

THE VALUE OF LITERATURE

*The Disparity between 'Practical Criticism' and 'Modern Literary Theory',
with a Case-Study of Thomas Hardy*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a critical study of the conceptual foundations of the work of a number of twentieth-century academic literary critics and theorists, with the aim of exploring the ground of some of the disputes between exponents of different approaches to literary analysis. It asks to what extent, and how, the fundamental assumptions and principles concerning the nature and value of literature and literary analysis vary between these analysts, and how these notions affect their analytical methods. To this end, it presents a close comparative reading of some of the more prominent British and American literary analysts of the past hundred years or so who have been associated with a variety of methodological camps, namely, T. S. Eliot, William Empson, F. R. Leavis, and I. A. Richards ('Practical', or 'New', Criticism); Homi K. Bhabha (postcolonialism); Terry Eagleton (Marxism); J. Hillis Miller (deconstruction); and Elaine Showalter (feminism). In the process, the thesis also investigates whether the old guard of Practical Criticism is as old-fashioned and unimportant as many of its successors have claimed it to be.

The thesis is divided into three parts. The first two are concerned, roughly chronologically, with key critical writings by Richards, Leavis, Eliot, and Empson (Part I), and by Eagleton, Showalter, Bhabha, and Miller (Part II). Parts I and II are further divided into separate chapters, each of which focuses on one literary analyst at a time and dissects, individually and comparatively, the following three elements in their writings: their definition of the concept of literature, the value they place on both literature and the task of literary analysis, and their analytical practice. The final part of the thesis consists of a case-study of Thomas Hardy, which shows how the treatment of the work of a single author by these eight analysts, and any analyst, is deeply affected by the assumptions and principles concerning the nature and value of literature and literary analysis which drive their work.

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Gesche Ipsen, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed:

Date:

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AG Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-1985*
- ARG William Empson, *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by John Haffenden
- CC T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings*
- CI Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*
- EN Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction*
- ER J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin*
- FC Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: From 'The Spectator' to Post-Structuralism*
- 'FCR' Elaine Showalter, 'The Feminist Critical Revolution', in
- FD Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others*
- GT F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*
- HRP Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*
- LM J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens*
- LO Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing*
- LoC Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*
- LT Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*
- MLC Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*
- 'MM' Homi Bhabha, 'Editor's Introduction: Minority Maneuvers and Unsettled Negotiations'
- NB F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of Contemporary Situation*
- NDC T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*
- NN Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*
- OL J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature*
- OP T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*
- PC I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*
- PLC I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*
- RN J. Hillis Miller, *Reading Narrative*
- RV F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry*
- SA Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*
- SC Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*

- SE* T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*
- STA* William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*
- 'TFP' Elaine Showalter, 'Toward a Feminist Poetics', in
- TN* J. Hillis Miller, *Theory Now and Then*
- TPP* J. Hillis Miller, *Tropes, Parables, Performatives: Essays on Twentieth-Century Literature*
- UP* T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*
- VC* F. R. Leavis, *Valuation in Criticism and Other Essays*, ed. by G. Singh
- VP* J. Hillis Miller, *Versions of Pygmalion*
- VS* J. Hillis Miller, *Victorian Subjects*

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

This thesis represents a critical study of the conceptual foundations of the work of a number of twentieth-century academic literary critics and theorists, with the aim of exploring the ground of some of the disputes between exponents of different approaches to literary analysis. It asks to what extent, and how, the fundamental assumptions and principles concerning the nature and value of literature and literary analysis vary between these analysts,¹ and how these notions determine their analytical methods. To this end, it presents a close comparative reading of some of the more prominent British and American literary analysts of the past hundred years or so who have been associated with a variety of methodological camps, namely, T. S. Eliot, William Empson, F. R. Leavis, and I. A. Richards ('Practical', or 'New', Criticism);² Homi K. Bhabha (postcolonialism); Terry Eagleton (Marxism); J. Hillis Miller (deconstruction); and Elaine Showalter (feminism). In the process, the thesis also investigates whether the old guard of Practical Criticism is as old-fashioned and unimportant as many of its successors have claimed it to be. Three propositions have guided the research:

First Proposition: Textual Absence

The very sense of uncertainty which surrounds the future viability of 'Literary Studies' as an academic discipline (be it in the guise of 'English' or 'English Literature', any other national or transnational literature course, or 'Comparative Literature') has in part been brought on by a move away from literary texts towards other things. Many analysts seem

¹ For the purpose of simplification, I have largely used the term 'analyst' throughout this thesis, to stand for both 'critics' and 'theorists'.

² For reasons of simplicity, and because the two terms 'Practical Criticism/Critics' and 'New Criticism/Critics' have been used in an almost interchangeable manner since their inception (often depending on whether the person using them is, or is referring to, British or American analysts), I have contracted these to 'Practical Criticism/Critics' throughout the thesis.

to be working with literature in order to be able to comment on something else, which thus turns literature from an end in itself into a means, and makes of Literary Studies a discipline practiced by some who define it by an object which lies outside its scope (of course, this chain of thought only makes sense if one believes that there is such a thing as an ‘outside-text’.) If it is to continue to exist as a strong academic discipline, it seems that Literary Studies needs to be concerned primarily with literature. Otherwise, if literature is not to be the object of study in itself, it would more appropriately form part of another course, such as Politics, History, Philosophy, or Sociology. Furthermore, literary analysis in the context of Literary Studies should be truly based on the words of a text, not on what one would like them to be, or on so much of what lies outside them, that they are eventually left behind. While there is naturally no reason not to involve context (history, psychology, biology, politics, and so on) in the analysis of texts, this only makes sense in the framework of the discipline of Literary Studies as long as it illuminates literature. Once literature begins to be employed to illuminate something outside it, its study ceases to be the study of literature, and becomes the study of that something outside it, and therefore a different discipline – which also means that the close reading of a text is a basic and essential requirement for the study of literature.

Second Proposition: Disputes

The literary academia has become increasingly divided into antagonistic camps, in particular since the widespread introduction of Literary Studies as a discipline to British and American universities at the beginning of the twentieth century. Groups of literary analysts – ‘Marxists’, ‘feminists’, ‘postcolonialists’, ‘deconstructionists’ and so on – appear to be spending a disproportionate amount of energy on battling with each other, rather than on literary scholarship itself. Three recent books in particular attest to this, both by their descriptions of this very antagonism itself and by their own enactments of it: Stanley Fish’s *Professional Correctness* and Tony Hilfer’s *The New Hegemony in Literary Studies* are critiques of the state of Literary Studies, founded on their authors’ revolt against the authority of certain literary theories, and between them they reject most of the currently most popular theoretical approaches to literature; and in the six hundred and eighty-three pages of *Theory’s Empire*, forty-seven academics of the last hundred years quarrel with

various aspects of one theory or another, even ‘theory’ as such.³ The focus of these disputes, moreover, tends to be conferred upon analysts in groups, as if they were political parties, without sufficient differentiation between individuals. By criticising, for example, ‘Marxist literary critics’, ‘impressionist criticism’, ‘postmodernism’, or ‘New Criticism’, one neatly circumvents the need to deal with the words actually written by a literary analyst, and is often able to blanket over a fairly heterogeneous assembly of characters without having to engage with their actual writings (and it becomes even worse, of course, when one’s hostility is directed at ‘literary criticism’ or ‘literary theory’ as a whole). Though categorisation can be practical in certain other fields, it is doubtful that it is very useful for the evaluation of individual analysts. Such labels frequently merely simplify a situation by ignoring significant disparities in the assumptions, principles and methods of those who are associated with them, and, when employed in a dispute, risk passing over what might be thought of as positive qualities. It is hereby not suggested, of course, that there is no such thing as, for example, a ‘Marxist’ or ‘Practical’ critic: there are some distinguishing characteristics which are not quite illusions, such as perhaps, in the case of the former, a philosophy built on one or more of Karl Marx’s tenets, and in the case of the latter, the belief that literary criticism has a real and practical function in the everyday world. Yet to conclude from the name of a group to the finer points of an analyst’s work, from the general to the particular, can be, and often is, a mistake.

An example of such a fallacy of generalisation is the treatment of those analysts who have variously been called ‘Practical’, ‘New’, ‘Bourgeois’, or ‘Liberal-Humanist’ critics. It appears to be a frequent point of agreement between many analysts who embarked on their professions in the latter half of the twentieth century, that what came before them was essentially wrong-headed and outdated, and that a new era had begun, or ought to begin. One can find, it is true, many instances of a respectful appreciation of the work of the Practical Critics – in particular that of Eliot, Empson, Leavis, and Richards, including praise from such prominent figures as de Man, Kenner, Wellek, Jameson, and Steiner – but they are matched by an equally voluminous comprehensive rejection of their writings as material of mere historical interest, if that. The apparent

³ See Stanley Fish, *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Tony Hilfer, *The New Hegemony in Literary Studies: Contradictions in Theory* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003); and Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral, eds, *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

inability to conceive of twentieth-century letters on letters without the contribution of Practical Criticism, therefore, is strongly marked by a simultaneous disciplinary unwillingness to attribute a positive, let alone a permanent, value to their writings (Appendix A to this thesis discusses this situation in detail). In a statement which applies as much to Eliot, Empson and Richards as it does to Leavis, Michael Bell declares that ‘by the end of the sixties, the increasing dominance of Marxist analysis, the impact of feminist and minority ethnic writing, and the globalising of literary influence and creation, all made Leavis’s methods and concerns seem outdated and parochial’, and Leavis has thus become a symbol for ‘liberal humanism’ and is ‘treated as a by-word for a naïve and outdated conception’.⁴ All four analysts have been charged with being (more or less liberal) humanists,⁵ and been associated with related élitist, authoritarian, empiricist, universalist, and centrist fallacies. Thus the Practical Critics have been dismissed, but they have also been misunderstood, with the resulting judgements of their work seemingly repeating themselves as mere truisms, unaccompanied by the kind of critical thinking which they, as judgements, demand. The Practical Critics were themselves not immune to this fallacy, and the various objections they made to methods of literary analysis unlike their own have also been highlighted in this thesis, and reveal themselves to be as dependent on their definitions and valuations of literature as those of their successors are.

Rather than looking at the matter in terms of a progression from the not-so-good to the more enlightened, perhaps it is more accurate to consider it in terms of an evolution. The result of such a change of perspective may be a rebuttal of the notion that the Practical Critics are *passé*, and that, with the so-called analytical paradigm-shift of the middle of the twentieth century (whatever may have caused it – the ‘linguistic turn’ brought on by Saussure, Lévi-Strauss’s *Anthropologie structurale* in 1958, the rise of ‘Neo-

⁴ ‘F. R. Leavis’, in A. Walton Litz, Louis Menand, and Lawrence Rainey, eds, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume 7: Modernism and the New Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 389-422 (p. 420).

⁵ It will be noted, of course, that Eliot became a strong critic of humanism, liberal or otherwise – but he defined humanism as the opposite of religious philosophy, rather than a vision of a central and universal human race. See ‘The Humanism of Irving Babbitt’ and ‘Second Thoughts About Humanism’, in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951; hereafter ‘SE’), pp. 471-91. See also Louis Menand: Eliot ‘regarded [...] humanism – as an attempt to evade the implications of scepticism by devising a cheery anthropocentric system of values’; ‘T. S. Eliot’, in A. Walton Litz et al., *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, pp. 17-56 (p. 25).

Marxism' in the late 1950s and 1960s,⁶ the recoil from the European fascism of the 1930s and 1940s), their work has been superseded by something much more valuable. As George Steiner also suggests in *After Babel*, theories developed in the Arts and Humanities are not equivalent to those developed in the Sciences:⁷ theoretical Physics is not the same thing as literary theory (the grammar of the two phrases already reveals much about the difference between them); and, while it is possible to speak of a 'progression' in a scientific context, it is much more difficult to prove increasing theoretical sophistication in a literary one.

In confrontations between one conceptual or philosophical foundation and another, literature tends to fade into the background. Moreover, such a rather absolutist attitude can only be to the detriment of Literary Studies, in that it prevents the kind of collaboration which truly serves the acquisition of knowledge demanded by any academic discipline.⁸ Academic analysts seemingly cannot work together towards the understanding of literature without the existence of a prior agreement on basic definitions of terms, analytical strategy, world-view, and political affiliation. A state of affairs in which the lines of battle are drawn more sharply than the lines of communication can but lead to an excessive disciplinary introversion and, eventually, disciplinary stagnation.

Third Proposition: The Importance of Beginnings

In trying to get to the root of the eight approaches to literary analysis covered by this thesis, my argument is naturally based on hypotheses of my own. Firstly, that one's principles and assumptions concerning literature fully affect how one deals with the task

⁶ Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht attributed the shift to these second and third factors in his talk 'Where Will the "Literary Disciplines" at the University Go, Comparative or Not – If They Go Anywhere?', given at the 2008 Hermes Consortium for Literary and Cultural Studies Seminar (*Comparative Literature: Models for Interdisciplinarity in the Humanities?*) on 18 June 2008.

⁷ 'Preface to the Second Edition', *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. ix-xviii (pp. xv-xvi).

⁸ See, for instance, David Damrosch's conclusion ('World Enough and Time') to *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), in which he argues for a collaboration between so-called 'specialists' and 'generalists'. Although his discussion is centred on the study of world literature, there is no apparent reason why such an approach might not be appropriate to other areas of Literary Studies.

of literary analysis, and consequently also what happens to a given literary text when one writes about it. Knowing what an analyst's assumptions are is therefore crucial to knowing how to interpret his or her writings on literature. Students who examine and understand an analyst's approach to a particular author, text, genre, and so on, will be able to distinguish those writings which are useful to their line of inquiry from those which are not. J. Hillis Miller recognised this in his 1966 article on 'The Antitheses of Criticism', in which he lists twenty-two pairs of oppositions which he had observed during a Yale Colloquium on Criticism, and concludes:

The work of a particular critic tends to be defined by where he stands on the mountain, by his perspective, explicit or implicit, on the issues raised by the oppositions I have listed. This placing is often so taken for granted that it is never recognized for what it is – the foundation of a critical method.⁹

Secondly, that there is such a thing as 'literature' which can be distinguished from other things, and there is therefore an 'outside-text'. Thirdly, that the value of literature, as well as of the act of reading and of literary analysis, is not the same for all readers, and can change even for a single reader from one act of reading to another. Lastly, that 'value' is not always congruent with 'function', although the two are certainly related: for example, while the function of a literary work may be defined as the use for which its author created it, and also as how it is used (for example, its use by a reader to while away spare time, or by teachers or clerics for instruction), its value depends on its effect, actual or perceived (for example, its ability to entertain, or to enlighten), and can therefore be negative, as well as positive.

Scope and Materials

Theoretically, one might have picked any number of analysts from any timeframe, but in the context of a Ph.D. one's scope is of course restricted by how many words one has in

⁹ 'The Antitheses of Criticism: Reflections on the Yale Colloquium', in *Theory Now and Then* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991; hereafter: 'TN'), pp. 2-3.

which to cover the subject. In order to be able to answer the research question most effectively – that is, in order to attain enough breadth to show how valuations of literature can differ quite radically, while confining the investigation to a small enough number of elements to prevent superficiality – it was deemed most sensible to select eight well-known figures. Richards, Leavis, Eliot, Empson, Eagleton, Showalter, Bhabha, and Miller represent one particular epoch (if such a unifying word can be used to name such a heterogeneous time) of literary analysis, that is, the one stretching from the publication of T. S. Eliot's *The Sacred Wood* in 1920 until today (the most recent work used for the thesis being Terry Eagleton's *How to Read a Poem* from 2007). My choice of this time-span was driven by two factors. Firstly, in order to be relevant to an assessment of the current situation, the thesis needed to cover writings right up to the present day. Secondly, the period includes both what is often called 'modern literary theory' and what is often called 'Practical' or 'New' criticism; and given that proponents of the former frequently dismiss the merits of the latter even before they dismiss each other, I considered it most useful to take this opportunity to place them side by side, to look at the Practical Critics with a fresh eye, and to see whether there really is as much less 'good' in the 'old-fashioned' than in the 'modern'.

With this in mind, I have chosen four characters who may be called Practical Critics, and four who may be defined as modern literary theorists (if we assume that the latter can be distinguished from the former by virtue of their being inclined towards the self-conscious construction of theories about literature alongside, on occasion even instead of, close literary analysis as such).¹⁰ Beyond this, I chose these eight analysts based on three criteria: their prominence; the pertinence of their work to the field of literary analysis; and their having produced their work in Britain or the United States, and therefore written in English.¹¹ I also selected, for the modern literary theorists, analysts who can each be said to represent one of the currently most influential analytical groups, that is, Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, and deconstruction. Richards, Leavis, Eliot, and Empson are to be found in any guide to literary criticism, either with their own entries, or under the header of 'Practical Criticism' or 'New Criticism', and in almost any

¹⁰ Parts I and II will show to what extent these appellations make sense, and to what extent these two groups differ from each other.

¹¹ This last, in order to be able to effect a more even comparison than one between critics from very different cultures would no doubt have been. The conclusion to this thesis touches on what could be done in that direction.

encyclopaedia or biographical dictionary covering Britain and the United States. Terry Eagleton remains, with Drew Milne, the most well-known of British Marxist literary theorists; though Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray are perhaps more frequently referred to in current feminist theory, none of them are particularly *literary* theorists – of those, Elaine Showalter is a most famous figure; Homi K. Bhabha is one of the two leading torch-bearers of postcolonial literary theory who have succeeded Edward Said (the other being Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak); and J. Hillis Miller stands alongside Paul de Man and Harold Bloom as one of the three chief deconstructive literary critics (also called the ‘Yale School’ critics) whose work continues to exert its influence. As far as the selection of texts is concerned, the number of words at my disposal has prevented my discussing every single publication by the eight analysts. I have therefore concentrated my research on their key writings, and only on those which are directly concerned with their ideas about literature and of whom they are the only authors.¹²

In addition to scrutinising what the eight protagonists of this thesis have written on the subject of literature and literary analysis, it was considered very important to conduct a case-study which shows what happens when one author’s work is placed into their hands. As the thesis progresses, what has been written and done by one analyst is compared to the work of the others, and a case-study provides an ideal opportunity for one to see exactly whether, and how, a single writer’s work has produced divergent representations by analysts whose conceptual foundations differ – sometimes widely – from each other: can the representations be reconciled, or can one of them be deemed to be more useful, even perhaps closer to the truth, than the others? Or will one find out that all of them are indispensable to the entity that is ‘the writer’? A number of authors presented themselves as suitable subjects; in the end, Thomas Hardy was chosen in part because his work is highly susceptible to the types of analysis to be discussed in Parts I and II: he has written a substantial amount of both prose and poetry, and touches on a wide range of aesthetic, cultural and political concerns. Furthermore, although a position is far from secured for him in every critic’s personal canon, Hardy is a well-known and respected figure in British, especially in English, culture. In the BBC’s ‘Big Read’ list of

¹² The latter, simply because it was necessary to be able to say with fair certainty that any words referred to, cited, or otherwise used in my argument were attributable to a specific analyst, and no one else. Only very occasional reference has been made to works not directly concerned with literature, such as Eagleton’s *Ideology* and Leavis’s *Nor Shall My Sword*; and Empson’s *The Structure of Complex Words* and Eliot’s *After Strange Gods*, though they do not directly concern literary criticism, feature in Part III because of their comments on Hardy.

the hundred ‘best-loved’ novels, for example, which was based on a public vote in April 2003, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* came sixteenth and *Far from the Madding Crowd* forty-eighth.¹³ The *Daily Telegraph*’s ‘110 Best Books: The Perfect Library’, compiled by the paper on 6 April 2008, is subdivided into several genres, and includes *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* as one of the ten best works of ‘Romantic Fiction’.¹⁴ Although publishers have proved reluctant to provide any detailed numerical information on sales of Hardy books, some information could be obtained: for instance, he is ‘one of [the] consistently top selling authors on the Oxford World’s Classics list’,¹⁵ and of the million or so books listed under ‘fiction’ on Amazon, a search of Hardy’s novels ranked by number of sales shows *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and *The Woodlanders* in the top 50,000.¹⁶ As for entries for Hardy in reference books and anthologies, the one in the *Concise Britannica Encyclopaedia* comprises sixteen lines,¹⁷ and Michael Millgate has written roughly 7,400 words about him for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*;¹⁸ the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, one may find two-and-a-third columns for ‘Hardy, Thomas’, and an additional four hundred and sixty-three lines of separate entries for thirteen of his novels (*A Laodicean* is conspicuous

¹³ <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/bigread/top100.shtml>> [accessed 13 August 2008]. Hardy is one of twelve authors whose work turns up more than once. The eleven others are Charles Dickens and Terry Pratchett (five times); Jacqueline Wilson, J. K. Rowling and Roald Dahl (four); Jane Austen (three); and Gabriel García Márquez, George Orwell, John Steinbeck, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Leo Tolstoy (two).

