probable) people, actions, times and places.

An important question necessarily arises: what is the precise nature of the relationship which exists between a 'literary work' and those aspects of 'reality' which it is thought to depict? To put this another way, any consideration of the degree to which a literary work is, or is not, a faithful replica of the real world automatically confronts the problem of 'content' (what it is supposedly about), the problem of 'form' (i.e. the form

which this content takes) and the problem posed by their relationship (that is, the precise connection which obtains between the *object* and the *mode* of representation). These are all questions to which there are no easy or definitive answers and on which opinion amongst theorists has, consequently, been very divided. One camp, the realists, insists strongly that literary works *passively reflect* reality and can even, in some cases at least, accurately and impartially represent reality as it really is. However, other theorists, so-called 'constructivists,' adamantly oppose these claims. They are of the view that literary works *actively construct* a particular image of reality that is not necessarily true. As such, what literary works perforce offer are their authors' personally inflected, socially and historically conditioned and, thus, necessarily subjective perspective on the world.

Literary Realism

Literary realism is informed by a particular ontological framework.¹ Many, perhaps most literary realists may be described as ontological materialists: literature has since time immemorial been described as holding a mirror up to 'nature' or *physical* reality. Others, however, are arguably ontological idealists in that they acknowledge that to some degree at least literary works may hold a mirror up to material reality but either, like Plato, lament the fact that literary works do not represent the ultimately non-material nature of the universe, or they contend that literature does in fact do so, albeit indirectly or allegorically. Over the years, the idea that literature mirrors simply 'nature' (whether defined in purely material or ultimately ideal terms) has been enlarged to include the view that the primary concern of literature is with the social, rather than natural, world as a result of which it is the words, actions and circumstances of *human beings* which are the main concern of literary critics. Literary realists, in short, hold that literature in general, and prose fiction and drama in particular, represent 'reality,' however this may be conceptualised. On this view, the presence of reality is a given, something which pre-exists the literary work and of which the latter is merely a regurgitation. From this perspective, literature performs something of a dual function: one ontological in that it contributes to the philosophical clarification of the fundamental nature of reality, the other social and historical in the way that it contributes to the goals of social and historical documentation.

The realist model of literature is also informed by a representational model of the author's mind. Literary realists emphasise in particular the cognitive (from the Latin *cognoscere*, to know) functions of consciousness, that is, the fact that the contents of the mind, especially our thoughts and beliefs, derive from and accordingly possess the capacity to report on the world. It is probably fair to say that most literary realists are externalists/empiricists to the extent that they believe that our ideas are derived from external sources and that arguably all knowledge is a function of sense experience. It should be noted, however, that at least some literary realists, such as Plato, are internalists/rationalists in that they believe that our reason, located within us, is a more reliable guide as to what is true of the outer world because our senses can mislead us. Literary realists accordingly draw upon the correspondence theory of knowledge and truth, that is, the view that our ideas correspond to objects in the real world which they can 're-

¹For an explanation of the philosophical concepts (e.g. 'ontological materialism') and frameworks that inform literary theory and criticism discussed in this article, please see **THE PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORKS OF LITERARY THEORY: RELEVANT BRANCHES OF PHILOSOPHY AND THEIR ADJACENT DISCIPLINES.**

present' accurately. As a result, they believe, literary works have the capacity to represent reality, however construed, accurately and objectively. Literature, in other words, offers a transparent window, to a greater or lesser degree of accuracy, on to the 'world.' Implied in this regard is the ability of the author to suppress or hold in abeyance, even if only temporarily, any biases, inclinations, predispositions, etc. that may either originate within that individual or are inherited from his/her environment, and which thus could negatively affect the capacity of his/her mind not only to possess a true understanding of the world but also to convey it to others via the medium of the literary work.

Allied to this theory of knowledge is a dependence on the correspondence or referential theory of meaning: if the work is something akin to a mirror or a transparent lens through which the world can be viewed as it truly is, this is precisely because the words which comprise it exist in a one-to-one correspondence to things therein. In other words, the significance of the words which comprise a literary work is entirely a function of the referents which they reflect. In this scheme of things, literary form, to wit, the author's choice of particular words and their arrangement in a certain sequence, is subservient to the content of a literary work. The latter takes precedence over the former, the result being that *literary* form necessarily 'con-forms' to or bears the imprint of the precise contours of the *world's* form. To put this another way, the various aspects of narrative, poetic, and dramatic technique are suggested or even dictated by the nature of the reality depicted. The *world*, in short, comes first and is accordingly primary, whereas the *word* and, by extension, the *work* is a secondary reflection thereof. Last but not least, realists are of the view that the best literary works are those which hold a faithful mirror up to the world. Literary works, when approached from the mimetic or representational angle, are accordingly often evaluated or judged in terms of the *realism* of the particular characters, actions, natural and socio-historical contexts, etc. portrayed, that is, in terms of their *vraisemblance* or faithfulness to what we already know of the real world.