¹⁴ Hardy does not feature in the categories of ‘Classics’, ‘Poetry’ or ‘Literary Fiction’ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2008/04/06/nosplit/sv_classics06.xml> [accessed 13 August 2008].

¹⁵ Quoted from personal correspondence with a contact at OWC, in an email from 20 May 2008. It was not possible – despite several attempts – to ascertain similar information from Pearson (publishers of Penguin Classics) or Wordsworth Editions.

¹⁶ Taken from amazon.co.uk <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Hardy-Thomas-H-Books/s/ref=sr_nr_n_13?ie=UTF8&rs=274413&bbn=274422&rnid=274413&rh=n%3A266239%2Cn%3A62%2Cn%3A274146%2Cn%3A274413%2Cn%3A274422> [accessed 29 May 2008].

¹⁷ Theodore Pappas, ed., *Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia* (Chicago and London: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2003), p. 821. Compare with the following writers, to whom he has been compared the analysts in Part III: about the same number for George Eliot, just over 22 for Dickens, 13 ½ for Robert Browning, 34 for Shelley, just over 19 for Henry James, 17 for Conrad.

¹⁸ See <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33708?docPos=4>> [accessed 13 August 2008; access to the article requires personal or institutional registration].

by its absence), *The Dynasts* and the *Queen of Cornwall* play;¹⁹ the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* contains sixteen poems by Hardy,²⁰ and the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* provides us with thirty-six of what are supposedly his choicest lines.²¹ If we search for ‘Thomas Hardy’ in Google, the result numbers ‘about 1,680,000’.²² The new national curriculum for English Literature in secondary, or high, schools, which has come into force at the start of the 2008 school year, includes Hardy as one of the ‘pre-twentieth-century writers’ of texts representing ‘the English literary heritage’, a selection of whom Key Stage 3 and 4 students should be taught (the previous curriculum listed him as one of the ‘major poets after 1914’ and one of the ‘major [fiction] writers published before 1914’, from which lists teachers of Key Stage 3 and 4 students were supposed to choose their materials).²³

¹⁹ Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, revised 5th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). The number of lines breaks down as follows: *Desperate Remedies* (19), *Under the Greenwood Tree* (26), *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (25), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (29), *Jude the Obscure* (65), *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (42), *The Dynasts* (59), *The Return of the Native* (32), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (33), *The Woodlanders* (40), *The Trumpet Major* (19), *Two on a Tower* (28), *The Well-Beloved* (16), *The Hand of Ethelberta* (14), *Queen of Cornwall* (16).

²⁰ Allison, Alexander W., Barrows, Herbert, Blake, Caesar R., et al. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3rd edn (New York and London: Norton, 1983). These poems are: ‘Hap’, ‘Thoughts of Phena’, ‘I Look into My Glass’, ‘Drummer Hodge’, ‘A Broken Appointment’, ‘The Darkling Thrush’, ‘The Ruined Maid’, ‘In Tenebris [I]’, ‘The Convergence of the Twain’, ‘Channel Firing’, ‘The Voice’, ‘In Time of “The Breaking of the Nations”’, ‘Afterwards’, ‘Jezreel’, ‘The Children and Sir Nameless’, and ‘No Buyers’.

²¹ Angela Partington, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 324-6. Compare with George Eliot (42), Dickens (171), Browning (158), Shelley (119), Henry James (28), and Conrad (18). The quotations are taken from his writings as follows: five from *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, two each from *The Dynasts*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *The Return of the Native*, one each from *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Hand of Ethelberta*, *Jude the Obscure*, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and *The Woodlanders*; one from *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy, 1804-1891*; from the poems, there are two citations each from ‘Convergence of the Twain’ and ‘Weathers’, and one each from ‘Afterwards’, ‘An Ancient to Ancients’, ‘Christmas: 1924’, ‘The Darkling Thrush’, ‘De Profundis’, ‘He Never Expected Much’, ‘Hereditry’, ‘I Look Into My Glass’, ‘In Time of “The Breaking of Nations”’, ‘Let Me Enjoy’, ‘The Man He Killed’, ‘Men Who March Away’, ‘Midnight on the Great Western’, ‘The Voice’, and ‘When I Set Out from Lyonesse’.

²² Search conducted on 13 May 2008. The results for our list of other characters were, in descending order of size: Charles Dickens: c. 6,350,000, T. S. Eliot: c. 3,230,000, Henry James: c. 2,380,000, Joseph Conrad: c. 2,180,000, George Eliot: c. 1,560,000, Percy Bysshe Shelley: c. 978,000, and Robert Browning: c. 754,000.

²³ Information obtained from the *National Curriculum* web site <<http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/>> [accessed 13 August 2008].

The latest information obtained for the three main A and AS Level examination boards shows that Hardy is a topic for examination on AQA and EDEXCEL papers (though not on OCR papers).²⁴ At university, his place is a little more equivocal. An investigation into his presence or otherwise in modules of B.A. English or English Literature curricula, at the top and bottom ten universities in the 2007 *Times* Good University Guide league table for institutions offering such courses, has revealed the following information: St Andrews leads the field with six modules; Durham and Oxford offer five; UCL, Leeds, Nottingham, Teesside and Greenwich all have two; Westminster, Huddersfield, Staffordshire, Wolverhampton and Canterbury Christ Church offer one; he is not taught at the University of Wales (Newport).²⁵ Except in the case of one module at Nottingham and the one at Canterbury Christ Church, Hardy is not compulsory on any of these universities' courses, and in most cases the reading list carries only one novel, or perhaps a novel and one or two poems. His status with the 'reading public', to borrow Leavis's phrase, then, and the simultaneous ambivalence of his academic and literary-critical status, make Hardy a most interesting subject for the purposes of the case-study.

²⁴ Specimen AQA A and AS Level papers for 2009 ask questions about *The Woodlanders* and *Selected Poems* (<http://www.aqa.org.uk/qual/gce/eng_lit_a_new.php> [accessed 13 August 2008]), and questions on *Selected Poems* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* were asked in the June 2007 papers (<http://www.aqa.org.uk/qual/gceasa/englia_assess.php> [accessed 13 August 2008]). The EDEXCEL 'set texts' list from Autumn 2006 (the latest available) includes *The Return of the Native*, and the EDEXCEL Poetry Anthology includes 'Darkling' 'Thrush' (see <<http://www.edexcel.org.uk/quals/gce/english/adv/9180/>> [accessed 13 August 2008]). The OCR used to have *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as a set text for a 'Victorian Novel' topic, but at the time of writing this has been supplanted by a module on the Romantic Period (<http://www.ocr.org.uk/qualifications/AS_ALevelGCE/English_Literature/documents.html#Past_papers_2007_-_January_series> [accessed 13 August 2008]).

²⁵ This information was obtained by a combination of internet research (of the relevant universities' English department web sites) and personal correspondence with department staff, and is (as far as could be ascertained) accurate for the 2007-08 academic year. Equivalent information could not be obtained from Cambridge, York, Warwick, Edinburgh, Lincoln, or Derby.

Structure and Methodology

The thesis is divided into three parts: 'Part I: Practical Critics', 'Part II: Modern Literary Theorists', and 'Part III: The Value of Thomas Hardy'. Part I and Part II are divided into four chapters, one for each analyst; each chapter is further separated into three subsections, comprising the following: 'The Definition of Literature'; 'The Value of Literature and of Literary Analysis'; and 'Method', which investigates the analysts' evaluations of individual texts, showing the way in which the assumptions and principles which have been previously identified are (or are not) borne out in practice. Part III has been divided into an approximation of an analyst-by-analyst structure, but also contains something of a thematic tendency, in that the analysts have been grouped according to similarities discovered in their methods or findings. The first chapter deals with Eliot and Empson, who focused mostly on Hardy as a poet of important (if incorrect) opinions on religion; the second chapter with Leavis and Richards, who turn out to have been most concerned with Hardy's quality and place as a poet of a (his or their) particular time; the third chapter discusses Eagleton and Showalter's reactions to his work, who have both taken him on mostly as a novelist immersed in a particular political context; Miller sits rather solitarily in the final chapter, because his writings on Hardy simply could not be matched to anyone else's, in scope, method or perspective.

In order best to answer my research question and assess the true nature of the arguments put forward by the eight analysts, I have conducted my research and discussion by means of a straightforward close reading of their key books and articles about literature and literary criticism. I have preferred to deal with their writings first hand, which means that instances in which I draw on what others have said about them are exceedingly rare and occur as points of interest, rather than as substantial elements of my argument. For Part I and Part II I have not merely concentrated on overt statements made on the subject, but also paid attention to factors such as the occurrence of certain terms (such as 'art', 'artist', 'genius', 'product', 'culture') and their association with 'literature', the space dedicated to 'literature' and 'literary analysis', the location of the focus of various writings, and the objections levelled against (and praise of) other approaches to literary analysis. Much the same goes for Part III, though of course my attention there has been in particular on what has been written about Thomas Hardy.

I have not evaluated the validity of these analysts' philosophies and politics as such, and whenever I have criticised what analysts have said or done, it has been in the context of their own work. I therefore have, where appropriate, merely pointed out what appear to me to be illogical or inconsistent arguments or methods, lack (or misuse) of supporting evidence, errors of fact, or moments in which analysis threatens to stray so far from the text that it is possible to question its connection to literature. This thesis also does not attempt to examine the ways in which these eight analysts in fact coincide with, or differ from, the methodological groups to which they are deemed to belong (by themselves, by their colleagues, or by their academic readership), because the answer to that question is not relevant to the main line of enquiry. When it comes to the modern literary theorists, for instance, I have not made a case either for or against the notion that Eagleton, Showalter, Bhabha, and Miller respectively epitomise 'Marxism', 'feminism', 'postcolonialism', or 'deconstructionism'.

I have throughout this thesis endeavoured to handle the subject as objectively as possible – or, if true objectiveness is impossible, which it may well be, I have at least sought to be fair, and not, for example, to criticise in one analyst's work that which I pass over in another's. The same goes for the case-study, where I have tried not to let my own estimate of Hardy's works (which is, in any case, still only in the process of being formed) influence my treatment of what the analysts have said about, or made of, him. In short, I have approached this investigation in what is perhaps a quasi-scientific manner: I have researched a set of textual data in order to find out what it tells me, and drawn conclusions where I could.

PART I: THE 'PRACTICAL CRITICS'

Prologue

Wherein does the value of literature lie? Why study it at all, why evaluate it? Eliot, Empson, Richards and Leavis began writing criticism when the memory of the *fin de siècle* Aesthetes was still fresh,¹ and were to an extent motivated by their objection to their critical principles. Though there are, on occasion, certain affinities to be found between the Aesthetes and the Practical Critics (for instance, in Empson's interest in the 'beauty' of poetry; Richards, Leavis and Eliot's retention of the notion of the author as a 'genius'; and Empson and Richards's designation of 'emotion' as one of the crucial elements of literature), their writings also display a number of fundamental disagreements, by means of which they sought to separate themselves as much from their predecessors as modern literary theorists in turn have attempted to distinguish themselves from the Practical Critics. For instance, Eliot, Empson, Leavis and Richards disagreed with the Aesthetes' rejection of morality and verifiability as pertinent to the artistic realm. For all four of them, the function of criticism was to reveal some kind of truth about the work under scrutiny, even if they differed in their views of what this truth is, or how it can be ascertained. Against this, Wilde's comment that 'the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not'² was no doubt considered sacrilegious. There is also, in particular, a vast rift between the Aesthetes and their successors when it comes to their respective opinions on the role of the critic. While Wilde called for a critic who 'deepens the mystery' of a work of art and whose interpretations become 'more real' the more of his personality enters his writings,³ Bell for a critic whose work is not based on 'objective truth', but who makes 'aesthetic judgments' based on 'matters of taste',⁴ and Poe proposed that 'just as the Intellect concerns itself with Truth, so Taste informs us of the

¹ See Appendix B to this thesis for a more detailed background on the Aesthetes.

² 'The Critic as Artist', in *Intentions* (London: Methuen & Co., 1909), p. 146.

³ 'The Critic as Artist', pp. 154-6.

⁴ 'The Aesthetic Hypothesis', in *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1921), pp. 8-9.

Beautiful⁵ (and so makes of taste the only true arbiter of poetry) – while the Aesthetes, then, made of criticism something personal, something not directed at the finding of some empirically obtainable and scientifically verifiable truth, those who followed them were focussed rather on creating a type of criticism which was not only expository and rigorous, but also teachable. By the time Eliot, Empson, Leavis and Richards reached critical maturity, literary criticism had become entrenched as an academic discipline,⁶ which meant that it not only had to be teachable, but also examinable, with all the requirements for standards and methodological rigour that accompany such a quality. This is in stark contrast to Bell’s opinion, for example, that standards were detrimental to artistic creation;⁷ and Wilde’s praise of Ruskin and Pater’s impressionist criticism⁸ suggests he would not have objected to Empson’s occasional misquoting in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (though he probably would have objected to his analytical method). Aesthetic criticism is perhaps defined best by Pater’s image of ‘each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world’,⁹ but Practical Criticism had a social point which an Aesthetic criticism asserting the full independence of art from life cannot possibly have had. Eliot, Empson, Leavis and Richards all emphasise, in their discussions of literature and criticism, the importance of searching for, and acknowledging, values that are not artistically self-sufficient, but to a greater extent integrated with the external world; and it is on this interaction between the work of art and the world at large, through the reader (and the critic), that many of their critical theories rest. With the Practical Critics’ assumption of the socio-cultural accountability of criticism, then, art was once again governed by moral principles and external standards.

⁵ ‘The Poetic Principle’, in *Essays and Reviews* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), p. 76.

⁶ For further details on the official entry of English Literature into English universities in the early twentieth century (though UCL had already been offering the subject since 1828, and Oxford since 1894) see, for example, Part I: Institutions, in Carol Atherton, *Defining Literary Criticism: Scholarship, Authority and the Possession of Literary Knowledge, 1880-2002* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); and E. M. W. Tillyard’s *The Muse Unchained: An Intimate Account of the Revolution in English Studies at Cambridge* (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1958). Eagleton’s ‘The Rise of English’, in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996; hereafter: ‘LT’) is also helpful to an extent, but see my discussion of this book in Part II, Chapter One of this thesis.

⁷ ‘Society and Art’, in *Art*, p. 269.

⁸ ‘The Critic as Artist’, in *Intentions*, pp. 141-3.

⁹ *The Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 151.

Chapter One: I. A. Richards

(1893-1979)

The Definition of Literature

What is 'literature'? Is it anything that has ever been written, or something more specific? Each of the eight analysts under investigation in this thesis has an answer to this question which not only differs, to a greater or lesser extent, from that given by the other seven, but which is also an important element of their valuation and handling of literature as a whole and of specific literary works. Richards may not provide an explicit definition of the term 'literature', but one suspects, from the fact that he frequently passes over prose in his critical discussions, that poetry (including some of the dramatic kind, in particular tragedy) is, for him, the most valuable literary genre.¹⁰ Prose is, in his opinion, rather inferior to poetry, and therefore not worth much of anyone's attention (though he does turn to it in *Beyond*, as we shall see later). For Richards, the primary task of literature is to communicate valuable experiences and to communicate them well – and he believes that prose simply does not do the job as efficiently, or as well, as poetry: there is a 'superiority of verse to prose for the most difficult and deepest communications, poetry being by far the more complex vehicle' (p. 164). Admittedly, he does suggest (in *Practical Criticism*) that there is an important need to improve 'the prose of discussion, reflection and research',¹¹ but the prose of fiction fails to inspire him. Yet what is the character of that which Richards includes under the name of literature, poetry or otherwise? He identifies literature as an art-form, and treats the literary work (at least, the good work) as a work of art. The words 'art', 'arts' and 'artist' pervade *Principles*, most prominently in some of the chapter headings: 'Communication and the Artist', 'Art and Morals', 'The Normality of the Artist', and 'Art, Play and Civilization'. We find plenty of references in the text, not only throughout these chapters, but also, for instance, in 'The Chaos of Critical Theories', where he lists, among 'the questions which the critic seeks to answer': 'Why is one opinion about works of art not as good as another?' (p. 2); and in 'Attitudes', in which he describes poetry as one of the 'mimetic arts' (p. 101). (He may not have

¹⁰ See *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2001; hereafter: 'PLC'), pp. 63, 230-2 and 264.

¹¹ *Practical Criticism. A Study of Literary Judgment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1952; hereafter: 'PC'), p. 343.

mentioned ‘art’ as much in *Practical Criticism*, but there is no pressing reason for us to suppose that he changed his mind sometime between 1924 and 1929.) He also associates literature with the act of creation (he talks about the ‘creative process’ (p. 27) and the ‘creative moment’ (pp. 27 and 174) in *Practical Criticism*) and calls the (most accomplished) artist-poet a genius.¹² In part, however, he also defines literature, as art, as delimited by science. He repeatedly separates what he calls ‘scientific’ thought from ‘emotive’ thought, such as when he declares that there are ‘two uses of language’, one scientific-referential and the other emotive-fictional, of which the latter is used ‘for the sake of the effects in attitude and emotion produced by the reference it occasions’ (that is, it is capable of reaching beyond mere referential activity).¹³ Other instances are his distinction, in the same chapter, between scientific truth on the one hand, and a non-scientific truth – which he associates with literature and which is not ‘factual’, but based on ‘acceptability’ and ‘sincerity’ – on the other (pp. 251-3);¹⁴ and his opposition of scientific to emotive belief, with only the former empirically verifiable (pp. 255-69),¹⁵ while the latter resides outside scientific logic, and is the very thing that allows poetry to ‘go beyond what we know scientifically’.¹⁶

The Value of Literature and of Literary Analysis

In *Principles*, Richards dedicates two chapters (‘The Phantom Aesthetic State’ and ‘Poetry for Poetry’s Sake’) to the question of aesthetics, and argues that

¹² *PC*, p. 249-50.

¹³ *PLC*, p. 250.

¹⁴ Echoing perhaps Francis Bacon’s similarly-termed distinction between scientific and theological truth.

¹⁵ See also *PC*, pp. 274-5, and Paul H. Fry, ‘I. A. Richards’, in *The Cambridge History*, pp. 181-99.

¹⁶ *PC*, p. 278. See also *Poetries and Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1970), in which Richards distinguishes ‘scientific statements’ from the kinds of ‘pseudo-statements’ made in poetry (Chapter VI, ‘Poetry and Beliefs’, pp. 57-66, in particular pp. 58-60, and p. 60 n.1: ‘A pseudo-statement [...] is not necessarily false in any sense. It is merely a form of words whose scientific truth or falsity is irrelevant to the purpose in hand.’).

Art [*sic*] envisaged as a mystic, ineffable virtue is a close relative of the ‘aesthetic mood’, and may easily be pernicious in its effects, through the habits of mind which, as an idea, it fosters, and to which, as a mystery, it appeals.¹⁷

In his view, the truth is that poetry does not have ‘any different reality from the rest of the world’, and the evaluation of poetry therefore needs to take ‘account of everything, and of the way things hang together’ (p. 68). His reasoning of this point is paradoxical (and, one suspects, is so unintentionally), for he proposes an inherent connection of poetry to everything else while simultaneously denying the validity of its full connection to the mind which reads it; and this paradox culminates in the nonsensical declaration that ‘[i]nto an adequate reading [...] everything *not private and peculiar to the individual reader* must come in. The reader must be required to wear *no blinkers*, to overlook *nothing* which is relevant, to shut off *no part of himself* from participation’ (my italics, p. 72). Everything, then, but not really everything, has to be included in one’s reading of poetry. He commands that ‘we must preserve [the poem] from contamination, from the irruptions of personal particularities’ (p. 71) – but if it is prone to such ‘contamination’, his argument that poetry is communicable because it ‘may be experienced by many different minds with only slight variations’ (p. 70) no longer holds up. These ‘personal particularities’ are, in fact, themselves the result of Richards’s own separation of the reader into ‘personal particularities’ and ‘impersonal commonalities’, whereby he is suggesting an *a priori* characteristic of poetry which a reading has to take into account, rather than concluding – as he pretends to – a characteristic of poetry from the way in which it is read. He confirms this suspicion with his subsequent statement, that it is

impossible to divide a reader into so many men – an aesthetic man, a moral man, a practical man, a political man, an intellectual man, and so on. [...] In any genuine experience all these elements inevitably enter. But if it could be done, as many critics pretend, the result would be fatal to wholeness and sanction of the critical judgement (p. 71).