Literary Relativism

For constructivists, ontologically speaking, neither physical nor social reality is a given, an *a priori*, pre-determined 'fact' that has been established once and for all and about which all humans agree. The fundamental structure of reality may very well be either material or ideal in nature and, by the same token, social and historical reality may take a particular specifiable form, but no one knows for sure because there are no facts, only interpretations, as Montaigne and, later, Nietzsche put it. No one, they argue, has access to *the* truth as a result of which all that one can say is that the physical and social universe appears this or that way *to me*. At the end of the day, physical and social reality, or at least our conceptions thereof, are at best the *a posteriori* products of our discursive constructions. This is because, constructivists contend, the mind does not work in ways that transcend time and place. Rather, it contents, not least one's beliefs, are the product not only of processes internal to that individual but also of specific external influences, not least of a social and historical nature, that make his/her outlook on the world unique and different from that of others. Epistemologically speaking, thus, reality is not something that can be accurately mirrored by human minds. At best, an individual's knowledge of reality is tied to his or her vantage-point or perspective and is, accordingly, neither more nor less accurate than that of others. In short, there is no such thing as a 'view from nowhere,' as Thomas Nagel proposes. All this is aided and abetted by the way in which words work which, far from existing in a one-to-one correspondence with things in the

world, refract rather than reflect, filter rather replicate, and categorise and order rather than merely name and label. This is due, partly, to the private usages to which individual put particular words and partly due to the contractualist nature of public language, to wit, the view that any given language is the manifestation of the collective understanding of reality shared by members of a given community.

The result of such epistemological perspectivism is what might be described as literary *relativism*, the view that literature is less a mirror that simply 're-presents' a prior reality than a speculum of sorts through which the author's particular conception of the way 'things' are is presented in consequently selective and partial ways. Literary works of necessity depict reality from a specific angle: its author's point of view. They, as such, *actively* 'construct' what are ultimately 'art-ful' and, thus, artificial accounts of reality which subsequently are often mistakenly assumed to be a true depiction of things as they really are. In this scheme of things, literary form, that is, the author's choice, usage and arrangement of words in specific ways, is a function of the author's conception of the world and the medium or vehicle through which this vision is communicated to the reader. To put this another way, a writer's choice of narrative, poetic, and dramatic technique dictates the particular sense of reality communicated by the literary work in question to its audience. Literary form, accordingly, does not 'con-form' to reality but, rather, 'in-forms' or 'packages' an author's perspective on reality. From this perspective, form takes precedence over content for which reason the precise shape which the world appears to possess bears the imprint, in fact, of the verbal choices made by the writer. In short, what we take to be 'reality' is not the cause or source but the *effect* of the literary work's discursive processes, that is, the formal strategies manipulated by the author. To put this another way, the *word* and, by extension, the *work* comes first and is accordingly primary, whereas the *world* is a secondary reflection thereof. Theorists in this camp argue, in light of this, that the literary merits of a work should be gauged on the basis not of whether it is a faithful reproduction of reality but, rather, of the stylistic felicity with which 'reality' is imagined.

At times, epistemological perspectivism (the view that no truth-claims can claim greater epistemic credence than others) hardens into an extreme skepticism (the belief that we may never be able to know reality as in itself it really is). The true structure of natural and social being may be, so skeptics argue, beyond human ken. Consequently, literary relativism, the view that literary works at best offer their author's perspective on things, can turn into *anti-realism*, the view that literature may have little or no truck at all with reality. The result is, in such literary works, a near or complete disinterest in the representation of natural and social reality and for which a delight in words and wordplay purely for their own sake (so-called 'art for art's sake') is often substituted.

THE AUTHOR, LITERARY HISTORY, CANONICITY: THE 'EXPRESSIVE' POLE

Another obvious way of thinking about a literary work is to read it with reference not to the world which it is thought to represent but to the author who wrote it and, by extension, the place and time (the social and historical context) in which s/he lived. Abrams terms this approach the 'expressive' pole of criticism. If mimetic critics are, arguably, largely concerned with what Aristotle termed the *material* cause of the literary work, expressive critics focus on the *efficient* cause, that is, its source or origin, the agent or agency responsible for it. The emphasis, in short, is not on what the work is about but on *who* wrote it. An intensive focus on the author more often than not leads one to a concern with his/her *originality*, that is, whether or not s/he brings something new to the table, to be

precise, whether his/her content and/or form is unique, special, but ultimately worthwhile in some way and, thus, different from that of other writers.

The basic question addressed under this rubric is this: what is the exact nature of the relationship which exists between a work and its author? To be precise, how should we understand the nature of a 'literary work' (see the discussion below devoted to literary form), the nature of the 'author' (the philosophy of mind is relevant here) and, last but not least, the nature of the connection linking the former to the latter (hence, once more, recourse to the philosophy of language in order to explore the question of exactly how certain 'things' conceived of as internal to an author's mind, not least his/her thoughts or feelings, are communicated externally to the reader). The expressive approach to criticism is informed, at least in part, by the model of meaning which Charles Taylor terms 'expressivist' and others 'ideational' or 'psychological'.²

Expressive literary critics, as their very name implies, believe that literary works (not least lyric poems) are a form of or vehicle for expressing or manifesting externally to others 'things' that originate within the author. These 'things' include not only one's mental states (thoughts, emotions, etc.) but also various aspects of one's identity or self. The latter are derived from both internal and external sources and include such things as one's psychological make-up, personality, moral character, nationality, class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. Literature, from this perspective, is a kind of dialogue or act of communication between one real human being (the author) and another equally real human being (the reader). Literary works, accordingly, offer the reader/critic a 'window' of sorts not on to the external world but, rather, into the inmost depths of their writers' being. To adapt a famous adage, literature is, like the eyes, the window of the author's soul.

Some expressive critics, often called 'hermeneuticists,' argue that literary works manifest the cognitive functions of the author's mind, that is, his/her thoughts about the world.³ In other words, the literary critic's task is to figure out the author's *intended meaning* (or, more simply, *intention*), that is, what s/he set out to say, the point s/he is trying to make. From this point of view, criticism is a mainly rational and intellectual exercise that revolves around interpretation, that is, deciphering the meaning deposited in a literary work by its author. Important questions arise in this regard: what are the precise criteria for deciding that the critic has correctly determined the author's intention? In other words, how can the critic be sure that his/her interpretation does justice to what the author in question really set out to say and does not merely impose his/her own point of view. In short, how can one ensure that one has been objective, rather than subjective, in interpreting a literary work? Some, such as Friedrich von Schleiermacher in the early nineteenth century, argue that an understanding of the author's psychology as well as the language in which s/he wrote is essential in this regard.

Others, not least Romantic poets and literary theorists such as William Wordsworth

²Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975), chapter one.

³Hermeneutics is the academic discipline devoted to the study of the interpretation of discourse. The name is derived, appropriately enough, from the ancient Greek Hermes, the so-called messenger of the gods charged with relaying divine messages to ordinary mortals. Initially, at least, hermeneutics directed its attention to deciphering the author's intention, though this focus later expanded (see the section later in this essay devoted to a discussion of the reader).

and Percy Bysshe Shelley, have argued that literature is better thought of as a largely *affective* and even irrational affair. From this point of view, literature, not least lyric poems, is thought to be imbued with its author's emotions (his/her feelings, passions, etc.) which are indicative of his/her attitude to some subject matter either within or without his/her self. On this view, literature is a process of communication by which certain feelings experienced by the author are transmitted to and re-experienced in turn by the reader/critic.

Others believe that literary works, by expressing their authors' ideas and/or emotions, invariably end up revealing aspects of the author's self such as his/her psychological make-up, personality, character, etc. An author's literary output necessarily expresses, by extension, the varied ways in which that personal identity is in turn perforce shaped by the economic, social, political and cultural structures peculiar to the specific stage of history at and the particular social location in which s/he lives and works. To put this another way, precisely because each literary work is written by an individual who is necessarily the creature of a specific place and time, it is inevitably shaped by the social and historical context of its production. Arguing that the literature produced in a given place and time shares certain characteristics, literary *historians* (some, like R. S. Crane, differentiate these from literary *critics* per se) try, therefore, to categorise authors and works by slotting them into particular socio-historical contexts: in the context of English literature, for example, Shakespeare is normally classified as a 'Renaissance' writer, while Wordsworth is deemed a 'Romantic,' Tennyson a 'Victorian,' and so on. From this point of view, what Renaissance or Romantic or Victorian, etc. literary works 'express' is ultimately not merely the personal identities of their writers but the collective social, political and cultural identities peculiar to those places and times.

Hence, the following chart:

LITERARY HISTORY				
HISTORY	HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY		LITERARY HISTORY	DATES
Pre-history				
Pre-Modern	Ancient		Classical	c.700 BCE - 300 CE
	Medieval			c.300 - c.1400
Early Modern	Renaissance			c.1400 - c.1600
	17th Century (The Age of Reason) (Rationalism)		Neo-Classical	c.1600 - c.1660
	18th Century (The Enlightenment) (Empiricism)			c.1660 - c.1785
Late Modern	19 th Century	German Idealism	Romantic	c.1785 - c.1830

		Historicism		
		Positivism	Victorian	c.1830 - c.1890
	Twentieth Century		Modernist	c.1890 - c.1945
Post-Modern	Twentieth Century		Contemporary	c.1945? -

It should be noted that *literary history* (the subset of literary criticism that focuses on the social and historical context of literature) emerged as a discipline only in the mid-to late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Though it may sound bizarre to modern people who are prone to assume that their own propensity to think historically is true of all people and at all times, many intellectual historians contend that it was around this time that Europeans began to hone a historical sense, that is, to develop the understanding that life is not a timeless, cyclical repetition of the same but, rather, synonymous with change and differentiation.⁴ It is not accidental in this regard that it was also precisely during this time that the academic disciplines of history, hermeneutics and philology emerged.⁵ The simultaneous emergence of these various, historically-oriented disciplines in that time and place was not fortuitous: nineteenth century Germany was a hotbed of 'historicism,' which in general may be summed up in relation to two principal trends: first, a universe defined in terms of change and transformation, as opposed to simultaneity and stasis, and, second, a propensity to conceptualise things via genetic explanations, that is, by seeking to understand their temporal cause or origin.

When literature is viewed as a form of self-expression, there are several reading strategies which the literary critic may adopt. S/he may seek, by paying close attention to the content in particular of a literary work, to discover the ideas intended by the author (his/her intention, outlook or point of view on the world); or, by focusing on its tone especially (what I. A. Richards defines as the author's attitude towards his/her subject matter), s/he may seek to re-experience the emotions expressed by the author; a work's content may also speak volumes about its author's life, personality, character, and so on (this is, evidently, a 'biographical' approach) as well as, by extension, details of the socio-historical context of which the author was a product (literary criticism of this sort functions as a supplement to disciplines such as history and sociology). A work's form or style may also be sifted for any clues which it may provide as to the author's characteristic ways of making sense of and/or reacting to the world, his/her personal and social identity, hence, Buffon's famous adage '*le style, c'est l'homme même,*' that is, 'a man's style reveals much

⁴See Athur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: a Study in the History of an Idea* (New York: Harper and Row, 1936). See also Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man and Reason: a Study in Nineteenth-Century Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1971).