The solution of this paradox lies, then, in its words: it is not that ‘everything must come in’, but that ‘everything acceptable must come in’. Poetry is, therefore, disconnected from some things, after all.

¹⁷ *PLC*, p. 13.

The impressionist attitude of Aesthetic literary criticism is simply unrealistic for Richards. He rejects the notion of ‘beauty’ as representing the value of poetry (see pp. 7-13), and believes that ideas of ‘good subjects’, ‘important messages’, ‘inspirational thoughts’, or any other such ‘keys’ to be sought for in the act of interpretation, are equally irrelevant and can, at worst, result in ‘indiscrimination and loss of values’.¹⁸ For him, the value of literature for the reader (be he a professional critic or not – Richards does not distinguish between reading as such and reading as a critic, only between right and wrong kinds of reading) is not something metaphysically inherent in the text, but something that lies in the communicative process, and comes into effect only in the completion of the communication of the poem to the reader, and the reader’s final reaction to it. The important thing is, that literature is read in a manner which he has determined to be ‘correct’, and that a given reading is completed by the delivery of a judgement on the value of what has been read. He is adamant, however, that it is of no consequence whether one comes to a correct decision, whatever that may be, as long as that ‘ordering’ of the mind and that ‘immense extension of our capacities’, which result from our ‘exercising our power of choice’ (and are both dependent on the ‘quality of the reading’), take place. It does not matter who you vote for, as long as you vote at all – and as long as the reasons for your vote are good ones. Richards may not have thought that there was a single correct judgement of literary quality, but he did think there was one with regard to the meaning of a text (though it remains to be seen, when it comes to discussing his method of evaluation, to what extent he upheld his own principle).

In *Principles*, Richards makes a declaration which could be considered the key to his literary theory: that ‘a growing order is the principle of the mind’.¹⁹ The value of literature lies (of course, only when it is what he considers to be good literature) in its ability to help the mind achieve a more ordered condition, because it perfectly communicates something of great value. References to the importance of an ‘ordered mind’ abound in both *Principles* and *Practical Criticism*,²⁰ but it is perhaps best expressed in Chapter VII of the latter, on ‘Doctrine in Poetry’. What the mind strives for, he writes there, is an ‘end-state of equilibrium’ (p. 275, n.), just as, perhaps, chemicals have the

¹⁸ *PC*, pp. 297-8. Note, on the subject of inspiration, his comment in *Poetries and Sciences* that the ‘belief in inspiration’ belongs to the ‘Magical View’ of the world, which has, according to him, been superseded by a ‘transference [...] to the scientific [view of the world]’ (p. 50).

¹⁹ *PLC*, p. 45.

²⁰ In particular pp. 55 and 221 in the former, and pp. 268, 320, 332, 347-8 and 350 in the latter.

inherent tendency towards internal and external balance with their environment. A 're-ordering' of the mind is its 'partial self-completion', he says, that lasts until the next time the world changes, when another re-ordering becomes necessary – and 'by such self-completion the superior man *would* "affect a union of the external and the internal"' (p. 287).²¹ This notion of mental unity is reflected also in his concern with coenaesthesia and synaesthesia²² – for instance in his belief in 'the "mutual dependence" of parts of a poem, that is, contextualism'.²³ A key influence of this preoccupation of his was Confucius's doctrine of 'equilibrium and harmony' (中庸 or *Chung Yung*)²⁴, on which he bases his theory of 'sincerity'. Richards's contention is that the material, so to speak, of the opinions expressed in a poem is inconsequential, as is whether or not the reader agrees with the opinions themselves; the crucial question is, how sincere, on the part of both poet and reader, these opinions are, because sincerity is a prerequisite for any sound response to life. On the part of the reader, and of any human being in general, he defines 'sincerity' as the 'obedience to that tendency which "seeks" a more perfect order within the mind', while for extreme degrees of insincerity we should look in asylums' (pp. 288 and 281-2). As far as the poet is concerned, his sincerity depends on a congruence 'between the poem's claim upon our response and its *shaping* impulses in the poet's mind', which means that '[a] good poem can perfectly well be written for money or from pique or ambition, provided these initial external motives do not interfere with its growth' (p. 280); it is great poetry (though, curiously, not all of it) that 'represents the closest approach to sincerity that can be found', and it is 'the quality we most insistently require in poetry' (pp. 281-2). It remains unclear, however, how these '*shaping* impulses in the poet's mind' could be ascertained by the reader to any degree of sure accuracy.

Richards thinks that there is, at the time that he is writing, a particular need for attention to mental order, endangered as it is by too much science. As he reasons in *Principles*, the 'break-down of traditional accounts of the universe, and the strain imposed by the vain attempt to orient the mind by belief of the scientific kind alone' has caused a change in the prevalent 'types of nervous disease' (p. 263). Science is not enough, and in

²¹ The italics are Richards's. In this thesis, all italics in quotations are those of the person quoted, unless I have explicitly stated otherwise.

²² See *PLC*, pp. 89-93

²³ This concern, according to John Paul Russo, foreshadowed 'the entire development of Richards' psychological criticism of the 1920s'; see John Paul Russo, *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 107.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

Poetries and Sciences he concludes that it is only one of several ‘myths’ of varying ranks, of which it occupies the lowest, which permeate our lives; poetry, alone among other kinds of myths, can successfully challenge science on its own terms and thereby resolve such conflicts between science and non-science:²⁵ ‘It is capable of saving us [...], of preserving us or rescuing us from confusion and frustration. The poetic function is the source, and the tradition of poetry is the guardian, of the supra-scientific myths.’ In *Practical Criticism*, he adds to the ‘break-down of traditional accounts of the universe’ a perceptible ‘decline’ in the ‘command of language’ in ‘perhaps every department of literature, from the Epic to the ephemeral Magazine’, due to ‘the increased size of our “communities” [...] and the mixtures of culture that the printed word has caused’ (p. 339), and a resulting ‘levelling down’ (p. 248): ‘At present bad literature, bad art, the cinema, etc., are an influence of the first importance in fixing immature and actually inapplicable attitudes to most things.’²⁶ The close and critical reading of valuable literature is essential, if the situation is to be improved. Because ‘the healthiest mind’ is the one which is ‘capable of securing the greatest amount of value’, there is a need for something that will teach the human being to decide what thing, or which ‘experience’, is more valuable than another, which will result in that improvement of standards he seeks. Various obstacles, however, mean that we are unable to do this properly in our everyday life: experiences gained through the arts are therefore ‘the most formative [...] because in them the development and systematization of our impulses goes to the furthest lengths’ (p. 222).²⁷ There is no grey area.

²⁵ ‘Challenge from myths of other ranks is suicidal.’ In *Poetries and Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1972), p. 78. He believes that science or, more appropriately, the myth which ‘lends its authority to the sciences which derive from it’, occupies the lowest of these ‘ranks’, but that it is at the same time ‘the least challengeable or optional or dispensable’. The basis of his philosophy here is somewhat obscure, but the important point is that, while science takes care of ‘the safety of our every bodily step, that order of expectations or of assumptions in virtue of which we catch or miss our trains’, the other ‘myths’ are equally valuable – ‘their work is not that of science; as they do not give us what science gives, so science cannot give us what they give’ (pp. 77-8).

²⁶ *PLC*, pp. 188-9.

²⁷ See also *Poetries and Sciences*, pp. 78-9, where he describes the non-scientific ‘myths’ as ‘concerned with more inclusive interests’ than science (hence their higher rank), and quotes Eliot’s notion of poetry (in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933; hereafter: ‘*UP*’), p. 15) as representative of a the ‘highest point of consciousness’ of a people and its speech, ‘its greatest power and its most delicate sensibility.’

Much is made of the novelty of Richards's discussion of 'impulses', 'affinities' and 'stimuli' in *Principles*, but there is really nothing very new about the idea that there is something in us which responds to things outside us, even if it is not something that was explored in the context of literary analysis before he came along. Call it an urge, a need, a desire, or an impulse, an affinity – call it a thing that satisfies these, or a stimulus that stimulates them – in the end, it is an old idea. Ann Banfield argues that his 'most pervasive and lasting influence' lies in 'the vocabulary of criticism, by contrast with the arena of developed theories',²⁸ but she is only partly right. Away from the jargon of psychology, Richards did contribute something significant to theories of criticism: he assigned a new function to the critic. He famously wrote in *Principles*: 'The arts are our storehouse of recorded values [...]. They record the most important judgements we possess as to the values of experience', and 'without the assistance of the arts we could compare very few of our experiences' (p. 27). How, though, can we be helped by reading well? He thinks that a critic of literature (professional or not) has not just an intellectual duty, but also a psychoanalytical one, namely, the provision of what one might term a 'reading cure': 'The critic is as closely occupied with the health of the mind as the doctor with the health of the body.' His vision of the process is thus: first, a good poet has an experience, and because 'the greatest difference between the artist or poet and the ordinary person is found [...] in the range, delicacy, and freedom of the connections he is able to make between different elements of his experience' (p. 166), he is highly 'vigilant' during that time; second, the poet is enough of a master of poetics to communicate this event so perfectly, that it evokes the same event in his reader (hence Richards's definition of good art, which is what remains when 'bad art' – the good communication of an experience of little value – and 'defective art' – a valuable experience badly communicated – are disposed of (p. 185)). Reader-critics will, of course, only have that same (or closely similar) experience, if they have read the given poem correctly, which is what his notion of a 'practical' criticism (laid out in the eponymous book) is concerned with teaching. Then, once the readers have evaluated the experience, they are able to compare it to others, and so decide its comparative value: is it an experience to be integrated into one's response to the world, one's personality? The personality of the reader, Richards argues, is at this point poised between the

²⁸ Ann Banfield, 'I. A. Richards', in Patricia Waugh, ed., *Literary Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 96-106 (p. 102).

particular experience which is the realised poem and the whole fabric of its past experiences and developed habits of mind. What is being settled is whether this new experience can or cannot be taken into the fabric with advantage. Would the fabric afterwards be better or worse?²⁹

Method

If we expect the production of scientific, objective evidence for every assertion or judgement made concerning a literary work – as some objectors to the Practical Critics’ methods seem to do³⁰ – we shall not find it. One often forgets that evidence can have any of a number of characteristics: it can be scientific (weights, measures, observed behaviour over a period of time, and so on), and thus to some extent objective; it can be legal (eye witness statements, expert opinions, forensic evidence), which is a mixture of the objective and the subjective; or it can be mock-objective, such as is mathematical evidence (while the method is objective, hypotheses are subjective – and it suffices if the argument is logical in itself, which means that it is quite possible to prove, for instance, that $1=0$). There are other kinds, but the critical method of all eight of the analysts discussed in this thesis is a fully subjective one, and as such their presentation of evidence is arguably much closer to the legal and mathematical type, than to the scientific. This is true even in the case of Richards, for, though he was ever keen to introduce the sciences to literary analysis (see his *Practical Criticism* protocols), he really did little more in his textual analyses than argue in a manner ranging from the merely authoritative (‘this is good, that isn’t’) to the philosophical. Richards was the champion of the ordered mind, and it is that and his general interest in philosophy, which drive his literary criticism. What matters to him in the case of the former, is the extent to which a work contributes to this ordering of the mind, that is, how a work can improve the mind that apprehends it correctly, and it is in *Principles of Literary Criticism* that we find the strongest evidence for this. His selection of works for quotation or illustration here is clearly based on how well the works provide evidence of his theory that the best poetry is the most well-organised, the most sincere, the successful communication of a valuable

²⁹ *PC*, p. 303.

³⁰ See my discussion of this in ‘Authoritarianism’, Appendix A, p. 229 of this thesis.

experience.³¹ He calls, for example, *The Pool* by H. D. ‘an instance of defective communication’ because, though the originating experience may have been valuable, the ‘experience evoked in the reader is not sufficiently specific’.³² To illustrate his distinction between ‘defective’ and ‘bad’ art, Richards adds a sonnet by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, in whose case the communication is a ‘success’, but the ‘heavy regular rhythm, the dead stamp of the rimes, the obviousness of the descriptions [...] the triteness of the close’ (p. 187) are to him evidence for the fact that the initial experience was worthless. He adds (in that attitude of a Benthamite psychologist which he displays throughout most of *Principles* and *Practical Criticism*, as well as in some of *Beyond*) that those readers who have ‘adequate impulses’ will not like the poem, and only ‘for those who make certain conventional stereotyped maladjustments instead, does the magic work’ (p. 188). Wilcox stands as an example for the kind of bad art that is in undeniable contrast to good art such as that of Keats, who, ‘by universal qualified opinion, is a more efficient poet than Wilcox, and that is the same thing as saying that his works are more valuable’ (p. 191). Richards is here approaching analysis scientifically – he has his method, born of the theory he has described in the first one hundred and eighty-five pages of *Principle*, has collected the data, and now submits his analysis as if it was forensic evidence in a murder case. Yet though he tries, his success depends too much on the standpoint of the jury to be truly scientific. If fingerprints are found on a murder weapon, it cannot be denied that they are really there, and one would find it hard to argue that the fact was of no importance. If a poem, on the other hand, is called bad because it does not communicate a valuable experience, or communicates it ineffectively, one might easily argue either that the contrary is the case, or that the successful communication of an experience is not what one would deem an important criterion by which to judge the quality of a poem. His tone, of course, does not help to endear him to those who might disagree with his propositions, and anyone who happens to like Wilcox’s poetry is likely to drop Richards altogether when it is suggested that they are therefore in any way badly organised, or even mentally defective. Statements such as ‘[f]ew things are worse than *Hiawatha* or *The Black Cat*, *Lorna Doone* or *Le Crime de Silvestre Bonnard*’ (pp. 206-7), and that ‘Mr. Yeats

³¹ The exception is Eliot, whose presence in the Appendix of the book is explained in part by the fact that his poetry ‘has occasioned an unusual amount of irritated or enthusiastic bewilderment’; though in Richards’s treatment of it, one can discern a desire to correct ‘the cognate difficulties which his readers encounter’ (p. 273).

³² *PLC*, p. 186.

trying desperately to believe in fairies or Mr. Lawrence impugning the validity of solar physics' are 'pathetic spectacles' (p. 249), are more absolute, one might argue, than anything in Leavis, Eliot, or Empson. Added to this, his frequent application of psychoanalytical jargon ('maladjusted', 'disordered', 'aberrations', 'fatal disabilities', 'safe cure', 'distorted sentiment' and so on) may give the reader much of a sense of being under examination in a fearsome psychiatric hospital. At the same time, though, this jargon, and his absolutist expression, attest to Richards's main motivation in this book: to impart a knowledge he has and his readers do not, and to put his readers on their way to becoming healthier human beings, in order to create a healthier (Benthamite or Platonic) society.

Judging by *Beyond*³³ – his only substantial published venture into actual literary analysis – Richards returned, in his later years and after much work in the field of rhetorics, to join the two roads on which he had set out: philosophy and literature. All he needs for the selection of texts, it seems, are those which encourage philosophical thinking in the reader. Although his interpretative focus is on the texts he examines, it is this only insofar as they can aid his more general philosophical arguments. The texts he has chosen are the *Iliad*, the 'Book of Job', *The Republic* and *The Divine Comedy*, and he calls them 'great work[s]', 'most of them alertingly *singular* in power and far above all their derivatives' (p. 37). They are great, according to the evidence he supplies, not because of any strictly narrowly poetic or literary merit, but because they are powerful in a certain way. In *Beyond*, he tries to find out what they mean, and in the case of the first three works he does this by applying a method of interpretative close reading. His analysis of 'Job' stretches across four chapters, with the first two displaying the closest readings in *Beyond*. Applying his, by now familiar, attempt at arriving at a semi-scientific way of dealing with literature, he declares that 'Job' is 'a type specimen, a means of examining and displaying some highly general and important features of a reader's situation' – the situation being the act, or moment, of interpretation (p. 42). He rues the 'inconsistencies' in it which he believes to have gone hitherto largely unnoticed, and we learn that it was possibly written by at least two different people, or groups of people, because the prose prologue and epilogue have as their subjects a Job and a God markedly different from those in the central poem (he even calls the character of 'God' 'Jahveh' and 'Shaddai', for the prose parts and the poem respectively (p. 48)). This is where his scholarship, that is, his knowledge of the different versions of the text and his attention to the details of

³³ (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974).

character representation and plot development, comes into force. He is in this, however, perhaps not so much a scientist, as really an old-fashioned scholar trying to determine authorship and meaning, while he simultaneously continues to consider more general philosophical and religious questions. His handling of the *Iliad* and *The Republic* is very similar to his treatment of 'Job', which means that the subsequent chapter on the *Divine Comedy* comes as a great surprise. Divided into three parts, the first twelve or so pages contain some general commentary on the poem, as well as an explanation of Richards's theory, and the method he is going to use in order to carry out his intention of following up the 'semantic considerations' Dante 'brings up' in it. Because the poem suggests to him 'the cyclic operation of self-appraisal: the self that would appraise has itself to be appraised' (p. 110), he applies a startling method that strikes one as a close relative of Jacques Derrida's (for example, in the latter's essay 'Des tours de babel'), and is but a shade away from Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*: after the first part of the chapter come just over eleven pages of his own poetry, three *terza rima* cantos in English, followed by twenty-nine pages of a 'Commentary' (his title) on his own cantos. He argues that 'more intricate and more highly organized meanings can be conveyed more adequately in verse than in prose' (p. 113), and that his cantos constitute an interpretation of the *Divine Comedy*, and that his interpretation of his own cantos in prose therefore comments on both texts. This tells us that Richards is responding extremely personally to this text, not as the sober and well-organized literary analyst whom he has promoted in his other writings. In 'The Scripture Over You' we find out what exactly his philosophy centres on: his hope for the 'dethronement of the Bible', and his belief that 'the warping of men's minds by attempting to induce obedience through torments and requitals' has gone on long enough and is responsible for the 'current growth in violence' (pp. 171-2). Quoting Blake's 'Giving, receiving, and forgiving each other's trespasses', he closes the book by stating that this line 'could be our Key to Paradise'. The philosophical method he applies throughout – from the scholastic interpretations in 'Job' to the *Divine Comedy*-chapter with its reflexivity and experimentation with different discursive forms – and the manner of his close reading, can again be explained by his evident motivation to analyse the texts not in themselves, as literary works, but as cornerstones of our philosophy, in particular as pertains to questions of religion and justice. He clearly saw the value of literature as something that reaches far wider than its immediate cultural context, bordering almost on the drive towards social transformation we will encounter later, in our readings of Bhabha, Eagleton, and Showalter. No great effort is required to get from

Richards to modern literary analysis – much more effort to return him to someone like Oscar Wilde.

Chapter Two: F. R. Leavis

(1895-1978)

The Definition of Literature

Like Richards, Leavis does not overtly discuss the difference between what is literature and what is not literature; he generally spends very little time on defining 'literature' (in particular when compared to the modern literary theorists discussed in Part II of this thesis), and concentrates far more on discussing its value, and on the actual analysis of individual texts. It is clear, however, from the works with which he concerns himself and from the statements he makes about the value of literature, that, unlike Richards, his subject is not only poetry, but also drama and prose fiction – and since he does not otherwise set himself any explicit limits as a literary critic, the assumption may safely be made that those are the only genres he deems to be literary. Advertisements, scientific tracts, newspaper articles, private letters and such are therefore not included. Leavis, like Richards, believes that literature is an art: a literary critic's 'first business', he tells us, 'is to study a work of art';³⁴ and he elsewhere repeatedly uses the phrase 'work of art' as a synonym for the literary work.³⁵ He also defines literature (as art) in part by distinguishing it from science, especially in what might be considered one of his most complex pieces on literary criticism, 'Thought, Meaning and Sensibility: The Problem of Value Judgment'. In this essay, he makes the case for a critical disentanglement of literary and literary-critical thought from philosophical and scientific thought. His argument is that the 'goal to which the poet labours' involves a 'rightness', which is the same as 'precision', but a precision of thought 'of a non-philosophical and non-scientific kind', and which has an 'impersonal authority' (*VC*, p. 295) that is unlike 'scientific objectivity' (p. 289). He also holds that artistic writing constitutes an act of creation,³⁶ which in turn

³⁴ 'T. S. Eliot: A Reply to the Condescending', in *Valuation in Criticism and Other Essays*, ed. by G. Singh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; hereafter: '*VC*'), pp. 11-6 (p. 14).