⁵Philology is the study of the historical development of language, most often via its expression in concrete literary works. This approach was eclipsed by the advent in the early twentieth century of linguistics qua the scientific study of language.

about that man.' Alternatively, instead of searching for what literary works reveal about their author, the critic may seek to *explain* a literary work in the light of knowledge previously acquired about the author via biographies, socio-historical studies, other works of criticism, and the like. Whatever the emphasis of the critic, literature is viewed in this general scheme of things as a means of gathering information on the author which is either derived from or applied to his/her works.

Literary history is also predicated on the recognition that literature, like any other worldly phenomenon, has a history in another related sense: to be precise, that Chaucer precedes Shakespeare who, in turn, precedes Milton who lived before Wordsworth, and so on. In other words, each writer (and his/her works) is necessarily linked chronologically to predecessors, contemporaries, and successors. In short, every body of literature has a history comprising a chronological succession of authors and their works. The following questions arise in this regard: what is the precise nature of the relationship that links authors to other authors? Is this relationship merely historical in nature, i.e. one simply of chronological succession with nothing else implied (e.g. Milton comes before Wordsworth, who precedes Eliot, who precedes Kamau Brathwaite and so on)? Or is this necessarily a relationship of influence (as well as resistance to that influence)? In other words, does Milton's work necessarily shape Wordsworth's, or Eliot's Brathwaite's, precisely because one precedes the other? To put the foregoing another way, does an author who chronologically precedes others also, by virtue of that priority, shape the work of those who come after him/her? If so, what form does this influence take exactly? If Wordsworth's work, for example, was shaped by Milton's, what exactly are the signs of this influence? Moreover, if influence is the name of the game, do successors merely absorb the influences of their predecessors or can such pressures be resisted entirely or at the very least partially? In other words, is authorial *originality* at all possible? To put this all another way, are authors cursed by what Harold Bloom calls their inevitable 'belatedness,' that is, by the fact that authors are always preceded by others who have come before?

Questions of influence (and rejection) are addressed by T. S. Eliot who uses the term *literary tradition* to designate an alternative way of conceptualising the history of literature. Like literary 'history,' the notion of a literary 'tradition' has an undoubted (what Ferdinand de Saussure terms) 'diachronic' dimension to it in that it acknowledges the fact that literature inevitably develops over time for which reason the content and form of twentieth century literature, for example, necessarily differs in significant ways from those of Renaissance literature. However, where literary *history* emphasises social and historical specificity, the element of change and, thus, discontinuity, literary *tradition* (derived from the Latin word *traditio*, meaning the 'handing down' or 'handing over' of something from one person to another) stresses that discontinuity co-exists with continuity, to be precise, the passing down from one generation to the next of certain theories and practices through which a sense of the common history and culture binding successive literary generations together is fostered. For this reason, shifting the focus from the poet to the poem, Eliot points out that where literary history emphasises the differences which separate individual *writers*, literary tradition also emphasises what their *works* have in common. At one level, Eliot certainly seems to have in mind an inclusive conception of tradition: *all* literature, irrespective of where and when works are produced, forms a gigantic whole, a 'synchronic' system that transcends time and place but which also, paradoxically, expands over time through the admission of new works (this Eliot terms the 'supervention of novelty'). At another level, however, Eliot arguably entertains a much more exclusivist notion of tradition: he appears to posit the existence, within the greater body of literature as a whole, of a small, select group of exceptional works that meet certain criteria of form and

content as well as the concomitant exclusion of others that do not. Such outstanding works, in other words, have to conform to established and agreed standards even as they also bring something new and just as valuable to the table. This new 'something' adds to and, thus, expands existing standards. It is in this way that, far from either stagnating or merely changing, literature makes progress. Stasis and change, conformity and innovation, are the two sides of the same paradoxical coin named 'tradition.' Where literary history merely chronicles changes over time that are neither necessarily negative nor positive, Eliot's literary tradition is synonymous with amelioration and improvement. Literature, through the contributions of a singular few such as himself, is on a path leading ever closer towards perfection.

In more recent times a conception of literature similar to and in some ways different from that of the literary 'tradition' has risen to the fore: the Structuralist notion of *intertextuality*, a neologism coined by the Bulgarian/French theorist Julia Kristeva. Where literary history emphasises the relationship which exist between the literary work and its socio-historical context as well as the chronological relationship linking successive authors, Kristeva uses the term intertextuality to describe the relationships which literary as well as other *texts* share with each other irrespective of who wrote it and of their time and place of production. In a manner analogous to the relationship which each sign shares with the other signs comprising a sign-system posited by Saussure, arguably the founder of modern linguistics, the meaning of each text is thought to derive from its relationship with or position relative to other texts. Literature forms part of a larger general 'textuality,' a simultaneous (or synchronic) whole in which texts possess both similarities to and differences from other texts. In short, much like Eliot's notion of the literary tradition, the notion of intertextuality is tantamount to a synchronic model of literature, a way of conceptualising the simultaneous connectedness of all texts in lieu of the chronological (or diachronic) conception of literature inherent in all models of literary history. Missing from this model, evidently, is any conception of how literature changes over time.

Literary historians, given the nature of their concerns, also often find themselves addressing related questions of *canonicity*, that is, entering into debates over which writers in a given body of literature are better than others and, therefore, worthy of being studied. 'Canon-formation' refers to the process by which a small number of writers who meet certain criteria are deemed to be 'classic' and accordingly 'canonised.'⁶ The term 'canon' signifies that minority of writers whose works are thought to be inherently more valuable in some way than and thus worth studying above all others. 'Canon-formation,' it should be noted, responds to a very practical, pedagogical need, to be precise, the fact that only a select few representative works which comprise a given body of literature can in practice be studied in institutions of education given the time constraints operative therein.

Several questions consequently arise: precisely how are canons formed? In other words, on what grounds exactly are some writers and their works granted classic status while others are not? Does this have to do with *what* a writer's work represents (its content)? For those of a mimetic persuasion, the answer to this is yes in that the most valuable works are those which hold an accurate mirror up the world as it really is. Does classic status have, rather, something to do with the person responsible for writing it? Expressivists tend to attribute the greatness of such works to their authors' intellectual, emotional and/or literary prowess and for which reason they are, in some cases at least,

⁶The term 'canonisation' refers to the hagiographical process whereby a small number of persons deemed by the Church to be exceptionally holy qualify for sainthood.

deemed something of a 'genius.' Using the works of Shakespeare as a test-case, the Romantic poet and theorist Samuel Taylor Coleridge believed that he had come up with an infallible method, one which he labelled 'genial criticism,' by which critics could objectively determine whether or not a work was the product of a genius. Objective critics tend to think that canonical status is determined by the form or style of a work to which epithets such as 'beautiful' may accordingly be attributed. In short, the quality of a literary work is thought to have something to do with either its representational capacity, or the person responsible for it, or its medium of representation, or some combination of the three.

In more recent times, however, the idea that canonicity, or the property of being a canonical work, inheres objectively in the work in question has increasingly been interrogated to the point where it is claimed that most or all such decisions are necessarily subjective and even biased in nature. Hence, the great debates and swirls of controversy which surround who should be 'in' and who 'out' of the canon. Hence, in particular, the suspicion of feminist, postcolonial and other critics that more sinister forces are at work in all or most such decisions, linked to factors such as an author's class, gender, and/or race. Feminists and postcolonial critics alike contend fiercely that misogyny and/or racism remain the hidden criteria at work in many or most such selections for which reason the established canon of English literature has, at least until recently, consisted of works written largely or entirely by those whom some might call today 'dead white males.'

LITERARY FORM: THE 'OBJECTIVE' POLE

Other critics tend to emphasise the *formal* or *structural* properties of the literary work, rather than the object of representation or the author. Abrams terms this pole of literary criticism the 'objective'. It should be noted that questions of literary form are most often not treated separately from a consideration of such things as the object of representation, the author of the work in question, and so on. For example, the discussion of *what* a literary work represents can rarely, if ever, be divorced from an examination of *how* exactly it does so (the various literary techniques deployed by the author). By the same token, the form of a literary work (especially that of a lyric poem) can be one of the most important clues as to the views, feelings, identity and what not of the person responsible for the work (the view, as pointed out earlier, that 'style *is* the man'). The result is that mimetic, expressive and formal approaches to criticism are not necessarily mutually exclusive and in fact often overlap with one another.

The key question which presents itself concerns the the nature of literary form itself. Given that words are the building blocks of literary works, objective critics train their attention on the specifically *linguistic* properties of the literary work which may be sub-divided into several categories. First, the work's *diction*, that is, the author's choice of words, including the figurative language (metaphors, similes, etc.) in the light of which the representation of particular objects are coloured and certain images thereby produced in the mind of the reader. This dimension of the literary work has to do with what Saussure terms the *paradigmatic* axis (what Roman Jakobson calls the *metaphoric pole*) of any utterance or *parole*. Saussure argues that along this vector, which he visualises in vertical terms, each sign actually present in the utterance shares a relationship of *equivalence* with (to be precise, both similarities to and differences from) all others not in fact present but which could potentially be substituted for it. (This is the so-called coherence, systemic or structuralist theory of meaning.) The play of similarities and differences along this axis produces a *structure* of meaning, that is, a conceptual framework predicated on so-called 'binary oppositions' of many kinds (spatial – e.g. inside versus outside; temporal – e.g.

progress versus stasis; moral – e.g. good versus evil; economic – e.g. rich versus poor, social – e.g. the mighty versus the downtrodden; political – e.g. democratic versus totalitarian; etc.). This pattern of meanings is one not normally immediately obvious or visible in the text but, rather, implicit rather than explicit, latent rather than manifest, and, thus, necessarily inferred or read off from what the work ostensibly is about. This structure of meanings is a necessarily atemporal and, as such, *spatial* or *synchronic* structure precisely because the concepts in question exist in a relationship of co-simultaneity with each other. In "A Dialectic of Aural and Objective Correlatives," Walter Ong perceptively points out in this regard the tendency among objective critics, not least the so-called New critics, to "draw an analogy between a poem and an object" (498), a view of literature reflects a "state of mind fixed on a world of spaces and surfaces" (499) and a "tactile and visualist bias" (499). Such theorists, "preoccupied with objects, structures, skeletons, and stratified systems" (499), have relied heavily on "spatial analogies" (499).