³⁵ See, for instance, 'Standards of Criticism', pp. 244-52 (pp. 246 and 247); 'Valuation in Criticism', pp. 276-84 (p. 281); and 'Thought, Meaning and Sensibility: The Problem of Value Judgment', pp. 285-97 (p. 297), all in *VC*.

³⁶ See, for example, 'The Radical Wing of Cambridge English', in *Letters in Criticism*, ed. by John Tasker (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974), pp. 75-7 (p. 77); and 'Valuation in Criticism' and 'Thought, Meaning and Sensibility', both in *VC*, passim.

implies that artistic writing is inherently always an original act (even if it is not always ‘original in the important sense’³⁷); and that, at its best, a work of literary art is a work of genius.³⁸ This may quite grate on those modern literary theorists who have been influenced by Roland Barthes, and believe that writing is closer to being an act of quotation or imitation, than of creation (‘It is language which speaks, not the author [...]. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture [...] the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original.’)³⁹. Even at Leavis’s time, there appear to have been those who disagreed with his conception of artistic genius, creativity and originality, because Barthes’s notion is not new. It has for a long time appeared in varying guises (for example, as the idea of divine inspiration), and was discussed widely enough even at the beginning of the twentieth century to prompt Valéry to speak out against ‘the unfortunate author who is no longer an author but a signatory’.⁴⁰

Leavis’s focus is in the main on English literature, which is, in his view, to be approached as ‘an organic whole, an order’ within the greater ‘order’ of European literature⁴¹ (though there is nothing in his writings to suggest that he does not allow for the method to be adapted according to other languages or cultures). In this he shows an affinity with Eliot’s idea of order and tradition as expounded by him in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’,⁴² and imagines that ‘such study entails a subtle initiation into thought about “tradition”’.⁴³

³⁷ ‘Standards of Criticism, in *VC* pp. 244-52 (p. 245).

³⁸ See ‘The Responsible Critic’, in *VC*, p. 192; and ‘Thought, Meaning and Sensibility’, *ibid.*, pp. 286 and 291.

³⁹ Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, in David Lodge, ed. (with Nigel Wood), *Modern Criticism and Theory*, 2nd edn (Harlow: Longman, 2000), pp. 146-50 (pp. 147 and 149).

⁴⁰ See his ‘Remarks On Poetry’, in *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 196-215 (p. 212).

⁴¹ ‘T. Eliot: A Reply’, in *VC*, p. 15.

⁴² See especially *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997; hereafter: ‘SW’), p. 41.

⁴³ ‘The Radical Wing of Cambridge English’, in *Letters in Criticism*, p. 77.

The Value of Literature and of Literary Analysis

It seems that Leavis suffered more, or at least, more publicly, from what he perceived as a crisis in contemporary culture, than Richards did, and his interpretation of the situation centres on cultural, rather than psychological, concerns. A ‘sickness of humanity’, a ‘crudely philistine commonsense prevails’, he argues, in this ‘technologico-industrial age’; this is a country ‘where we are every day being made to feel the marginal status of the higher cultural values’. He does not believe, though, that the cure is, as seen by some Marxists, a ‘purely economic matter’,⁴⁴ and reserves the hope that

there *can* be intellectual, aesthetic and moral activity that is not merely an expression of class origin and economic circumstances; there *is* a ‘human culture’ to be aimed at that must be achieved by cultivating a certain autonomy of the human spirit.⁴⁵

The value of literature is for Leavis intimately bound up not only with close and good reading, but also with the final judgment, and – unlike for Richards – it matters enormously to him what that judgement is. It is for the critic, he argues, to ensure that a writer receives ‘due recognition’ for that in his writing which is good or great, because without recognition there is no point in creation. He faintly echoes the hermeneutics of the German Romantics, when he writes that if a work ‘fails to be read, and to tell, it might as well not have been written (except that it remains a potentiality)’.⁴⁶ Criticism, he thinks, ‘is a more deliberate following-through of that process of creation in response to the poet’s words (a poem being in question) which any serious reading is’ (p. 278). He assumes that ‘there could be no developed thought – thought about life – without a highly developed language’,⁴⁷ and that language is ‘the essential life of a culture. And literature, of course, is a mode or manifestation of “language”’.⁴⁸ By communicating such ‘thought about life’, literature challenges us to think more deeply for ourselves, and it is therefore far removed from being merely a source of luxurious ‘aesthetic’ pleasure. There

⁴⁴ ‘Thought, Meaning and Sensibility’, in *VC*, p. 292. Elsewhere he acknowledges, though, that ‘of course the economic maladjustments, inequities and oppressions demand direct attention and demand it urgently’ (‘Marxism and Cultural Continuity’, in *VC*, pp. 31-7 (p. 33)).

⁴⁵ ‘Marxism and Cultural Continuity’, in *VC*, p. 35.

⁴⁶ ‘Valuation in Criticism’, in *VC*, p. 284.

⁴⁷ ‘Thought, Meaning and Sensibility’, in *VC*, p. 287.

⁴⁸ ‘Valuation in Criticism’, in *VC*, p. 279.

is ‘no special realm of “aesthetic values” [...] the judgments [the student] has to make may very well have obvious moral bearings’⁴⁹ – ‘it is in creative literature that one finds the challenge to discover what one’s real beliefs and values are’.⁵⁰ Given that ‘the most complete use of the English language [...] is in the major works of great creative writers’, and ‘every creative writer of the greatest kind knows that in a major work he is developing [...] thought about life’,⁵¹ the creative kind of criticism which Leavis advocates has the potential to bring such ‘thought about life’ to the attention of those who may not be as skilled as the critic in understanding works of art. He is clearly not too far away from Richards here; for him, too, albeit without the kinds of psychoanalytical connotations found in Richards, literature increases the value of one’s person and one’s life through its communication of an artist’s experience .

Leavis’s plan, of how the evaluation of literature can benefit humanity, consists of several steps. First, a writer (who is a ‘master’, possibly a ‘genius’) produces a piece of great literature. Second, the critic analyses this literature, and has to display the artist’s creativity in the process – he has to be a ‘truly creative critic [...] capable of original creative conviction, [...] whose work expresses it compellingly, and justifies it’.⁵² Third, if he then deems the work worthy of recognition, and is convinced that ‘due recognition’ will make a difference ‘of some moment in the contemporary sensibility’ (p. 284), he will be the one who ‘distinguishes, and makes the due claim for, the creatively original writer, and wins for him what recognition he gets’.⁵³ One notes here a striking difference between Leavis and Richards: ‘due recognition’ is for Leavis an essential part of the literary-critical process; yet Richards is intent on dispensing with it in *Practical Criticism*, because he considers ‘authority’ to be one of the great impediments to good criticism:⁵⁴ if we know someone to be generally considered a ‘great writer’, we are less likely to read him correctly, because we are likely to be biased either in favour of, or against him. Leavis appears to have found the perfect solution, at least in theory: the writer has to be recognised in order to be read by the public, but his ‘authority’ is not going to be an issue

⁴⁹ ‘The Literary Discipline’, in *VC*, p. 175.

⁵⁰ ‘Valuation in Criticism’, in *VC*, p. 281: ‘significant art challenges us in the most disturbing and inescapable way to a radical pondering, a new profound realization, of the grounds of our most important determinations and choices’.

⁵¹ ‘Thought, Meaning and Sensibility’, in *VC*, p. 287.

⁵² ‘Valuation in Criticism’, in *VC*, p. 283.

⁵³ ‘Standards of Criticism’, in *VC*, p. 246.

⁵⁴ *PC*, pp. 315-6.

if the public is educated well enough in the critical faculty to be able to come, individually, to an independent decision: education will make the individual “capable of judging for himself” [...]. Judgment cannot be a matter of applying the accepted (or “inherited”) standards.⁵⁵ This is how the critic educates the public, as a man of authority but with a socio-cultural conscience, a benevolent instructor, ideally through a university ‘English School’.⁵⁶ The goal is, however, not only to promote an understanding of, and appreciation for, literature for its own sake, and ‘[e]rudition’ is not the be-all and end-all of literary study; it needs to ‘produce something other than mere accumulation’.⁵⁷ This ‘something’ is the enabling of general critical sensibility in other fields, academic or otherwise. While his explanation that such an education ‘aims at fostering the completest receptivity that can be attained – the most unprejudiced and sensitive readiness to perceive, and to respond to, subtle intimations of new “values”, new kinds of significance’⁵⁸ sounds rather similar to Richards’s notion of the well-ordered mind which is able to distinguish the valuable from the worthless, ‘a serious effort in education involves the fostering of a critical attitude towards civilization as it is’,⁵⁹ and thereby the pedagogical effort can transcend merely literary matters. Still, it is fair to say that Leavis’s most immediate aim is an initial improvement of the cultural situation, and therefore he believes that, if the ‘fostering [of] the completest receptivity’ can be achieved, the critic will be able to ‘express’, ‘define’ and ‘form’ contemporary ‘sensibility’ (p. 49). A critic’s method ought also to involve the evocation of the literary tradition through the critique of past, as well as contemporary, literature: ‘to establish [...] the creative centre where we have the growth towards the future of the finest life and consciousness of the past,’ we also have to be ‘concerned with the life in the present of the literature of the past’.⁶⁰ In the fourth and final stage, this ‘pedagogic’ event produces a better-educated public, without whom literary culture will decay, for ‘a responsive educated public [...] is the presence in the total community, in our civilization, of literature as a power’.⁶¹ The reason for this is, that only those who are educated in the best way are able to respond to the good critic’s appeal, and it is therefore also only through them that ‘the influence of great

⁵⁵ ‘Restatement for Critics’, in *VC*, pp. 46-53 (p. 47).

⁵⁶ ‘Standards of Criticism’, in *VC*, p. 249.

⁵⁷ ‘T. S. Eliot: A Reply’, in *VC*, p. 16.

⁵⁸ ‘Thought, Meaning and Sensibility’, in *VC*, p. 286.

⁵⁹ ‘Restatement for Critics’, in *VC*, p. 52.

⁶⁰ ‘Valuation in Criticism’, in *VC*, p. 283.

⁶¹ ‘Standards of Criticism’, in *VC*, p. 247.

writers achieves its work' in turn, the 'work' in question being that of changing cultural standards for the better (pp. 244-5). There is a definite echo here of Arnold's critical function: 'the critical power,' he wrote in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', 'tends to establish an order of ideas [...]. Presently these new ideas reach society [and] there is a stir and growth everywhere; out of this stir and growth come the creative epochs of literature.'⁶² Arnold thought that at his time the conditions were not ripe for the flourishing of a creative epoch of literature, as did Leavis, who was largely unimpressed by anything written after Lawrence. In the end, then, for Leavis it was as true in the early twentieth century as it was for Arnold in the later nineteenth: 'Criticism first; a time of true creative activity, perhaps [...] hereafter, when criticism has done its work' (p. 269).

Method

'Winning recognition' for good writing and evoking 'the literary tradition through the critique of the past' are the tools with which Leavis finds he can 'express', 'define' and 'form' contemporary 'sensitivity', and the evoking of a tradition is really an extension of the former: the literary tradition that needs to be perpetuated is, after all, founded upon those writers who make up its more valuable lines.⁶³ In his chapter on Henry James in *The Great Tradition*, Leavis expresses his disillusionment with the tradition of the English novel, which he describes as being such that critics 'have expectations that prevent them from distinguishing [...] the signs of serious art. It is a disastrous tradition. It undoubtedly accounts for the misdirection and waste of much talent.'⁶⁴ He tries to rescue the situation by establishing, here and also in *Revaluation* and *New Bearings*, what the 'great tradition' really is. In *Revaluation*, he calls the first chapter 'The Line of Wit' (the line in

⁶² Matthew Arnold, *Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, ed. by R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), p. 261.

⁶³ Although some claim that Eliot was the source of Leavis's idea of traditions and 'lines', Eliot was not the man who introduced these concepts to literary criticism; neither was Dryden, probably, but he had already written in 1700 about poets' 'lineal descents and clans' – see Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*, 3rd edn, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 260.

⁶⁴ Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*, 2nd edn (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973; hereafter: 'GT'), p. 153.

question beginning with Jonson and ending in Pope)⁶⁵; argues that Ben Jonson ‘initiate[d] a tradition’ (p. 24); proposes that Matthew Prior is left hanging and that Rochester ‘might have done much more with [his] endowments’ (p. 35), had it not been for the ‘death’ of the line ‘from Jonson through Carew to Marvell’ (p. 111); writes about a ‘meditative-melancholic line of versifiers’ (p. 103), a ‘central line’ of Victorian poetry (p. 255) and so on, and Yeats is discussed in *New Bearings* almost exclusively in terms of his place in- and outside one tradition or another (English, Victorian, and so on).⁶⁶ Comparing writers favourably or unfavourably to one or another of their past, present or future colleagues, is itself a judgment on their quality, and it is a means of evidence on which Leavis is rather keen. He uses it throughout these three books, from which his readers learn that, in order for one to be considered a good writer, one has to avoid being Thackeray, Flaubert, Dickens (with the exception of *Hard Times*,⁶⁷ though he later retracts this in *Dickens the Novelist*), Milton, the later Wordsworth, Shelley and Auden; and to be great, one needs to exceed (or to be shown up as bad, one needs to fail to be close enough to) Shakespeare, Jonson, Marvell, Pope, Dryden, the early Wordsworth, Keats, Eliot, and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Regardless of his acknowledgement of the importance of tradition, however, Leavis continues to demand a parallel originality. He uses tradition to explain the foundations for current literature and to acquaint the reader with the past, rather than as something which requires poets (as Eliot argues in *The Sacred Wood*) to fit into it. Individuality is acceptable, and what truly matters is only the precise manner in which one is original. ‘The great novelists in that [great, English] tradition are all [...] very original technically, having turned their genius to the working out of their own appropriate methods and procedures’,⁶⁸ he writes in *The Great Tradition*, an instance being D. H. Lawrence, who displays ‘original interests and approaches’ (Lawrence was one of his favourite writers, and he wrote extensively on him in later years).⁶⁹ Joyce is presented, on the other hand, as an example of one whose originality is negative: *Ulysses* is ‘a dead

⁶⁵ Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956; hereafter: ‘RV’), p. 28.

⁶⁶ See Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation*, 2nd edn (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971; hereafter: ‘NB’), p. 44.

⁶⁷ He describes *Hard Times* as the only novel ‘in which his distinctive creative genius is controlled throughout to a unifying and organizing significance’; in *GT*, p. 18.

⁶⁸ *GT*, p. 7.

⁶⁹ See *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist* (1955) and *Thought, Words and Creativity: Art and Thought in Lawrence* (1976).

end, or at least a pointer to disintegration’, and the influence of Eliot and Joyce is ‘the wrong kind of reaction against liberal idealism’ (p. 26); though originality is not in itself a negative force, the character of their originality leads tradition off into the wrong direction. Donne and Swift are, however, examples of substantial ‘force of originality’,⁷⁰ Edward Thomas is ‘an original poet of rare quality’⁷¹ and Pound, at least in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, is ideally ‘at once traditional and original’ (p. 150).

Leavis partly defines great writers as having the ability to display their mastery of language, which tallies with his view that language is essential to ‘thought about life’ and the quality of culture. Whether or not one reads this as a sign that he considered it to be a more important factor in poetry than in prose, in *New Bearings* and *Revaluation* language occupies a far greater space than it does in *The Great Tradition*, although he praises, in this last book, Conrad as ‘a master of the English language’.⁷² In *Revaluation*, he berates Milton for having, with his Grand Style, ‘renounced the English language, and with that, inevitably, [...] a great deal else’;⁷³ by contrast, the ‘staple idiom and movement’ in Eliot’s *Gerontion* ‘derive immediately from modern speech’.⁷⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins earns particular praise, because Leavis believes that he expanded upon the use of the English language, even its use by Shakespeare (presumably no mean feat); Hopkins’s strength was, simply, ‘that he brought poetry much closer to living speech’.⁷⁵ Ronald Bottrall, also, receives applause for using ‘the body and sinew of the language’, and Donne, equally, for ‘the spirit in which the sinew and living nerve of English are used’.⁷⁶

Because he considers literature as art and, to an extent, as an independent entity, Leavis believes that one ought to ensure that ‘it is strictly the “poetry” one is criticizing’ (p. 204), not the beliefs expressed in that poetry, or elsewhere. He arguably succeeds in this even when he deals with Shelley (pp. 203-40), though he objects to much of the man’s philosophy: two pages into the chapter, he states that he disagrees with ‘Shelley’s revolutionary doctrines and with his idealistic ardours and fervours’ (p. 204), but what

⁷⁰ *RV*, pp. 11 and 111 respectively.

⁷¹ *NB*, p. 66.

⁷² *GT*, p. 18.

⁷³ *RV*, p. 52.

⁷⁴ *NB*, p. 82. *New Bearings* was published a year before Eliot’s *The Use of Poetry*, which might explain the presence, in both these critics’ works, of the idea that poetry ‘takes its life from the people’s speech and in turn gives life to it’ (*UP*, p. 15).

⁷⁵ *NB*, p. 168.

⁷⁶ *RV*, p. 12.

follows is a criticism of his poetics, not his philosophy. His method of analysing literary works does not appear to have changed according to whether or not he agreed with a writer's thoughts. A list of characteristics which reflect his standards, constructed from the terms which he most frequently recalls in both his general and more specific critical writings, is telling, and includes attributes of both style and content. If one turns to any page of *The Great Tradition*, *New Bearings* and *Revaluation*, one will find a multitude of references to the following qualities: positive vitality; subtlety; vividness; concreteness; economy; good organisation (that is, being made up of elements which 'inform and organize a coherent whole', recalling Richards); a sure touch (authors being in control of what they are doing); musicality (though not of the Miltonic kind); a lack of artistry and sophistication, in the negative sense of these words; intensity; immediacy; real thought, and an awareness of, and an interest in, life (together with the promotion of such thought, awareness and interest); maturity; serious significance; profundity; intelligence (in the manner in which authors handle their materials); the presentation, rather than the mere description of, character; having a strength of motive (strong impulse, significant 'personal pressure'); having representative value (in that the text, plot, characters, thoughts and emotions are representative of more than themselves); poignancy; and seriousness. Leavis does not venture to define any of these in any way that would satisfy a lexicographer or a scientist, or even many of today's literary theorists. When he uses them, however, one senses that he is applying them deliberately, and that no other words would have done in the given case, even while he is fully aware of the fact that they can be considered to be too vague; but he believes that it is 'characteristic of our field of thought that we have to use terms we can't strictly or neatly define', and these standards and their definitions are thus 'not producible, they are not precise, and they are not fixed'.⁷⁷ This very much determines, and is itself partly the result of, Leavis's handling of evidence. He argues that 'verification' in a philosophical or scientific way is not possible in literary criticism because 'value judgments in literary criticism are not quantitative' and, if they are in a way verifiable, they are this in a sense which is different from that of 'philosophers contemplating the scientific process of establishing the validity of a scientist's constations'. The problem of what verification could consist of in this field 'must be left for the thought to tackle [...] based on the literary *criticism* from which it derives'. In legal terms, Leavis is the eye witness and the expert witness at his literary trials, and all that he – as judge of his own procedure as advocate – requires for a valid

⁷⁷ 'Standards in Criticism', in *VC*, pp. 244-52 (p. 244).

judgment (and we may well remember here that the final judgment is essential to Leavis, and is what everything works towards) is that ‘the case is made’.⁷⁸ When he writes about Pound, that ‘his aestheticism is ‘accompanied by intense seriousness’,⁷⁹ or that the effect of Shelley’s poetry is one ‘of vanity and emptiness [...] as well as monotony’,⁸⁰ or that George Eliot has ‘knowledge alive with understanding’,⁸¹ he is simply presenting his reaction to their work, as general reader and as an expert in literature; that he makes his point in a dense and authoritative style may be down to his hoping to reinforce his eye witness testimony in order to have it agreed on as expert testimony (a technique which reappears in all the analysts who feature in this thesis, even those who have written more recently – despite modern objections to the Practical Critics’ authoritarian style). His quotations serve as illustrations that are, though examples of a certain amount of close reading, pieces of evidence meant to speak for themselves; when he quotes, for instance, Carew’s *Know Celia, Since Thou Art so Proud* in its entirety in *Revaluation*, he does so merely in order to show the reader the text which makes him judge Carew in a particular way. He rarely reaches Empsonian depths of reading, perhaps the only exception being his chapter on Eliot in *New Bearings* (pp. 75-132), though even there he acknowledges that his method is comparatively limited (‘only an analysis on Mr Empson’s lines could be anything like fair to the subtleties of the poem’ (p. 86)); instead, he tends to restrict himself to personal comments, such as that a particular poem ‘is not a mere charming trifle; it has in its light grace a remarkable strength.’⁸² He hopes, it seems, that the reader will agree, or at least that his judgements can signal the beginning of a discussion – and he thereby bears out in practice what he proposes in ‘Valuation in Criticism’, namely that a ‘real critical judgment, of its very nature, always means to be more than merely personal.’⁸³ His idea of what is ‘more than merely personal’ does not stretch to it being scientific in any way, but refers rather to his concept of the Third Realm (p. 278), in which the public meets the poem, and where the private meets the public: every statement is addressed to another person, and so initiates a debate with the words ‘This is so, isn’t it?’ (p. 277).