Objective critics, second, focus on the work's *schema* (a term drawn from rhetoric) which refers to the specific sequences into which the words chosen are ordered: phrases, sentences, paragraphs (in the case of prose), stanzas (in the case of poetry), acts (in the case of plays) and, by extension, the development of the text as a whole as it proceeds from the very beginning to the end. Saussure terms this axis of all utterances, including the literary work, the *syntagmatic* (what Jakobson calls the *metonymic* pole). Along this vector, which he visualises in horizontal terms, the signs actually present in the utterance, by virtue of their proximity to each other, share a relationship of *contiguity* (in the sense that they seem to 'touch' or almost touch each other). This relationship is necessarily *temporal* or, to use Saussure's term, *diachronic* in nature for the simple reason that it takes time to read, word by word, from beginning to end. In the case of plays, novels and narrative (epic) poems, schemas take the form, ultimately, of 'plots,' the groundwork for the analysis of which was laid by Aristotle in his *Poetics* and continued more recently by successors such as the Neo-Aristotelians (e.g. R. S. Crane) at the University of Chicago. Lyric poems also necessarily follow a progression, one putatively coterminous with the author's stream of consciousness and, in its most sophisticated variants at least, tantamount to an 'argument' of sorts designed to communicate to the reader some inner mental state (intellectual, affective or otherwise), to convince him/her of the veracity of some truth-claim made in this regard and, in the final analysis, persuade him/her to adopt a particular attitude or act in a certain way.

Third, objective critics address the *generic classification* of literary works, their division into, for example, plays as opposed to novels or poems, as well as various subsets thereof (such as tragic versus comic plays, etc.). For objective theorists and critics, what differentiates one genre from another has less to do with what a work is about or who wrote it than purely formal criteria. In other words, what distinguishes novels, plays, poems, etc. are the linguistic properties peculiar to each. Plato, who is predominantly a mimetic critic concerned as such with *what* a work depicts, was arguably the first theorist of genre, distinguishing ultimately on formal grounds, however, between mimetic and diegetic forms of literature in Book II of *The Republic*. The former, such as plays, represent reality directly without the intervention of a narrator as a result of which witnessing the words and actions of the characters is almost like witnessing real life, whereas the latter, such as epic poems, represent reality indirectly by means of a narrator and the telling of a story (these are, as such, at a further remove from reality). Even for Plato, in other words, the question of *how* a text represents the world is of key significance. Aristotle develops Plato's distinction more fully, arguing influentially that the

arts in general are distinguished by their *medium* of representation: the medium of literature is words, whereas the visual arts rely on shapes and colours, etc. There are, in turn, three basic kinds of literature, drama, epic or narrative poetry (the ancestor of modern prose fiction), and lyric poetry. These are differentiated from each other by their *manner* of representation: plays have no narrator, while epic and lyric poetry do. Epic and lyric poetry are in turn further differentiated by the fact that the former is narrated in the third person and the latter in the first person. It is only at this point that the *object* of representation comes into play: plays are differentiated, Aristotle argues, by their subject matter, hence their division into tragedies and comedies, the former focusing on events that turn out badly and vice versa for the latter.

Objective theorists and critics are *formalists* in the general sense that they argue that the most important thing which a *literary* critic should focus on is the *literary* work itself or, more precisely, its form. The New Critics, for example, stressed that it is a fallacy to focus either on the author and his/her social and historical context (Wimsatt and Beardsley famously call this the 'intentional fallacy') or the reader (their equally celebrated 'affective fallacy'). Zahava McKeon explains that there is a

traditional conflict between a view of literature that focuses on the effects produced by a literary work and the means that produce them and on the personality and psychology of the artist, and a view that considers the work as an object, a whole made up of inter-related parts to be studied as a thing in itself regardless of the quality of mind of the artist or of any response that the work may or may not evoke in an audience. (5-6)

Psychologists may, understandably, choose to focus on the author and the workings of his/her mind or, alternatively, what makes a reader tick as s/he makes sense of and is affected by literary works. Sociologists and political scientists, similarly, have every reason and right to explore the formative impact of the socio-historical context on the author and his/her work. However, formalists claim, the sole focus of a *literary* critic per se should be on the *literary* qualities of the work at hand. In other words, nothing should divert his/her attention away from the job at hand: a description of the *verbal properties* of the literary work itself. Concern for any and everything lying outside the province of literature turns a literary critic into a sociologist, a historian, a psychologist, etc., in other words, everything but a student of literature. In short, as Ransom puts it, criticism should be intrinsic, then, rather than extrinsic. It is only in this way that scientificity (or at the very least quasi-scientificity) may be attained and literary criticism professionalised. Hence, Ransom's proclamation, in "Criticism Inc.," that criticism "must become more scientific, or precise and systematic, and this means that it must be developed by the collective and sustained effort of learned persons – which means that its proper seat is in the universities" (94).

Such emphases on literary form have often led to accusations that formalists such as the New Critics in the USA and the Russian Formalists in the USSR were ahistoricist in bent, that is, intent upon divorcing literature from reality. Alfred Kazin, for example, accused the New Critics in particular of threatening in this way to turn literary criticism into a "cult" (436) by making a "fetish of form" (431).⁷ Such charges may not be fair, however, for one simple reason: nowhere is there any indication that these schools, not least the New Critics, notwithstanding their urging that special attention be paid to form,

⁷Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds: an Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942).

stress anything resembling a 'mimetic fallacy.' There is, in other words, no evidence that they considered it a mistake to focus on the claims about the world made by literary works. What they did emphasise, instead, is that the representation of reality is a far more complex affair than it might first appear and that, consequently, content and form are inextricably intertwined. In the case of lyric poems especially, New Critics like John Crowe Ransom argued that their meaning is located at the intersection of what he termed the 'logical' or 'paraphraseable core' (its meaning consisting in the representation of some state of affairs) and its 'local texture' (its precise form). In the case of prose fiction (as well as, by extension, narrative poetry), some like Mark Schorer have argued similarly that discussions of subject matter are inseparable from questions of what he terms the 'narrative technique' by means of which this subject is treated. These are distinctions analogous to Saussure's view that each sign is an indivisible unity comprised of a signifier (its sound and, by extension, its graphic representation) and a signified (its meaning), the one inseparable from the other much like two sides of the same coin.

It is true, though, that at least some objective critics, refusing to see form as merely a vehicle for content and, thus, as a means to any end, have taken the formalist approach to a radical extreme. A good example of this is the so-called 'art for art's sake' movement associated with the work of nineteenth century writers, theorists and critics such as Théophile Gautier and Oscar Wilde and who openly embraced accusations of ahistoricism. Gautier, for example, ridiculed those who emphasised mimeticism and moral didacticism in art, while Wilde famously poured scorn on the aspirations of mimetic and pragmatic critics alike. For Wilde, art does not imitate life: it is, rather, the other way around in that life imitates art. If art does anything, it is to express the author's unique vision of reality as a result of which art is less the product of its age and time than the other way around. Nor, in Wilde's view, does art have a moral impact, good or bad, on the reader not least because right and wrong are not unquestionable absolutes.

In more recent times, especially for those who accept the coherence, structuralist or systemic theory of meaning and deconstructive variants thereof, that is, the view that the meaning of a sign is derived from its relationship to / difference from other signs, the relationship between reality and the words used in a literary work ostensibly to represent that reality is asymptotic at best and non-existent at worst. Hence, a tendency to view literary form as having no necessary relationship to reality and, thus, as being worthy of study in its own right and in its own terms, that is, with respect to the properties and structures peculiar to its very own constituent elements: words. In a nutshell, if literature reveals anything at all, it is not the world (whatever that may mean exactly) but the very language of which it itself is comprised. It is for this reason that literature is, arguably, metalinguistic, that is, a use of language ultimately to talk about language, in other words, a self-referential discourse. In this scheme of things, it is not a matter of content taking precedence over form or form over content. Form does not exist either in subservience to or in sovereignty over something other than itself. Content does not dictate form, just as form does not determine content. Neither is primary nor secondary. Accordingly, form does not bear the imprint of reality just as content is not imprinted by form. This is because literary form is its own reason for being, its own *raison d'être*. There is only the word, and nothing but the word. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, at least to thinkers of this persuasion.

THE READER: THE 'PRAGMATIC' POLE

Some theorists and critics have focused not on what literary works are about (the 'mimetic'

pole of criticism), nor who wrote it (the 'expressive' pole), nor their form (the 'objective pole'). Their focus is, rather, on the reader. There exist at least two ways of thinking about this issue. Those whom Abrams calls 'pragmatic' critics address what literature does to the reader. Others, however, come at this problem from the other end, that is, they focus on what readers do to literature. Where pragmatic critics study the impact which literature has on the reader, those who might be called 'interpretivists' study precisely how readers read and make sense of texts. Interpretivists are divided, in turn, into those who believe that the goal of reading is to grasp the meaning inherent in the text and those who believe by contrast that meaning is something which emanates from the reader and is attributed to the text.

The key question addressed on this score is: what is the precise nature of the relationship which exists between a literary work and its reader? In other words, how should we understand the nature of a 'literary work,' how should we understand the nature of the 'reader' and, last but not least, how should we understand the nature of the connection linking the work to its reader. The nature of the literary work is discussed in the previous section devoted to literary form. Readers are human beings possessed necessarily of a mind and other properties, as discussed earlier with regard to the author. The answer to the third hinges on the theories of knowledge and language which one espouses. Pragmatic criticism is informed both by a pragmatic or instrumentalist theory of knowledge – the view that the truth of a claim is decided by its practical effects or consequences, its instrumentality or utility – and by an instrumentalist theory of meaning – the view that the meaning of words is synonymous with the effects which they have and the functions which they perform.

On the other hand, interpretivism, as pointed out above, is divided into two camps: the meaning of a text is thought to be something either found or constructed. Those who accept the former view draw on a correspondence theory of knowledge – in this case, a reader's interpretation is true because it corresponds to the meaning inherent in the text before them – as well as either a correspondence theory of meaning – the view that the meaning of words in a text are the product of the reality which they represent – or the expressivist theory of meaning – the view that the meaning of a word is an expression of certain mental states within the author. The latter camp draws on a combination of the perspectival model of knowledge – the view, in this case, that the reader's subjective perspective on the text is paramount – and the consensus theory of knowledge – the view that meaning is whatever is agreed upon by the members of some specified group, in this case, for example, what Stanley Fish refers to as the 'interpretive community' which sanctions particular interpretations. They draw, too, upon some combination of the expressivist theory of meaning, albeit with a twist this time in that the words read express mental states originating within the reader and not the author, and the consensus/contractualist theory of meaning – the view that a reader's interpretation of a word is a function of the fact that a language is tantamount to a set of social conventions and meaning a function of consensus.