⁷⁸ ‘Thought, Meaning and Sensibility: The Problem of Value Judgment’, in *VC*, p. 288.

⁷⁹ *NB*, p. 143.

⁸⁰ *RV*, p. 211.

⁸¹ *GT*, p. 61.

⁸² *RV*, p. 16.

⁸³ In *VC*, pp. 276-84 (p. 277).

Chapter Three: T. S. Eliot

(1888-1965)

The Definition of Literature

Eliot's life revolved around poetry, in its on-stage and off-stage incarnation, and as a literary analyst, too, he has little time for anything but poetry. This is not, however, because he thought, with Richards, that prose is an inferior form, but only because it was not his field of expertise: he describes prose as something which he is 'not qualified to discuss', partly because it was, even towards the end of his career, still too new an entry in the discipline of literary criticism.¹ Of any other kinds of writing there is also hardly a mention, apart from an instance in which he describes journalism as distinct from literature proper.² It is always clear that literature is for Eliot an art-form, at least as far as its more accomplished products are concerned; great literature is 'the transformation of a personality into a personal work of art', he argues in 'Philip Massinger',³ and there is a constant association in his writings, from the earliest to the latest, of literary texts with the work of art. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', he uses the term 'art' as if it was synonymous with literature – poetry is art, and the poet is an artist (p. 41), and the business of the literary critic is that of 'studying' a work of art (p. 81); in 'The Social Function of Poetry', he writes about how poetry differs from 'every other art'⁴ but is despite its difference no less an art; in 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry' he argues that there is a 'lack of artistic conventions'⁵ for poetic drama; in 'Reflections on Vers Libre', he calls the theory of the titular form of poetry a 'theory of art' (p. 183); and so on. There is a multitude of allusions, as well as direct statements, along these lines throughout the body of his critical writing.⁶ Poetry is the genre with which he is most concerned, but

¹ *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957; hereafter: 'OP'), p. 118.

² 'Charles Whibley', in *SE*, pp. 492-506 (pp. 492-3).

³ *SW*, p. 118. His lecture on Virgil ('What is a Classic?', *OP*, pp. 52-74) examines the difference between a 'great' and a 'classic' literary work at some length.

⁴ *OP*, p. 7.

⁵ *SE*, pp. 43-58 (p. 54).

⁶ In a slightly curious instance, Eliot speaks of literature as a 'work of art or a work of intellect' (*SW*, p. 3). It is not quite clear how he distinguishes the two – in particular since he nowhere else appears to separate intellectual from artistic activity, and in fact often associates the two types with each other.

when it comes to defining what it is, he seems at a loss for words. There are two types of criticism, he argues in his introduction to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, and the ‘critic who remains worth reading’ is the one who ‘seeks to find out what poetry is’, as well as ‘assesses actual poetry’.⁷ Yet he is aware of the practical difficulties of both tasks, and considers a critic worth reading even if he ‘has only imperfectly answered’ the two questions of ‘what is poetry?’ and ‘is this a good poem?’.⁸ His own attempts appear to leave him largely dissatisfied, though they are revealing – at one point, he announces: ‘poetry is a superior amusement. I call it amusement *pour distraire les honnêtes gens*, not because that is a true definition, but because if you call it anything else you are likely to call it something still more false’.⁹ Elsewhere, he resorts to definition by elimination: poetry is not ‘criticism of life’, not ‘the inculcation of morals’ or ‘the direction of politics’, it is not ‘religion or an equivalent of religion’ or ‘a collection of psychological data about the minds of poets, or about the history of an epoch’ (in particular the last of these standing somewhat in opposition to what, as we will see later, analysts such as Eagleton and Showalter seem to think).¹⁰ One statement brings the reader close to his vision of the essence of the genre – if it has one – without being, in the end, any the less vague: ‘poetry [...] certainly has something to do with morals, and with religion, and even with politics perhaps, though we cannot say what’ (p. xi). At another time, Eliot declares that he has ‘not attempted any definition of poetry, because I can think of none which does not assume that the reader already knows what it is, or which does not falsify by leaving out much more than it can include’. He cites the ‘variety of poetry’ as the reason for its eluding capture: ‘all the kinds seem to have nothing in common except the rhythm of verse instead of the rhythm of prose: and that does not tell you much about all poetry’; and it cannot be ‘defined by its uses’, either.¹¹ ‘I think,’ he writes in his introduction to Valéry’s *The Art of Poetry*,

⁷ *UP*, p. 16.

⁸ These two are tellingly complemented two years later by the questions of what we like and what we ‘ought to like’, what we are and what we ‘ought to be’ (‘Religion and Literature’, in *SE*, pp. 388-401 (p. 399)).

⁹ *SW*, p. x.

¹⁰ He is in this clearly influenced by Valéry’s ‘pure poetry’ (see ‘Pure Poetry’, in Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, pp. 184-92).

¹¹ *UP*, p. 155.

that much poetry will be found to have the instrumental value that Valéry reserves to prose, and that much prose gives us the kind of delight that Valéry holds to be solely within the province of poetry. And if it is maintained that prose which gives that kind of delight *is* poetry, then I can only say that the distinction between poetry and prose has been completely obliterated, for it would seem that prose can be read as poetry, or poetry as prose, according to the whim of the reader. I have never yet come across a final, comprehensive, and satisfactory account of the difference between poetry and prose. We can distinguish between prose and verse, and between verse and poetry; but the moment the intermediate term *verse* is suppressed, I do not believe that any distinction between prose and poetry is meaningful. (pp. xv-vi)

Its origin, he thinks, lies in the ‘savage beating a drum in a jungle’,¹² herein echoing a current popular concern with Darwin’s theory of evolution (as developed, for example, in the field of psychoanalysis by Freud, most notably in *Totem and Taboo*, where he declares that ‘primitive man’ is not a mere thing of our past, but that ‘he is still in a certain sense our contemporary; there are people alive today, of whom we believe that they are still close to the primitives, much closer than we are, in whom we therefore see the direct descendents and representatives of earlier man’).¹³ Eliot’s savage in the jungle is simultaneously ancestor and peer,¹⁴ he is a diachronic and synchronic apparition, both origin of and accompaniment to a modern poetry born of rhythm. What poetry became, in Eliot’s day and world, however, is more complex and obscure than drums in the jungle.

Eliot equates ‘creativity’ to the making of a work of art.¹⁵ It is a thing ‘which must remain unaccountable’ – with the completion of the poetic process, ‘something new has happened, something that cannot be wholly explained by *anything that went before*. That, I

¹² *UP*, p. 155.

¹³ (‘er [ist] noch in gewissem Sinne unser Zeitgenosse; es leben Menschen, von denen wir glauben, daß sie den Primitiven noch sehr nahe stehen, viel näher als wir, in denen wir daher die direkten Abkömmlinge und Vertreter der früheren Menschen erblicken’) in *Totem und Tabu: Einige Übereinstimmungen im Seelenleben der Wilden und der Neurotiker* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1956), p. 9 (my translation).

¹⁴ Which runs counter to Lévy-Bruhl’s vision of the primitive as somehow detached from the modern Western (see, for example, Robert Bernasconi’s entry for Lévy-Bruhl, in Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 482).

¹⁵ See, for example: ‘creative work’ in *UP*, p. 108 and *SW*, p. xv; ‘the creative process’ in *OP*, p. 119; ‘creative artist’, in *SW*, p. 13.

believe, is what we mean by “creation”.’ He also accepts the existence of ‘genius’, in that he speaks of the ‘poetic genius’,¹⁶ describes Keats as one,¹⁷ and refers to the ‘new work of genius, whether in art, science or philosophy’.¹⁸ So far, so unsurprising; but when it comes to ‘inspiration’, Eliot pulls up short. Though he once refers to the Muse,¹⁹ the instance strikes one as merely a handy phrase slipped into a lecture, and nothing much more serious than that. Eliot appears aware of the arbitrariness of such metaphors: ‘To talk of poets as [...] inspired does not get us very far, and this notion of inspiration need not be pressed for literalness’ (p. 50). Eager to be precise in the formulation of his hypotheses, no matter how mysterious the nature of creativity, he describes the poetic process as something which for him is not bound to inspiration, but rather a ‘sudden lifting of the burden of anxiety and fear which presses upon our daily life’, a ‘breaking down of habitual barriers [...] not a vision but a motion terminating in an arrangement of words on paper’. Whatever the creative process consists of, Eliot believes that it is ‘not any clue’ to the value of poetry (pp. 144 and 146), suggesting that even if one were to be inspired by a supernatural source, it would not make poetry more valuable than if one were not, even if it may make it a different kind of prize.

Eliot is evidently focussed on European and American literature, especially on literature in English (with the exception of occasional pieces on Virgil, Dante, Valéry, Baudelaire, Molière, Racine and a few others), and he does not seem to believe that there are many other kinds to be taken seriously, except as concerns the extent to which they can help their superior representatives. At one point he even equates the writer who is ‘universal’ with the writer who is ‘representative’ of ‘the whole European tradition’.²⁰ His reluctance to assign any substantial value to the teaching of English Literature at university sets him apart from Richards, Leavis and their colleagues of the English School; but Classical literature ought to remain.²¹ In that sense, English is in Eliot’s opinion inferior to Latin and Greek, though it is worth enough that he did not feel compelled to study the literature of another language or culture to a greater depth; he

¹⁶ *OP*, pp. 119 and 124.

¹⁷ *UP*, p. 101.

¹⁸ *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962; hereafter: ‘*NDC*’), p. 47.

¹⁹ ‘[...] anyone who has ever been visited by the Muse is thenceforth haunted’, *UP*, p. 69.

²⁰ *OP*, pp. 69-70.

²¹ A cause of the ‘deterioration of the universities is the deterioration lower down [...] nowadays they even teach *English* in England’; in ‘Modern Education and the Classics’, in *SE*, pp. 507-16 (pp. 509-12).

praises ‘the rich possibilities of English verse’,²² and calls English literature ‘one of the most eminent [of those literatures], in which the classical qualities are scattered between various authors and several periods’, and which ‘may well be [...] richer’ than those which have a distinct classical author or age because it is ‘the most various of great languages in its constituents, tends to variety rather than perfection [...] has, perhaps, the greatest capacity for changing and yet remaining itself’.²³

The Value of Literature and of Literary Analysis

In 1961, having looked back over his critical work, Eliot concedes that both some of his opinions and his manner of opining changed in the course of his life. He refers to ‘errors of tone’ in his early work: ‘arrogance [...] vehemence [...] cocksureness or rudeness’, but refuses to disinherit those essays, preferring to resign himself to the fact that he is to be ‘identified’ with the author. Whether or not his tone really changed with increasing age, is something we shall look at later – for now the question is, what made Eliot write critically in the first place, and what value did literature have for him as a critic? Eliot was, like Richards and Leavis, certainly reacting to not only the art, but also to the criticism that had gone before him, and much that was contemporary to him: ‘I was in reaction, not only against Georgian poetry, but against Georgian criticism’,²⁴ and against Wordsworth’s advocacy of rhetorical simplicity,²⁵ Coleridge’s excessive philosophising,²⁶ and Coleridge and Goethe’s lack of closeness to the text under investigation, such as their substitution of ‘their own Hamlet for Shakespeare’s’²⁷. He also criticizes, among others, Arnold, Pater, Swinburne, Gosse and Richards. When Eliot read another critic’s

²² ‘The Classics and the Man of Letters’, in *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965; hereafter: ‘CC’), pp. 145-61 (p. 150). Though Eliot does, in *NDC*, go into details regarding the distinction of English from Welsh, Scottish and Irish, he elsewhere, such as in his lecture on ‘American Literature and the American Language’ (in *CC*, pp. 43-60), confuses, or conflates, the denotation ‘British’ with that of ‘English’, an act not uncommon among many at his time.

²³ *OP*, pp. 53 and 68.

²⁴ ‘To Criticize the Critic’, in *CC*, pp. 11-26 (pp. 14 and 16). The assumption is made that by this he means the age of George IV, not George V.

²⁵ ‘“Rhetoric” and Poetic Drama’, in *SW*, pp. 65-71 (p. 66).

²⁶ ‘The Perfect Critic’, *SW*, pp. 1-13 (p. 11).

²⁷ ‘Hamlet and His Problems’, *SW*, pp. 81-7 (p. 81).

words that ‘poetry is the most highly organized form of intellectual activity’, he was prompted to proclaim that, if this was the best it could come up with, ‘modern criticism is degenerate’.²⁸ His chief objection seems to have been the lack of rigour in the evaluation of writers. Bad ones ‘are never done with’, he writes in ‘Imperfect Critics’,

because there is no one to kill their reputations; we still hear that George Meredith is a master of prose, or even a profound philosopher. The creative artist in England finds himself compelled, or at least tempted, to spend much of his time and energy in criticism that he might reserve for the perfecting of his proper work: simply because there is no one else to do it. (p. 38)

Artists had to go in for literary analysis because somebody had to, but they were also the best equipped: ‘as sensibility is rare, unpopular, and desirable [in criticism], it is to be expected that the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person’ (p. 13). He modifies this statement slightly in 1956, when he points out that what he now terms ‘workshop criticism’ does have its limits. The creative artist’s scope as critic is, after all, restricted to certain subjects and genres on which he can write with any competence, for ‘the critic’s judgment may be unsound outside of his own art’²⁹ – he does not suggest, though, that this makes the artist any the less skilled within it.

Eliot’s critical subject-matter and style show that he was writing less for the general reader than for someone with a deep interest in poetics (be he a poet or a literary critic in the making) and, if one considers Eliot’s tendency in his essays to assume certain facts and ideas without further explanation (a tendency to which some modern literary theorists are also prone, as we will see in Part II of this thesis), and his untranslated quotations from non-English writing, he evidently expects that his reader be acquainted with a certain amount of literary history, poetic technique, French, Latin, Ancient Greek, and so on. When he talks about education in his essays on literature, however, he restricts himself to the education of poets, novelists, dramatists, and their critics, the teaching of literature, that is, ‘only in relation to those who are going to write it’.³⁰ An interest in the general public only enters into a work such as *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, in which his concern is sociological, rather than literary (though literature and, more generally, culture play a significant part). One audience he is addressing in his

²⁸ *SW*, pp. 1-2.

²⁹ *OP*, p. 118.

³⁰ ‘The Classics and the Man of Letters’, in *CC*, p. 150.

essays is simply his own self: in ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’, he admits that his analysis of the work of his fellow-writers was really ‘a by-product of my private poetry-workshop; or a prolongation of the thinking that went into the formation of my own verse’.³¹ This echoes his statement in 1920, that ‘the value of poetry’ lies in part in the fact that ‘appreciation is akin to creation, and true enjoyment of poetry is related to the stirring of suggestion, the stimulus that a poet feels in his enjoyment of other poetry’.³²

Like the rest of the Practical Critics discussed here, Eliot’s valuation of literature was primarily motivated by the idea that culture is a good thing, and in his opinion the health and illustriousness of a civilization were directly dependent on it. In what is fast becoming a cliché³³ he, too, saw the time of his world as a difficult and complex one: ‘Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity,’ he writes in ‘The Metaphysical Poets’;³⁴ ‘the modern mind [...] comprehends every extreme and degree of opinion’, he adds at a later date;³⁵ the increasing secularisation of this ‘modern mind’ is something undesirable in the extreme, he thinks, and one will have to work hard ‘to renew and rebuild civilization, and save the World from suicide’.³⁶ Of most interest here, perhaps, is his statement that ‘the preservation of a living literature [is] the preservation of developed speech, and of civilization against barbarism’,³⁷ for it sits oddly with some of his other pronouncements on the value of literature. How can something which Eliot calls ‘superior amusement’ in the 1928 preface to *The Sacred Wood* be given such a meaty role in the salvation of civilization? In 1933 he is, after all, still of the opinion that I. A. Richards’s notion of poetry as ‘saviour’ is unrealistic:

³¹ *OP*, p. 117.

³² In his essay on Ben Jonson, in *SW*, p. 88.

³³ It is an old one, at that; Arnold said much the same in his ‘Function’ essay: ‘life and the world being in modern times very complex things, the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it’ (in *Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, p. 261).

³⁴ *SE*, pp. 281-91 (p. 289).

³⁵ *UP*, p. 124.

³⁶ ‘Thoughts After Lambeth’, in *SE*, pp. 363-87 (p. 387); his theme is here a religious one, but since he makes a direct connection between religion and literature (see ‘Religion and Literature’, in *SE*, 388-401), and between religion and culture in general (see *NDC* passim.), it is appropriate to include this quotation here.

³⁷ ‘The Classics and the Man of Letters’, in *CC*, p. 160. See also *UP*, p. 15.

Mr. Richards speaks as though [poetry] were good for everybody. I am perfectly ready to concede the existence of people who [...] believe as Mr. Richards does in these matters, if he will only concede that there are some people who do not.³⁸

This last sentence appears to be the key to the apparent dichotomy: Eliot distinguishes the value of literature as a whole to society as a whole, which it cannot save, from its value for some people only, or to the individual reader, whom it can. Remaining with the social theme, he speaks of the importance of the survival of culture, for which there is

no safeguard more reliable than a language. And to survive for this purpose it must continue to be a literary language – not necessarily a scientific language but certainly a poetic one [...] if [the literature of that culture] is no longer cultivated, the people to whom it belongs [...] will tend to lose their racial character.

The perpetuation of the distinct character of different races is necessary for the preservation of other (more sophisticated) cultures, which depend on interaction with other regions and countries.³⁹ High culture is in turn worth saving for its own sake, because culture can ‘be described simply as that which makes life worth living’ (p. 27) – described simply and also, therefore, rather vaguely. This does not mean to say that Eliot advocates a proliferation of publications – saving a culture is not the same as saving a high culture. The problem with the multiplication of books and the amount of time we spend reading them is, that in order to subsist in our (European) society we do not have enough time to exchange ideas with real people. There are too many of us, too: ‘In a society of smaller size (a society, therefore, which was less feverishly busy) there might be more conversation and fewer books’ (p. 86). This is the point at which the world at large hands over to the individual. Literature – and Eliot is here, as in the great majority of his discussion of literature, focussing on poetry – is so valuable for society because of the effect it can have on individual readers: it makes their lives ‘worth living’. Its influence on the community, ‘at the furthest periphery, is of course very diffused, very indirect, and very difficult to prove’. In a healthy society, though, the influence is to be found everywhere, for ‘in a healthy society there is a continuous reciprocal influence and interaction of each part upon the others’; and poetry, ‘in proportion to its excellence and

³⁸ *UP*, pp. 134 and 136.

³⁹ *NDC*, p. 57 and pp. 50-66 passim. Once again, Darwin’s theory of evolution seems to have influenced his thinking here.

vigour, affect[s] the speech and the sensibility of the whole nation'. It affects them by virtue of one of its functions, namely its ability to preserve 'the beauty of a language', and its ability to 'help it to develop, to be just as subtle and precise in the more complicated conditions and for the changing purposes of modern life, as it was in and for a simpler age'. It is, in short, 'the *spiritual* communication between people and people [... and deals with] the spiritual aspect of problems the material aspect of which is the concern of politics' (a distinction with which an analyst with, say, Eagleton's philosophy would certainly disagree).⁴⁰ The uses of poetry, so Eliot, range from the trivial or specific (to 'commemorate a public occasion') to the profound:

It may effect revolutions in sensibility [, ...] may help to break up conventional modes of perception and valuation [...] and make people see the world afresh, or some new part of it. It may make us from time to time a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves, and an evasion of the visible and sensible world.

It brings us closer, then, to our habitat, by effecting a constant readjustment of our minds to our environment.⁴¹ This is its longer-term effect, but it also has a more immediate value. In a move that relates his later writing to his earliest, Eliot reminds us that there are 'three permanent reasons for reading: the acquisition of wisdom, the enjoyment of art, and the pleasure of entertainment'.⁴² If it did not supply us with this tripod of satisfactions, it could of course not have any influence on us, because we simply would not read at all: 'the worst fault that poetry can commit is to be dull'.⁴³ (As we shall see later, those modern literary theorists who are concerned with social injustice would interject that the 'worst fault that poetry can commit' is something rather more substantial.)

Eliot concedes, however, that the importance of literature and culture is a matter decided largely by their contexts. How necessary are they for a society at a particular point in time, given external circumstances? By doing this, he stands out from the other

⁴⁰ *OP*, pp. 12 and 14-5.

⁴¹ *UP*, p. 155.

⁴² *NDC*, p. 86.

⁴³ *UP*, p. 52, echoing – consciously or not – Dr Johnson's notion that 'tediousness is the most fatal of all faults'.

three Practical Critics discussed here as the only one who acknowledges that the value of literature may be a relative affair, even if he does firmly set out his own valuation. He does not go into detail about what these circumstances may be, or how theories of ‘literature’ and ‘culture’ have in fact changed with time and geography; but he tells us that, at any rate, in times of great change ‘one would expect people to be too busy in other ways’, than that they had much time for intense artistic communication (p. 94) – an arguable statement, when we consider the evidence that art continues to be produced in times of war (which are, surely, nothing if not times of great change). Nearly ten years later, he says: ‘The question I leave with you is the question whether we think the maintenance of the greatness of our literature a matter of sufficient importance’;⁴⁴ what prevents this from appearing to be a mere rhetorical gesture (a reasonable suspicion, given that such gestures are not uncommon in lectures) is his follow-up question in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, namely, whether the means required for the

growth and survival of a superior culture [...] are themselves socially desirable. [...] We must proceed to consider how far these conditions of culture are [, ...] in a particular situation at a particular time, compatible with all the immediate and pressing needs of an emergency.⁴⁵

He even goes as far as saying that censorship of literature is not in itself a bad thing, and that its fairness or unfairness depends very much on the ‘goodness and universality of the cause’ and on ‘the intelligence that goes to the application’.⁴⁶ The good of the state is ranked above the artist’s right to be published (a notion which could have been inspired by Plato’s *Republic* or Bentham’s utilitarian philosophy) – but Eliot never takes it much further.

There is, finally, also a value of literature for the writer himself. In addition to the aforementioned burden-lifting, there is, for the poet, the ‘excitement, that joyful loss of self in the workmanship of art, that intense and transitory relief which comes at the moment of completion and is the chief reward of creative work’ (p. 108). For the critic,

⁴⁴ ‘The Classics and the Man of Letters’, in *CC*, p. 153.

⁴⁵ *NDC*, pp. 108-9.

⁴⁶ *UP*, p. 136; compare this to his list of reasons why censorship is wrong, not in principle, but in the way in which it is generally carried out: it ‘suppresses the wrong books’, is ineffective and ‘acts only from custom and habit, not from decided theological and moral principles’ (‘Religion and Literature’, in *SE*, p. 393).

at least for himself as critic, Eliot adds that good literature makes for good criticism, and that the best criticism is perhaps that which deals with subjects which most affect the critic personally: 'I have written best about writers who have influenced my own poetry', while 'on authors whose work I dislike my views may – to say the least – be highly disputable.' Why he was unable to be objective when faced with writers whom he admired, but able to with the rest, is something which he leaves unexplained.⁴⁷

Seeing 'the object as it really is'⁴⁸ is not only, as we have seen, part of the value of poetry for the reader, but also part of the value of criticism for poetry.⁴⁹ And it is exactly the ability of literary analysis to uncover the value of a work of art, which in turn makes it valuable for Eliot. Yes, it is necessary for the 'preservation of a living literature' whose continuation profits culture, society and the human race, but more immediate still is its role as the conductor which allows the reader to approach poetry, and then select what is worth preserving and what is not. Eliot rejects a number of critical methods, including those that are impressionistic (as in Wilde's thesis that the critic 'is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things'),⁵⁰ biographical, paraphrasing, pedagogic, and semiotic.⁵¹ His greatest objection is reserved for interpretative criticism. What criticism should never do, he argues, is attempt to explain a poem, whether 'by origins' (that is, the revelation of influences and sources), which leads to 'the error, prevalent nowadays, of mistaking explanation for understanding',⁵² or by its communicative qualities: 'We [...] should not [...] think of the poetry as being primarily

⁴⁷ 'To Criticize the Critic', in *CC*, pp. 22 and 26.

⁴⁸ *SW*, p. 12. Eliot borrowed this concept from Arnold ('the endeavour, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is'; in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', in *Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, p. 258). Richard Shusterman argues that this belonged to an early objectivist phase that Eliot went through in 1919-23, and that he later changed his mind, citing his introduction to G. Wilson Knight's *Wheel of Fire* as evidence (Richard Shusterman, *T. S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism* (London: Duckworth, 1988). But in that introduction, Eliot does not fully recant his antipathy towards interpretative criticism; all he really grants it is the status of something born of an 'imperative and fundamental impulse', something therefore unavoidable – though not therefore any the more desirable (see 'Introduction' (1930), in G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy*, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. xiii-xx (p. xvii)).

⁴⁹ In what follows, I am using 'poetry' instead of the more general 'literature', since Eliot largely restricts his own literary-critical work to that genre (which includes poetic drama).

⁵⁰ Oscar Wilde, 'The Preface', in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 3.

⁵¹ See, for example, *OP*, pp. 113-131 passim and *SW*, pp. 1-13 passim.

⁵² *OP*, pp. 119 and 121.

the vehicle of communication. Communication may take place, but will explain nothing.⁵³ While Richards tends to assume that teaching a proper critical technique can educate the amateur to become an ideal reader, by allowing him fully to understand what it is that the poet is trying to communicate, Eliot believes that the poet can never perfectly reproduce an experience in poetry, for which reason the reader's experience can never be

exactly what the poet experienced, nor would there be any point in its being, though certainly it has some relation to the poet's experience. What the poet experienced is not poetry but poetic material; the writing of the poetry is a fresh 'experience' for him, and the reading of it, by the author or anyone else, is another thing still.

In any case, he argues, the poet's intention is not to communicate an experience, but to 'write a poem', which itself is the communication of something new, something that came after the experience which provided its inspiration (pp. 126 and 138). Critical methods which purport to assist in interpretation therefore cannot bring the value of poetry into effect. In order for there to be something communicated, there has to be meaning, and since 'a great deal, in the way of meaning, belongs to prose rather than to poetry' (p. 152), the 'lemon-squeezer school of criticism' cannot help but fail in its attempt at a scientific approach to 'find out what the poem really meant'. It can also not successfully establish one true meaning, since 'the meaning is what the poem means to different sensitive readers'. The creative act on the poet's part terminates upon publication, but the poem continues to live in various interpretative incarnations in the minds of others,⁵⁴ and the idea that one can find out what the author intended to communicate, 'consciously or unconsciously', is a fallacy. In the end, this method of analysis also fails crucially in its literary-critical duty to promote pleasure, because it is hard to enjoy poetry after it has been analysed in this way. It is 'as if someone had taken a machine to pieces and left me with the task of reassembling the parts [...] a good deal of the value of an interpretation is – that it should be my own interpretation.'⁵⁵

The continuation of cultural tradition requires the transmission of literature,⁵⁶ which requires selection, which in turn requires prior analysis. In order to decide what it

⁵³ *UP*, p. 115; see also "'Communication" will not explain poetry', *ibid.*, p. 138.

⁵⁴ This is directly comparable to Leavis's notion of the 'Third Realm'.

⁵⁵ *OP*, pp. 125-7.

⁵⁶ See *NDC*, p. 41.

is that deserves preservation as part of the so-called living literature, criticism has to distinguish the genuine from the false (something which can be done immediately, with contemporary literature) and the good from the bad (something which can only be done retrospectively).⁵⁷ In 1923, Eliot defined criticism as ‘the commentation and exposition of works of art by means of written words [whose aim is] the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste’.⁵⁸ More than thirty years later, in ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’, apparently out of a concern that the old version was a tad too ‘pompous’, he converts that definition to ‘to “promote the understanding and enjoyment of literature”’, which he hopes to be ‘more acceptabl[e] to the present age’. It is at first glance hard to tell the difference between the two, and one is tempted to see it as a change of rhetoric rather than idea. There is arguably, however, a perceptible shift not only in tone but also in intent. While the ‘elucidation’ of a work suggests the provision of a single meaning – a glossary in which the specialist language of a text is translated into one more comprehensible to the layman – and a ‘correction of taste’ evokes images of the surgical removal of a dysfunctional limb, a ‘promotion of understanding and enjoyment’ can be taken to be a pedagogical tool showing student-readers how to understand and enjoy a text, rather than telling them what to understand or enjoy about it. Thus the selection of works of literature, whose transmission from the past to the present and to future generations facilitates the continuation of tradition, becomes with this second definition of the function of literary analysis a task for amateur as much as for the professional critic. The critics propose their views and the student-readers digest them, but there is no guarantee that the final decision made by the critics’ successors will be the same as their own.

The first of the two methods by means of which criticism can achieve his promotion of understanding and enjoyment, that is, the definition of poetry, has already been discussed. The second method is that of assessing the poetry. Although Eliot had no time for purely interpretative methods which impose the critic’s response on the reader, he did insist that

there is also the negative task of pointing out what should *not* be enjoyed. For the critic may on occasion be called upon to condemn the second-rate and expose the

⁵⁷ *OP*, pp. 49-51.

⁵⁸ *SW*, p. 24.

fraudulent: though that duty is secondary to the duty of discriminating praise of what is praiseworthy.⁵⁹

The value of criticism lies in its ability to help its readers to decide, either in agreement or disagreement with the critic in question,⁶⁰ which authors to appreciate or admire – though critics are of course always hoping to attain their readers’ consent. In order to do this, the critic cannot employ a type of criticism based upon aesthetic foundations alone, but needs to involve the whole man, and cannot allow himself to praise a work for any aesthetic merit so long as it is unacceptable on moral grounds. The critic is, Eliot writes in ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’, ‘a man with convictions and principles, and of knowledge and experience of life’.⁶¹ This is why purely literary criticism is impossible, and ‘moral, religious and social judgments cannot be wholly excluded. That they can [...] is the illusion of those who believe that literary merit alone can justify the publication of a book which could otherwise be condemned on moral grounds.’⁶² At the same time, he argues, anything which strays too far away from the advancement of pleasure and understanding, though ‘it may still be a legitimate and useful activity [...] is to be judged as a contribution to psychology, or sociology, or logic, or pedagogy, or some other pursuit [...] to be judged by specialists, not men of letters.’⁶³

Method

It has been proposed that Eliot valued literature because of its ability to enrich society by means of the continuation of culture, the ‘preservation of developed speech, and of civilization against barbarism’, and that it achieves this by imparting to the individual reader the acquisition of wisdom, the enjoyment of art, and the pleasure of entertainment. It is this latter that he focuses on most when he analyses individual writers and works, and it complements not only his belief that a single, correct interpretation is impossible, but also his desire to learn himself from the poets whom he studies. Like

⁵⁹ *OP*, p. 128.

⁶⁰ ‘Religion and Literature’, in *SE*, p. 390.

⁶¹ *OP*, p. 130.

⁶² ‘The nearest we can get to pure literary criticism is the criticism of artists writing about their own art’ (‘To Criticize the Critic’, in *CC*, pp. 25-6).

⁶³ *OP*, p. 130.

Leavis, Eliot is always very aware of the prevailing general opinion of whichever writer he discusses, and one is conscious of the fact that he is always trying to contribute something new to the discussion – which attests to his desire, noted earlier, to fill a gap in what he considers to be rigorous literary analysis, set apart from the many kinds of criticism to which he objects. In ‘Four Elizabethan Dramatists’, for example, he declares that his goal is ‘to define and illustrate a point of view toward the Elizabethan drama, which is different from that of the nineteenth-century tradition’;⁶⁴ in ‘John Dryden’ he attempts to correct the fact that ‘the majority of living readers of poetry’ are ‘insensible of his genius’ (p. 305); and in ‘Wilkie Collins and Dickens’, one of his very few ventures into the criticism of prose, his motivation is to not only to tempt the reader to ‘enjoy and [...] appreciate’ Collins, but also to redress the low status of melodrama in modern times (pp. 460-1). Similar statements justifying his ventures can be found at the outset of almost all these essays and lectures. It is therefore safe to say that the authors (mostly poets or poetic dramatists) and texts he selects are ones which he believes to have been somehow misjudged, whether in their assessment as good or bad works, or in the manner in which they have been dealt with. That particular writers (such as the Metaphysical poets, Elizabethans, and Dante) have been paid particular attention by Eliot is, if we remind ourselves of his ‘workshop criticism’, no doubt due to the fact that they have, in one way or another, affected him as a poet.

The similarities between Eliot and Leavis continue. Pervading his more general critical writings is his familiar conception of the literary tradition and the poet’s role within it, which he first laid out in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ but continued to refer to in later works of general criticism.⁶⁵ There is no need to reiterate his discussion of the topic here beyond the fact that he thought that poets cannot stand alone: ‘No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists’, and with every new literary work ‘the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted’ (p. 41). He sees a reciprocity between the past and its future that creates a tradition, while simultaneously demanding, like Leavis, that there be originality: to ‘conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art’ (p. 42). Though he sometimes makes direct statements about a poet’s place in relation to a certain tradition, for example when

⁶⁴ *SE*, pp. 109-17 (p. 109).

⁶⁵ See *SW*, pp. 39-49.

he writes that ‘Mr. Yeats is an Irishman [...] [and] is outside of the tradition [of wit] altogether’,⁶⁶ Eliot was not in fact intent on telling his readers of what the best tradition should consist (even if he did have his own thoughts on the topic). He is not nearly as absolutist as Richards is in *Principles* and, though he most definitely judges the literary works he studies, one does not have much of a sense of being compelled to agree.⁶⁷ What matters much more, the shape that the ever-looming tradition most consistently takes in Eliot’s literary analyses, is his frequent endeavour to weigh one writer against another.

Eliot does not have Leavis’s long list of standards, of terms to which he continues to return when arguing his case for or against a particular writer or work (wit itself is, for example, no guarantee of high quality, because ‘wit is always different’).⁶⁸ Instead, he tends to examine the work of poets much more either as independent texts – each time with a more or less fresh eye, and bringing in only as much of history or biography as seems safe and necessary to use; or he assesses them according to whether they are any good compared to the work of other writers, and if so, how. His standard is the reaction a text evokes from him, as well as its ability to fulfil the three criteria of increasing wisdom, appreciation of art and pleasure. Without explanation or illustration, he accuses Elizabethan dramatists of instances of ‘bad writing, careless writing, and bad taste’, which he believes to be evident in ‘almost any Elizabethan play, including those of Shakespeare’. He provides as little evidence for this as he does for his subsequent assertion that these nevertheless do not ‘weaken the foundation’.⁶⁹ Similarly, he praises the ‘direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling’ he finds in Chapman and Donne, though the quotation that follows is presented without commentary⁷⁰ – it is almost as if, like Leavis, he believes that what he has said before is justification for the presence of the text in that place, not the other way around; still, with both him and Leavis we nevertheless sense that a close reading has in fact preceded analysis. As with Leavis, also, we have here the expert witness: his statement has force by virtue of being his, because he is a poet and generally a man of letters, and this is equally the case when he judges how good or bad a piece of work is by comparing it to another that is better or worse (and such a positioning of the analyst as expert witness is quite

⁶⁶ ‘Andrew Marvell’, in *SE*, pp. 293-304 (pp. 293-4).

⁶⁷ See for example Gareth Reeves, ‘T. S. Eliot and the Idea of Tradition’, in *Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 107-18, for a supporting argument.

⁶⁸ ‘Marvell’, in *SE*, p. 293.

⁶⁹ ‘Elizabethan Dramatists’, in *SE*, p. 115.

⁷⁰ ‘The Metaphysical Poets’, in *SE*, pp. 281-91 (p. 286).

characteristic of all the figures discussed in this thesis, who all really suggest that one should implicitly trust their opinions). In 'John Dryden', he compares two pieces by different poets, and then comments:

The first of these passages is by Dryden, the second by Shelley; the second is found in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, the first is not; yet we might defy anyone to show that the second is superior on intrinsically poetic merit.⁷¹

Why it has less poetic merit is left entirely unclear to anyone who does not instinctively read the passages with Eliot's eyes. Again, in 'In Memoriam', he declares that Swinburne 'is often crude and sometimes cheap in comparison' with Tennyson;⁷² does he mean to say that, if Tennyson had not existed, Swinburne would not be thought 'often crude and sometimes cheap'? He does not go on to answer this, but the suggestion that this is the case is very strong. The royal, or academic, 'we' that he uses here – as so often (though he does not use it exclusively: see, for instance, his essays on Dante (1929) and Baudelaire (1930) (pp. 237-77 and 419-30) – helps him to make his case, because it carries an assumed authority that the argument does not produce on its own.

⁷¹ 'Dryden', in *SE*, p. 306.

⁷² In *SE*, pp. 328-38 (p. 328).

Chapter Four: William Empson

(1906-1984)

The Definition of Literature

Unlike Richards, Leavis and Eliot, Empson barely mentions ‘genius’ or the ‘creative moment’, which means we cannot quite determine his opinion on those two concepts, other than that he may not believe in their existence; but, as with the other three Practical Critics, we know that he thinks that a work of literature is a work of art. Though he leaves that term itself unexplained it is clear, from looking at some of the contexts in which he mentions ‘art’, that whatever his conception of it is, the kind that interests him excludes anything which is ‘literary’ in the limited sense of its being made up of letters, a tool for the communication of information. Rather, he distinguishes art from other communicative methods, as something much more exotic: ‘the act of communication in the arts is [...] queer’,⁷³ partly because of the shape which ambiguity takes in its products. An example of this ambiguous exoticism of art is ‘the way in which opposites can be stated so as to satisfy a wide variety of people, for a great number of degrees of interpretation’, something that is ‘the most important thing about the communication of the arts’.⁷⁴ It is interesting to find that this notion of poetic ambiguity (or ambiguous poetry), which is central to much of his criticism could be seen as a companion to Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia in the novel, as well as later (Derridean, perhaps) poststructuralism. For Empson describes a co-existence of meanings within a single word (not only, but also, etymologically speaking), as well as between occurrences of the same word in different places in a poem, which is never quite resolved into a single and universally valid definition (though perhaps he does not carry his theory quite as far as Miller does, in following the deconstructionist idea of the eternally deferred arrival). He further distinguishes art from the quotidian, when he claims that the artist’s possibilities of experience are more varied than the normal man’s: ‘a poet as an artist is often

⁷³ ‘Obscurity and Annotation’, in *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. by John Haffenden (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987; hereafter: ‘ARG’), pp. 70-87 (p. 77).

⁷⁴ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3rd edn (London: Pimlico, 2004; hereafter: ‘STA’), p. 221.

anticipating experiences which may never, or only in the most distant future, occur'.⁷⁵ In 'The Cult of Unnaturalism', he argues that 'sensibility needs to act ahead of theory' when it comes to art (p. 628), and that a literary theory should not, whatever its merits, be forced on anyone who values works of art for their being 'a sort of relief and strength, because they are independent of the moral code which their public accepts and is dependent on [...]. Such works give a valuable imaginative experience, and such a public cannot afford to have them analysed'.⁷⁶

Empson, like the other three Practical Critics, is preoccupied with the question of the distinction between science and art. He holds, with them, that art is not the same as science, but acknowledges the fact that a scientific element may exist in a particular set of circumstances. One of these is the poet himself, whose work is 'self-analytical', founded on an intimate experience. He

must have a great deal of the scientist in him [...] that toughness, that indifference to the source of the original feeling, that power to stand outside his feelings and generalise, at some distance, from the materials that his feelings present him with.⁷⁷

This does not, however, extend to the employment of scientific jargon, which lacks the ambiguity that makes art what it is: 'it has, if not only one meaning, at any rate only one setting and point of view';⁷⁸ and a poet 'writing for psychoanalysts does not cut so dignified a figure as a poet writing for the delight of a reverent posterity', although the latter, too, has his drawbacks when the readership is aware of that particular intention (as it would have been at that time, given the dissemination of Freud's theory of artistic creation as fantasy-fulfilment).⁷⁹ In this instance, there is therefore a careful juggling involved, of a scientific stance with an artistic motive and an artistic style. Empson forecasts that artists will generally be 'affected' in their art 'in the direction of the sciences', from an effort to avoid ridicule, because man is, he argues, increasingly aware of his place in history and of the distance between him and his predecessors, which in

⁷⁵ 'Obscurity and Annotation', in *ARG*, p. 81.