Pragmatic Criticism

The 'pragmatic' approach to criticism focuses on what literary works do to readers. Such critics are concerned with the impact, most often of a moral and/or emotional kind, which literature has upon the reader. From this perspective, literature (and evidently, by extension, other cultural practices such as music) is evaluated or judged with reference to either the good or the bad effect which it has upon those exposed to it and who are

thereby encouraged to adopt either desirable or deplorable attitudes and to act in accordance therewith. The *locus classicus* of such a view of literature is Book X of Plato's The Republic. The possibility that literature may have a negative effect inevitably raises the spectre of censorship, that is, the possible need for some form of control over what exactly is depicted in a literary work and, by extension, whether some books should be allowed to exist at all.

Interpretive Criticism

Other theorists, however, are concerned less with the impact which the literary work has on the reader than, inversely, with the impact which the reader has on the work. Such theorists study what, if anything, readers bring to the text. To be precise, they explore the processes of reading by which meaning is thought to either be found in or, alternatively, attributed to the text. One very influential camp contends that meaning, a function either of the world which words reflect or what an author imparts to words, is something already present in a text that waits to be found. When it succeeds in finding this given meaning, understanding is thereby achieved and misunderstanding avoided. In this scheme of things, the reader is something of a *passive consumer* or absorber of the meaning found in a text, his/her grasp of which is thus either true or false. Literary criticism, from this point of view, can and ought to be impersonal, impartial, neutral, objective, in a word, scientific. The sole meaning of any work can be *discovered* with the aid of a universal *method* not unlike that of the scientist as s/he seeks to understand the object of his/her investigation. From this perspective, literary criticism is tantamount to a kind of positivistic science capable of providing objective knowledge of the true meaning of any literary work, a meaning which is available to all readers, at any time and in any place, once they follow tried and tested methods.

The other camp, the influence of which is growing, is of the view that meaning is something brought to and imposed on the text by the reader in the very process of reading it. It is for this reason that meaning is arbitrary, misunderstanding accordingly not an issue and criticism a necessarily subjective affair. The reader in this schema is not a passive consumer but, rather, an *active producer* of the work's meaning as a result of which no interpretation is either right or wrong, merely plausible, each specific act of reading producing merely one possible interpretation, among many others. This camp contends that there is, thus, a multiplicity of potential meanings, the source of each of which is a specific act of reading performed by a determinate reader in a particular social and historical location. Reading perforce expresses the subjective inclinations, biases, predispositions, desires, socio-historical determinants, etc. of the reader in question, the result being that criticism is necessarily and unavoidably personal, partial, partisan, subjective and, consequently, anything but scientific.

It should be pointed out that a debate has arisen within the second camp as to the degree to which meaning is imposed on the text. Some argue that readers simply connect the dots, as it were, provided by the text. In other words, the words which form the text delimit the range of possible interpretations, rendering some plausible and others not. By contrast, others contend that there are potentially no limits to interpretation. If any boundaries do exist, these are the result of specific constraints imposed on acts of reading by what Stanley Fish terms the 'interpretive community' (e.g. a particular school of criticism) to which the reader belongs. These constraints take the form of socially- and historically-specific dictates concerning what critics are allowed to do, how they should do it and, thus, which interpretations are reasonable.

First published: September 2010.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

For a discussion of the philosophical concepts and frameworks which inform literary theory and criticism, see also **THE PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORKS OF LITERARY THEORY: RELEVANT BRANCHES OF PHILOSOPHY AND THEIR ADJACENT DISCIPLINES.**

Please see the following articles on the historical development of literary theory and criticism up to c.1900:

- **SELECTED THEORIES OF THE LITERARY AUTHOR TO c.1900**
- **SELECTED THEORIES OF THE LITERARY READER TO c.1900**
- **SELECTED THEORIES OF LITERARY REPRESENTATION TO c.1900**

For information on more recent developments in literary theory and criticism since c.1945, see the entries on the following schools of criticism:

- **AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
- **ANGLO-AMERICAN FORMALIST LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
- **DECONSTRUCTIVE LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
- **DIALOGICAL LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
- **FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
- **FOUCAULDIAN DISCURSIVE LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
- **MARXIST LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
- **PHENOMENOLOGICAL, EXISTENTIALIST AND HERMENEUTICAL LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
- **POST-COLONIAL LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM:**
 - **AFRICAN LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
 - **EAST ASIAN LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
 - **SOUTH ASIAN LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
 - **CARIBBEAN LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
- **PSYCHOANALYTIC LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
- **STRUCTURALIST LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
- **STRUCTURALIST MARXIST LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**
- **STRUCTURALIST PSYCHOANALYTIC LITERARY THEORY AND CRITICISM**

REFERENCES

All references in the article above, unless otherwise stated, are documented in one or the other of the following bibliographies:

- **THE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SELECTED PRIMARY SOURCES IN PHILOSOPHY AND 'THEORY'**
- **THE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SELECTED PRIMARY SOURCES IN RHETORIC**
- **THE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SELECTED PRIMARY SOURCES IN LITERARY THEORY**