⁷⁶ *STA*, p. 246.

⁷⁷ 'Obscurity and Annotation', in *ARG*, p. 83.

⁷⁸ *STA*, p. 236.

⁷⁹ 'Obscurity and Annotation', in *ARG*, p. 86; see also Sigmund Freud, 'Lecture 23: The Paths to the Formation of Symptoms', in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, ed. by James Strachey and Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 404-24 (pp. 423-4).

turn makes the future look endless. ‘Posterity is likely to last as long as all vitality has yet lasted since the first jellies’, he proposes, which makes the wish for eternal fame at least a touch absurd. How can anyone hope to be famous for that long? We are, after all, barely able to produce the name of any human alive more than two thousand and a few hundred years ago. If poets, therefore, become increasingly self-conscious during the creative process, Empson thinks they will begin to ‘treat poetry as a form of self-knowledge’, and thus make it a ‘branch of knowledge in general’ – instead of an expression of sensibility, which is what it really is (pp. 85-6). As Empson says of Coleridge’s poetry, if the poet had included all those notes concerning his sources which John Livingston Lowe included in *The Road to Xanadu*, people of his time might have ‘admired his erudition’, but although the poems ‘would be no less good in themselves, [...] it would have been harder, when they were novelties, to see their peculiar merits’ (p. 75). More than anything, though, art is a thing of beauty – albeit not a joy for ever: ‘Beauty is both a cause of and an escape from suffering, and in either way suffering is deeply involved in its production.’⁸⁰

Like Eliot, Empson was a poet as well as a critic (though he published far less – his *Complete Poems* comprises only seventy-seven pieces)⁸¹, and that may be why the arguments in his more general critical writings circle around poetry more than any other literary genre. He believes that both good poetry and prose achieve a significant part of their effects by means of ambiguity,⁸² and that both are genres fit for ‘argufying’;⁸³ but this is conceding rather little to prose, and the differences he determines are substantial indeed. In his opinion, while ‘poetry has an urgent need to deal with reality, [...] in prose a man may allow himself to entertain ideals’ (a surprising notion, perhaps).⁸⁴ So much for content. As far as form is concerned, it is metre and rhyme which hold the key to the superiority of poetry. Metre ‘imposes a sort of intensity of interpretation upon the grammar, which makes it fruitful even when there is “no song”’.⁸⁵ Together with rhyme, it forces language to take detours from colloquial language which make the reader all the more aware of the ‘several colloquial orders from which the statement has diverged’ (p.

⁸⁰ ‘Thy Darling in an Urn’, in *ARG*, pp. 282-8 (p. 285).

⁸¹ See John Haffenden, ed., *William Empson: The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 2001).

⁸² *STA*, p. 28; ‘is all good poetry supposed to be ambiguous? I think that it is’ (*STA*, p. xv).

⁸³ ‘Argufying in Poetry’, in *ARG*, pp. 168-73 (p. 168).

⁸⁴ ‘Eliot and Politics’, in *ARG*, pp. 364-8 (p. 364).

⁸⁵ *STA*, p. 28.

30). Prose, as unmetred and unrhymed, is therefore rather more colloquial than poetry,⁸⁶ and therefore less ambiguous and more barren. Most damning, though, must be his statement that ‘the best writing in English was done before the ascendancy of prose’⁸⁷ - echoing Richards and Eliot, but going against much of Leavis’s work.

The Value of Literature and of Literary Analysis

We know that Empson had a strong enough interest in literature and in literary criticism to switch to it from his study of mathematics in the late 1920s;⁸⁸ but what is it that he thought was so valuable about literature – more specifically, about poetry – that he not only created it, but also spent a large amount of time writing about it? The first quality is his perception of it as an object of beauty: ‘Unexplained beauty arouses an irritation in me, a sense that this would be a good place to scratch’, he declares in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.⁸⁹ In his 1947 ‘Preface to the Second Edition’, he adds:

I was frequently puzzled in considering my examples [...]. I felt sure that the example was beautiful and that I had, broadly speaking, reacted to it correctly. But I did not at all know what had happened in this ‘reaction’; I did not know why the example was beautiful. (p. x)

In 1964 he writes that, as late as 1948, he was still ‘especially keen [...] on a programme for explaining all the sources of the beauty of a poem, finding a reason for everything’. By the time he made this last comment, however, he had come to think that there were times when neither authors, nor critics, can find a concrete explanation for their ‘feeling’ that something ‘is good’: ‘Both must seem to themselves to be choosing without cause, however determinate their world may actually be’, and it gives them a certain freedom to be able to do so.⁹⁰ Still, these cases are presented as an exception, and he is not indicating

⁸⁶ See also his description of Lyly’s ‘fabulous beasts’ as a ‘colloquial or prose device’ (*STA*, p. 168).

⁸⁷ ‘Teaching Literature’, in *ARG*, pp. 93-7 (p. 96).

⁸⁸ See John Haffenden, ed., *William Empson: Among the Mandarins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 184, for an account of how Empson read some of Richards’s work during his first year at Cambridge, before the switch.

⁸⁹ *STA*, p. 9.

⁹⁰ ‘A Theoretical Point’, in *ARG*, p. 129 (p. 129).

that this is the truth of the matter, only that it is sometimes so perceived, and that things should – sometimes – be left at that; yet he did not abandon his previous analytical method at that point.

That the value of literature lies in its being an object of beauty still does not, however, satisfactorily explain what it is about beauty that was so valuable for Empson. This question brings us to the second, dependent quality of literature: that it is able to move its readers sufficiently to affect their thought and behaviour. Richards's influence is quite evident here, such as when Empson writes:

As I understand it, there is always in great poetry [...] an appeal to a background of human experience [...]. [...] [W]hen a receiver of poetry is seriously moved by an apparently simple line, what are moving in him are the traces of a great part of his past experience and of the structure of his past judgments.⁹¹

Beauty is, he argues (again in line with Richards), something which is simultaneously subjective and objective, and that it is quite possible to think of it in that way, despite John Sparrow's criticism of this theory.⁹² It does not need to be one or the other, in the same way as it is possible to believe that light is at the same time particle and wave: 'an apparent intellectual conflict need not be a practical obstacle'.⁹³ His proof for the matter is that, just as it is possible for a work of art to induce widely different reactions that are none the less 'coherent, durable and complete' for being so different, it has also been observed that 'a poem conveys very nearly the same experience to extremely different people'.⁹⁴ Literature can achieve this because of its aforementioned ability to 'appeal to a background of human experience' by presenting, in its greatest incarnations, 'a feeling of generalisation from a case which has been presented definitely'.⁹⁵ It is one of the functions of the literary critic

⁹¹ *STA*, p. xv; compare this to, for example, Richards's description of 'present and past stimuli' in *PLC*, pp. 73-82.

⁹² 'I. A. Richards and Practical Criticism', in *ARG*, pp. 193-202 (p. 198).

⁹³ 'Remembering I. A. Richards', in *ARG*, pp. 225-8 (p. 228).

⁹⁴ 'I. A. Richards and Practical Criticism', in *ARG*, p. 198.

⁹⁵ *STA*, p. xv.

to extract for his public what it wants; to organise, what he may indeed create, the taste of his period. So that literature, in so far as it is a living matter, demands a sense [...] as of what is necessary to carry a particular situation off. (p. 245)

John Sparrow was clearly not the only critic to balk at the idea that beauty cannot be rationalised. Empson describes what he considers to be the two critical camps of Beauty and of Truth-Goodness, with the former arguing that beauty has nothing to do with moral principles, 'so that aesthetes are expected to profess a playful indifference to the principles on which they in fact (one is to assume) order their lives. It is odd, and I think harmful, that this *fin-de-siècle* squabble is still going on' (p. 11). What he proposes is, to extract that which is valuable in literature by revealing the 'machinery', as he often calls it, of its beauty-effect, aware that 'I shall seem to be aligning myself with the "scientific" mode of literary criticism, with "psychological" explanations for everything, and columns of a reader's sensitivity-coefficients' (p. 11). In fact, he declares, he disagrees as much with the psychoanalytical criticism which does not permit enjoyment, as with the aesthetic criticism which does not permit reason.⁹⁶ Richards argued that to put poetry under the microscope shows depth of 'passion';⁹⁷ Empson takes it further, deeming it hubristic to think that the act could be damaging: 'while it may be true that the roots of beauty ought not to be violated, it seems to me very arrogant of the appreciative critic to think that he could do this, if he chose, by a little scratching'.⁹⁸ In this he stands in disagreement with Eliot, who objected in just this way to the exposition of the poetic machinery in criticism. He also stands out from other, later, American practitioners of 'New Criticism', in his rejection of what he calls 'the Wimsatt Law [...] which says that no reader can ever grasp the intention of the author':⁹⁹ believing, on the contrary, that it is worth attempting to understand the author behind the work. '[A]bout the most harmful thing you can do', he argued, is to tell a 'student of literature', who 'ought to be trying all the time to empathize with the author (and of course the assumptions and

⁹⁶ See also: 'you can get nothing from literature without in some degree enjoying it' ('Teaching Literature', in *ARG*, p. 95).

⁹⁷ *PC*, pp. 322-3.

⁹⁸ *STA*, p. 9.

⁹⁹ 'Preface' to *Using Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p. vii. See also 'Questionnaire on Criticism', in *AGENDA*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1976), in John Haffenden, ed., *William Empson: Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 622-4 for a comment supporting the use of biographical detail in literary criticism.

conventions by which the author felt himself bound)', that 'he cannot even partially succeed' in this (p. viii). Though the usefulness of biography is not to be overstated, and 'it does not always succeed in giving' one a 'better understanding of the work' (p. vii).

One of the results of his investigation into the communicative process of poetry is his attempted outline of the workings of poetic language on the mind of the reader. 'What poets are for, and why they are important', he declares, is their ability to increase the mind through the provision of an experience (pp. 3-4). It is true that someone of Eliot's type and calibre could 'shake the literary world by the mere force of the poem *before* it was tolerably understood; that this can happen is one of the basic surprising truths about poetry',¹⁰⁰ yet this cannot disguise the fact that a poem's importance lies in the conveyance of meaning. 'Poetry has powerful means of imposing its own assumptions, and is very independent of the mental habits of the reader', Empson notes. The imposition traces the following path: a term is introduced in a manner so surreptitious that, if it is not already natural for the reader, it acts as a 'signal' for something that is to be taken for granted: 'Once it has gained its point, on further readings, it will take for granted that you always took it for granted' – and so a new experience is incorporated into the reader and becomes part of his or her habit.¹⁰¹ His own method of verbal analysis, he argues, may itself make this experience more valuable, if it is applied by readers working on their own;¹⁰² it can reveal how poets can influence their readers, even if a line of poetry appears 'beautiful without reason',¹⁰³ and that, if readers are aware that poetry has this potential, they can react to it more appropriately. This is an interesting idea, akin to Richards's notion of the taking up of the poet's experience into one's mental 'fabric', but not one which Empson explores in much more detail in his literary-critical writings.

In a 1959 letter, Empson calls the study of literature 'frivolous unless related to judgments of value, experience of life, some kind of trying out [of] the different kinds of attitude or world-view so as to decide which are good ones',¹⁰⁴ and poetry is able to

¹⁰⁰ Quoted from an letter to John Wain by John Haffenden in his 'Introduction', in *ARG*, p. 17.

¹⁰¹ *STA*, p. 4; see also: 'One great important function of poetry is precisely this; to make the reader connect naturally, with understanding, things which he had not connected before.' ('Obscurity and Annotation', in *ARG*, p. 76).

¹⁰² 'The process of understanding some lines of poetry is an essential part of their value' ('Obscurity and Annotation', in *ARG*, p. 74).

¹⁰³ *STA*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁴ To Mark Roberts, on 8 February 1959, quoted by Haffenden in his 'Introduction', in *ARG*, p. 59.

convey this kind of ‘sensibility’ and ‘mode of experience’ in a way that nothing else can.¹⁰⁵ There is, according to Empson, a particular need for critical analysis during his time that says something ‘profound’ and ‘fundamental’¹⁰⁶ about a text, because modern poetry is much more obscure than poetry tended to be in the past, ‘both because there are many more things for poetry to refer to and because of the nature of those things’.¹⁰⁷ In addition to this, and inextricably related to it, modern thought is going through a similar assimilation of all and everything, and people are reading so much more, and a much greater variety of things, at his time than they did before:

In the present state of indecision of the cultured world people do, in fact, hold all the beliefs, however contradictory, that turn up in poetry, in the sense that they are liable to use them all in coming to decisions. It is for reasons of this sort that the habit of reading a wide variety of different sorts of poetry [...] gives to the act of appreciation a puzzling complexity, tends to make people less sure of their own minds, and makes it necessary to be able to fall back on some intelligible process of interpretation [...].

It is the analyst’s function to ‘reassure’ readers by providing them with a workable method¹⁰⁸ that will help them make a decision as to ‘whether the thing is being interpreted rightly and as to whether, if it is, one ought to allow oneself to be pleased’ (p. 255). Whatever one’s emotional response to a poem, however, it should always be a personal opinion, unencumbered by the voice of someone else’s assumed authority, involving only ‘independent judgment’, ‘the free judgment of the whole personality of the reader.’¹⁰⁹ One can have the wrong feeling, but only if one’s method of reading and assessing poetry leads one to forget with what kind of poetry one is dealing;¹¹⁰ other than that, ‘[h]ow far one’s response to a poem is the complete one, [...] the right one, [...] the one intended by the author – these are mysteries, and if they could be answered they would be answered differently in different cases.’¹¹¹ In the end, Empson concedes that

¹⁰⁵ ‘Obscurity and Annotation’, in *ARG*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁶ *STA*, pp. 1 and 13.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Obscurity and Annotation’, in *ARG*, p. 70.

¹⁰⁸ *STA*, p. 243-4.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Teaching Literature’, in *ARG*, pp. 94-5.

¹¹⁰ *STA*, p. 255.

¹¹¹ ‘I. A. Richards and Practical Criticism’, in *ARG*, p. 199.

even ‘any reading that gives a man pleasure may be valuable to him by giving him the habit of reading, and one would respect anything that put life into the average classroom’.¹¹²

Method

Emerson’s literary analyses are quite possibly the most enjoyable of the four we have looked at so far, though also more difficult to get through than any of the others, in their sheer mass of detail. *Ambiguity* and *Some Versions of Pastoral* are, of the writings of the Practical Critics, the most like textbooks of textual analysis, while his rhetoric is at the same time much less lecturing, much more unassuming, than theirs. In *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, he declares that he has ‘almost always’ selected poems for analysis ‘that I admire’,¹¹³ and if we suppose that he has done the same in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, which we may reasonably do, we can perhaps understand why he is so enjoyable: because he is in turn enjoying himself. In his analyses, even in *Milton’s God* (which is in places as concerned with establishing his opposition to certain Christian ideas as it is with *Paradise Lost* itself), one of his valuations of literature, that it is somehow capable of improving humanity, almost absents itself. It may still exist partially in his motivation for writing about it in the first place, but what is really always present is his concern with literature as a thing of beauty, of pleasure. His comment in *Ambiguity*, that the critic ought ‘to organise, what he may indeed create, the taste of his period’ (p. 245), is not something that occurs immediately to his reader as an accurate description of the point which he is trying to make at a given moment, even in *Ambiguity* itself; rather, he appears much more concerned with the way in which things strike him, and how they work. In *Ambiguity*, the aim of his investigation is to find out why a poem is beautiful, how certain ways of meaning can create beauty (p. xi). His analysis in that book is detailed to the extreme; next to it, surely nothing the least more generalised may honestly be called ‘close reading’ (of the eight analysts discussed in this thesis, only J. Hillis Miller can be said to approach what one may call an ‘Emersonian’ method). One example can serve as an illustration of the whole. Writing about Pope’s *Dunciad*, he quotes two lines of it and follows them with a page of analysis of a mere four of their words (‘truth’, ‘gold’, ‘praise’ and ‘pudding’), the

¹¹² ‘Teaching Literature’, in *ARG*, p. 95.

¹¹³ *STA*, p. 7.

crux of the analysis being, to show the ‘various ways’ in which they can be ‘connected’ depending on the associations one assigns to them, in order to determine the ‘proportions’ of Pope’s ‘contempt’ and ‘magnanimity’ within the poem. He concludes, after quoting a few lines from *Moral Essays*, that ‘All this is great fun’ (pp. 126-7). One rarely encounters such a statement in any literary criticism; its levity is characteristically Empsonian, and is evidence of the pleasure he takes in the poetry he studies. Another telling example can be found in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, when he takes the time to find out all occurrences of the word ‘green’ in Marvell’s poetry; he has apparently collected all of them, and even distinguishes, in this list, between rich and ‘[L]ess rich uses’ of the word, all of which is preceded by the declaration that ‘they are pleasant things to look up’ (p. 127). He moves from quotation to analysis and commentary with such rapidity that there is hardly a page which does not contain an analysed quotation, and yet this rapidity does not reduce the thoroughness with which he handles his subject. His desire for precision may be the same desire that drove him to begin his university career studying mathematics, or it may be the result of his training in that subject – be that as it may, his mathematical method may be discerned in his attention to detail, and in his weighing of different possibilities and probabilities. It even, on at least one occasion, makes an unmasked appearance: about to begin an examination of the possible resolutions of poetic contradictions, Empson proclaims that ‘[w]e [...] must now stand upon our heads, and are approaching the secret places of the Muse’, and follows it with one and a half pages of poetic mathematics (‘If “ p and $-p$ ” could only be resolved in one way into: “If $a=a_1$, then p ; if $a=a_2$, then $-p$,” and so on), and it works well in this context.¹¹⁴ *Some Versions of Pastoral* is strikingly similar to *Ambiguity*, his question here being what pastoral literature, ‘a puzzling form’ (p. 6), is made of, by what it is defined, and how ‘the ways in which the pastoral process of putting the complex into the simple (in itself a great help to the concentration needed for poetry) and the resulting social ideas have been used in English literature’ (p. 22). He proceeds in much the same way as he does in the earlier book, though he defines the different elements of the pastoral he discusses (double plots, complexity converted into simplicity, the conception of the hero as tragic and Christian

¹¹⁴ *STA*, pp. 196-7. On p. 68 of *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions, 1974), he compares a work of art to a mathematical formula in its ability both to be judged by and to exceed the artist: ‘In the same way a poetical ambiguity depends on the reader’s weighting the possible meanings according to their probability, while a dramatic ambiguity depends on the audience’s having the possible reactions in the right proportions, but the distinction is only a practical one.’

and so on) perhaps more clearly than he has defined the types of ambiguity in the earlier book. In Empson's analyses, one always has the sense of being with the texts he is analysing; they are a continuous chain of text—word analysis—text—thought—text, and so on. He may be described as practising a kind of critical forensics, in which the word and its possible contexts, together with the interpretation of the word's possible meanings in those contexts, provide the evidence for the character of the word itself. His evidence is, of course, selective, but he is rigorous in his interrogation of it, which follows something of the path of a mathematical formula, in that a hypothesis ('this is beautiful', 'this is pastoral') is followed by a working-out of its proof, and ends, sometimes, with a *q.e.d.*' That the proof might not hold up in science is true, but it tends to hold up in his literary criticism.¹¹⁵ His method is extremely different from Leavis's, but he nevertheless drew praise from the latter, who called 'his instruments [...] always appropriate';¹¹⁶ though Richards suspected that he was 'overdoing it'.¹¹⁷

Using Biography, a collection of essays of which some had been previously published in various journals and edited books, is a very different work. Judging by his preface, Empson's intent for the book may be called conservationist: 'I am reaching an age,' he begins, 'when I had better collect the essays which I hope to preserve'; yet he believes that, rather than having produced a 'rag-bag' of unrelated pieces, he has assembled essays which 'contain more biography than most of my output' (p. vii). As we know, he did think biography could play a part in literary analysis, but he did not think that it ought to be one of the chief materials for literary analysis. Indeed, some of the essays here seem to be more concerned with understanding an author, than with illuminating a work. The third piece on Marvell, for example, constitutes fifty-two pages of, more or less reasonable, speculation about Marvell's marriage to his housekeeper, inspired by an article in *PMLA* in 1938, which suggested that 'Marvell's housekeeper was lying for gain when she claimed to be his widow' (p. 43). Empson examines the situation, legal and otherwise, before and after the writer's death, and the chapter is punctuated, thirty-three pages into it, by the statement that, to 'establish the marriage is of no consequence to literature, as it came so long after his best poetry, though' – and here, it

¹¹⁵ There are a handful of exceptions – for example, when he calls *Titus Andronicus* 'a bad and nasty play' ('Hamlet', in Empson, *Essays on Shakespeare*, ed. by David P. Pirie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 79-136 (p. 123)) – but such incidents are few.

¹¹⁶ 'Empson', in *VC*, p. 28.

¹¹⁷ *Among the Mandarins*, p. 276.

seems, lies Empson's intention – 'I do think it saves Marvell from a scandal' (p. 76). His chapters on *Tom Jones*, on the other hand, are very close to the novel. Biography functions here less in an attempt to understand Henry Fielding, as in an attempt to understand his novel, specifically his use of 'double irony', and thereby to explain 'why I find the book so much better' than 'recent literary critics, and my students at Sheffield' (p. 131) (he concludes that 'the chief reason why recent critics have belittled Fielding is that they find him intimidating' (p. 157)). The essay on Eliot hangs somewhere between 'The Marriage of Marvell' and '*Tom Jones*', in that it is, on the one hand, replete with information, factual and assumed, about Eliot's religion, and his relationship with his family, in particular his father; on the other hand, Empson's intention seems to be to understand *The Waste Land*, rather than to account for one or the other aspect of Eliot's personality or life (and he does cite a fair amount from its text, both the published and manuscript versions). His conclusion, that the 'central theme of *The Waste Land*, or symbol as one might say, is about a father' (p. 194), is not entirely unreasonable; though his readings of the text in the light of Eliot's relationship with his father might have been more convincing, if he had been able to supply more concrete evidence of the fact that Eliot 'wanted to grouse about his father' (p. 197) because, as Eliot wrote in a letter in 1923, he 'disapproved of my residence in England', and had, in his will, left him his portion of the inheritance in trust, rather than outright (p. 193). In this collection of essays, then, Empson shows us what he thinks biography can do to further one's understanding of someone's work, but he also shows us what it can do outside the literary text, to the figure of the author. Because much of the biographical detail, however, is somewhat hazy,¹¹⁸ it is difficult to be persuaded of the accuracy of his method and conclusions, entertaining as the essays may be.

Although his general critical writings turned ever more towards religion in his later years, Empson retains even in *Milton's God* his favourite analytical method of extreme close reading. John Haffenden argues that his 'abiding concern with rational resistance bridges the apparent gap between his supposedly exclusive and unjudging interests in his early books – first with technical analysis, then with linguistics – and the ethical declarations of *Milton's God*,¹¹⁹ and Empson there certainly does not try to hide his religious views. Right from the outset, he states that 'I think the traditional God of

¹¹⁸ See, for example, the passage about Marvell's 'sexual constitution', pp. 86-7; or the one describing Eliot's mother's visit to London in 1921, p. 194.

¹¹⁹ *Among the Mandarins*, p. 283.

Christianity very wicked',¹²⁰ and his introduction of his personal beliefs into the book is no doubt motivated by his desire to counteract the 'neo-Christian movement, which I think has been harmful to literary criticism' (p. 26). Even so, *Paradise Lost* remains his subject, and his argument is still based on close analysis of the text; he says he wants to 'follow the story of the epic [...] and try to capture the way it was meant to strike a fit reader' (p. 36), in order to 'mediate' between various 'reconsideration[s]' of *Paradise Lost* that have been carried out in the preceding years. Though his analysis provides us with his opinion on the justice or injustice of what the poem says, it does so almost never without some kind of a close link to the text, and he asserts his intention to be clear about his views: 'the moral argument must not get detached from the literary-critical one, or I may appear to say that the poem is bad because Milton agrees with my opponents' (p. 89). He believes, for instance, that Satan's line 'Who durst defy th'Omnipotent to Arms' introduces all manner of ambiguity: an omnipotent character cannot be defied, so is the 'defy' Satan's verb, but 'th'Omnipotent' Milton's attribute for God? Similarly, Beelzebub's 'Fearless, endanger'd Heavn's perpetual King' is a paradox, because something that is perpetual cannot possibly be endangered (pp. 37-8). Empson takes all this to mean that Milton was struggling with his attitude to God, and, after introducing evidence in the form of quotations from Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana*, he concludes that 'Milton only just managed, after spiritual wrestling and the introduction of a certain amount of heresy [in the form of the so-called Mortalist Heresy], to reconcile his conscience or keep his temper with his God.' Thus we always return to the text. Though both men are clearly contending in the pages of their respective works with a system of beliefs they fervently oppose, *Milton's God* is vastly different from Richards's *Beyond*. While Richards's philosophical argument overwhelms the texts he considers, *Paradise Lost* is indubitably ever the real subject of Empson's book.

¹²⁰ William Empson, *Milton's God* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), p. 10.

Epilogue

It is interesting that Eliot, Empson, Leavis and Richards all eventually broadened the focus of their critical output, sooner or later and to a greater or lesser extent: what it was they wanted to achieve, what made them seek to publish their essays, articles and books at all, what it was they so badly wanted to tell the public – all these were not exactly as they had been, though one cannot exactly describe it as a paradigm-shift in their writings. Richards, for one, moved from the psychological processes of poetry and the science of correct reading to the problems involved in human communication in general, in particular as it pertains to education, but he still produced a book containing actual literary criticism late in his life (*Beyond*, in 1974). Leavis moved from the valuation and revaluation of certain writers and periods, in an effort to right wrongs and establish a tradition worthy of its name, to education, and an interest in ‘the problems and predicaments of contemporary civilization as well as in the nature of thought and art-speech in the non-philosophical sense and how they affect creative writing’,¹²¹ but nevertheless spent part of his time on analyses of Lawrence (for example in *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist* and *Thought, Words and Creativity: Art and Thought in Lawrence*) and Dickens (*Dickens the Novelist*, written with Q. D. Leavis). Eliot turned to culture and cultural politics, and their role in a religious world, in *The Idea of a Christian Society* and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, but also assembled *On Poetry and Poets* as late as 1956, with most of the essays ‘written within the last sixteen years’;¹²² And Empson increasingly tended towards a more generally cultural and religious criticism, but also wrote *Faustus and the Censor*. It is not wholly surprising that they should have done this, for they felt that culture is more than decoration, that it is in fact a vital element of our world without which we cannot do; and conversely, that culture, and they, cannot do without the world.¹²³ They evidently did not lose all interest in literature, and the value of literature

¹²¹ G. Singh, *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher: Essays & Papers by F. R. Leavis* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), ‘Introduction’, pp. ix-xiv (p. ix).

¹²² See the preface to *OP*, p. xi.

¹²³ See also Arnold, who may have been an influence: ‘The culture which is supposed to plume itself on a smattering of Greek and Latin [...] is valued either out of sheer vanity and ignorance, or else as an engine of social and class distinction, separating its holder, like a badge or title, from other people who have not got it. No serious man would call this *culture*, or attach any value to it, as culture, at all.’ See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. by Samuel Lipman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 29-30.

had by no means depreciated, or become a mere secondary presence in their lives – rather, it may be said to have co-existed with whatever else there was. One ought to remember, however, that (unlike three of the four modern literary theorists examined in Part II here) every one of them began his adult life studying something more or less removed from literature, something that can be traced in much of his work. In Eliot's and Richards's case, it was philosophy; in Empson's, mathematics; in Leavis's, history. It may be concluded from this that, whatever value literature held for them – an aid to psychoanalysis, a teacher of critical sensibility, a representative of high culture, a thing of beauty and pleasure, and so on – it was also simultaneously useful to them as an opportunity to express their thoughts on broader themes. Whatever else may separate them from their successors, in this regard they are perhaps closer to them than one might have expected, and there is possibly, in this instance, a wider chasm between the Practical Critics and the *fin de siècle* Aesthetes, than between them and Bhabha, Eagleton, Miller, and Showalter. True, there are moments in some of their earlier writings, in which they show themselves to be the children of the Aesthetes; and even in their later works they still hold on to a sense of literature as something somehow more significant, if not more elevated, than many other forms of human expression. Yet for all four of these men, literature was also inevitably linked to the general cultural life of a society, and they thus conceived of a greater social significance for their work than the Aesthetes had conceived for theirs.

PART II: THE 'MODERN LITERARY THEORISTS'

Prologue

We turn now from the Practical Critics to those analysts who may be classed as 'modern literary theorists'. As was the case with the first group, this one is marked by a heterogeneity with regard to its members' aims, analytical strategies, and the judgements made of individual writers. What will become clear as this part of the thesis progresses, however, is that all four of the characters who feature here exercise their craft under the aegis of one or other theory about how the world functions, and literature within it. From Eagleton's Marxist interests, via Showalter's appeals to a literary analysis motivated by feminist politics and Bhabha's concern for the state and status of postcolonial conceptions and productions of culture, to Miller's deconstructionist aesthetics, they all are continuously aware of their positions in relation to other approaches to literature. It will be seen, however, that Miller diverges from the rest of them in one aspect of his approach. Perhaps as a direct result of his continuing faith in literature as something wondrous, or perhaps because he decided to retain the method of close textual analysis from his training in New Criticism even when his philosophy became heavily deconstructionist, Miller manages to stay with the texts he analyses far more than the other three. In this, as much as in his detailed analytical observations, he approaches Empson, who was also increasingly interested in providing a counterpoint for literary criticism influenced by what he perceived as a Neo-Christian movement, but nevertheless never quite took his eyes off the literary page long enough to lose his place. Not for Miller, then, the 'reading between the lines', but only the reading of the lines, even if his deconstructionist philosophy does not permit a perfect reading. In contrast, one discovers that Eagleton, Showalter, and Bhabha treat the literary text more as a tool than as an artefact, and even when they do speak about literature in terms of 'art', those instances seem to be more or less remnants of a position that either has passed, or is too personal for their academic purposes. For whatever reason, the value they place on literature and literary analysis turns out to be one which serves a social, or political,

purpose; as if, once that purpose has been achieved, there could be no more use for literature.

Chapter One: Terry Eagleton

(b. 1943)

The Definition of Literature

Marxism has been one of the strongest theoretical camps in the literary field for some decades, and even if its popularity is less than what it once was, its influence has been widespread. Terry Eagleton is one of the foremost Marxist literary critics in Britain today, and is in general credited with much authority in the field of literary analysis. His *Literary Theory: An Introduction* is one of the most well-known texts of its kind, and *How to Read a Poem* was even serialised in the *Times's* Saturday 'Books' supplement in 2007.

Eagleton spends much more time on the definition of literature than the Practical Critics did, a fact which tallies entirely with his general approach to analysis, which is theoretical and conceptual much more than literary-critical; it therefore involves as much analysis of literary analysis and its concepts, as critiques of literature.¹ A significant amount of space needs to be dedicated here to his handling of the matter of definition, since it is vital to his valuation of literature and his method of analysis. It seems that the answer one would receive from Eagleton to the question 'What is literature?' depends largely on what particular goal he was hoping to achieve by answering it. Though he believes, apparently very strongly, that literature is an infinitely flexible category, he nevertheless continues to use 'art' synonymously with 'literature' throughout his writings. This is true even of those he produced after the 1983 publication of *Literary Theory*, in whose introduction and conclusion he most firmly rejects restrictive definitions of 'literature':² 'we can drop once and for all the illusion that the category "literature" is [...] eternally given and immutable. Anything can be literature, and anything which is regarded as unalterably and unquestionably literature [...] can cease to be literature' – and literature therefore 'does not exist in the sense that insects do'.³ He counters the fact that

¹ Unless the contrary is explicitly stated, I shall continue to use the term 'literature' in its narrower sense in this thesis, and therefore distinguish, at least formally, between it and literary-critical, literary-theoretical, or otherwise literary-analytical writings, even though Eagleton would no doubt, and possibly quite rightly, prefer one not to.

² 'Introduction: What is Literature?' and 'Conclusion: Political Criticism', in *LT*, pp. 1-14 and 169-89 respectively.

³ *LT*, pp. 9 and 14.

so many people do still believe in its existence as a category which is separate from other forms of expression and action, with the argument that the ‘value-judgements’ by which those people determine the category ‘have a close relation to social ideologies’ (p. 14). His point is that literature is not a separate, objective, material entity, and that any attempt to make it into one is driven by ideological considerations, most immediately by the requirements of the discourse of ‘[l]iterary theorists, critics and teachers’, who build the so-called literary canon out of texts that are ‘more amenable to this discourse than others’ (p. 175). ‘Literature’ is also a category that changes over time; he writes: ‘[T]he texts now dubbed “literature” [...] will be inevitably “rewritten”, recycled, put to different uses, inserted into different relations and practices’ (p. 185).⁴ He thinks that this has always been true, though the very existence of the term itself has made us blind to it. He mentions the same impossibility of defining literature elsewhere, and although he does venture his own definition of the term in *Literary Theory*, it is arguably vague. Still, it is useful in the context of what it is that he is trying to achieve in the book in which he produces it: “‘literature’ is a highly valued kind of writing’,⁵ and usage of the term therefore a political one to which he would oppose the entire ‘field of [...] “discursive practices”’ (p. 178).

With the exception of these examples, however, he uses the label ‘literature’ throughout his work in its narrower sense of a system which includes poems, novels, plays, and short stories. That is, if he includes more than that he does not explicitly state it, and little, if anything, that he writes could be taken to suggest this. Does he, then, consider literature as a work of art in the same way that Eliot, Empson, Leavis, and Richards did? He sometimes does, and sometimes does not. There seems to have been no particular event to cause a shift in his thinking, for his usage of ‘art’ or ‘work of art’ as a euphemism for literature is scattered across his books indeterminate of their publication date,⁶ and so is his description of writers as artists.⁷ What appears to have

⁴ See also *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2006; hereafter: ‘CP’), pp. 57 and 164; *How to Read a Poem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007; hereafter: ‘HRP’), p. 31; and *The Function of Criticism: From ‘The Spectator’ to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984; hereafter: ‘FC’), pp. 77 and 95.

⁵ *LT*, p. 9.

⁶ He describes, for instance, *The Waste Land* as something that ‘is like all works of art’, in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2002; hereafter: ‘MLC’), p. 15. Further examples of similar usage may be found in the same text, pp. viii, 2, 48, and 64; in *CI*, ‘Introduction’ (no pagination) and p. 164; in ‘Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism’, in Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, pp. 361-73 (pp. 361

much more of an impact on whether or not he uses such terminology is the subject of his inquiry. Given his proposal for a revision of literary analysis, which entails that an analyst's material should be determined by his or her aim and strategy,⁸ one may conclude that the same goes for an analyst's conceptual definitions – not only what they are, but how they are handled. Thus, when Eagleton is tracing the history of Marxist literary criticism and making a case for it,⁹ he analyses his predecessors' opinions in relation to their placement of literature within the greater scheme of things (history, reality, politics, ideology, and so on) but foregoes a direct evaluation of their conception of literature. In a similar way, when he is intent on examining the connections between ideology and literature (see, for example, *Criticism and Ideology* and *Ideology*), he mentions the word 'literature' without apparently feeling undue pressure to describe its nature beyond its relation to ideology. When making a case for the dismissal of other current or past methods of literary analysis, however, as he does in, among others, *Literary Theory*, *The Function of Criticism* and *After Theory*, he decides to delve deeper into the scope of the term 'literature' because he considers the lack of such an analysis one of the key failings of the Practical Critics and their successors.

Apart from treating it as something quasi-indeterminate on some occasions and as an art form on others, Eagleton ventures a third possible definition of literature elsewhere still, namely that of ideological production. Despite his use of the terms 'art' and 'art-form' to describe literature in *Criticism and Ideology*, he spends most of that book considering literature in the light of productive forces. He evidently finds it useful to his outline of that ideological-Marxist form of textual analysis around which the book is centred (one of its key chapters is called 'Categories for a Materialist Criticism' and is concerned with 'the major constituents of a Marxist theory of literature' (p. 44)) to think

and 363); in *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991; hereafter: '*Ideology*'), pp. 22-3; in 'Poetry, Pleasure and Politics', in *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-1985* (London: Verso, 1986; hereafter: '*AG*'), pp. 173-80 (pp. 179-80); in 'What is a Novel?', in *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2005; hereafter: '*EN*'), pp. 1-21 (pp. 9 and 19); in *HRP*, pp. 23 and 96; in 'Northrop Frye', in *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others* (London: Verso, 2003; hereafter: '*FD*'), pp. 96-103 (pp. 96-99); in 'George Steiner', *ibid.*, pp. 180-2 (p. 182); in *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), pp. 87, 94, 101; in *FC*, pp. 80 and 123-4; and in 'Introduction Part I', in Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne, eds, *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 1-15 (p. 11).

⁷ See, for instance, *MLC*, pp. 63-4; 'James Kelman', in *FD*, pp. 263-5 (p. 263); *HRP*, pp. 13 and 29; and *CI*, p. 182.

⁸ *LT*, p. 183, discussed in more detail later on in this chapter.

⁹ As in *MLC* and *Marxist Literary Theory*, for example.

of the author (after Walter Benjamin) as a producer, the text as a product, and the process of writing as production.¹⁰ Describing the text as ‘an aesthetic product’ (p. 62), he proceeds to work a lengthy analogy between textual and dramatic production, concluding that the literary work is itself as much a production of ideology as a theatrical staging is a production of a text (pp. 64-8). Its object is history, which

‘enters’ the text [...] as *ideology* [and] is ‘present’ in the text in the form of a *double-absence*. The text takes as its object [...] certain significations by which the real lives itself [...]. History, one might say, is the *ultimate* signifier of literature, as it is the ultimate signified. (p. 72)

Although he tells us that texts are the result ‘of a specific overdetermined conjuncture’ of general and literary modes of production, and of general, aesthetic and authorial ideology, Eagleton is wary of appearing to present texts as inert and hastens to qualify the idea by declaring that ‘it is not [...] a merely passive product. The text is so constituted by the conjuncture as to actively determine its own determinants’ (p. 63). There are other places in which he equates literary activities with the idea of production, rather than with ‘the Romantic notion of the author as *creator* – as the God-like figure who mysteriously conjures his handiwork out of nothing’.¹¹ In ‘Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism’, for example, he argues that art ought to be ‘practice, strategy, performance, production’, though he distinguishes between it and ‘prevailing forms of commodity production’ (no explanation is, however, provided for this distinction);¹² and in *Marxist Literary Theory*, he thinks of culture as ‘production before it is expression’.¹³ He therefore makes of literature, in these instances, a thing that is supposedly the measurable result of measurable conditions: for, unlike creation, which can be ‘out of nothing’, a product is always the result of definite factors. This theory of Eagleton’s certainly does not agree with the Practical Critics’ idea of literature, which does not assume the measurability of its creators, and we recall Leavis’s protestation that ‘there *can* be intellectual, aesthetic and moral activity that is not merely an expression of class origin and economic circumstances; there *is* a “human culture” to be aimed at that must be achieved by cultivating a certain autonomy of the human spirit’. According to Eagleton, though, the human spirit is not autonomous; taking the author as an example, he believes

¹⁰ See, for instance, pp. 45, 58-9, 60-1, 166, and 186, though the entire book is pervaded by this terminology.

him to be, like any human being, the product of certain material elements, ‘a series of distinct factors: social class, sex, nationality, religion, geographical region and so on’.¹⁴

When it comes to genre, Eagleton – unlike the majority of the Practical Critics discussed in Part I – seems to champion neither poetry, nor prose in particular. His focus is sometimes on the one, sometimes on the other,¹⁵ and sometimes, as in *Ideology*, on both, without much distinction between them. His belief that genre (or ‘form’, as he often calls it), is historically determined no doubt contributes to their occupying an equal status in his mind. Form, he argues, is created by the ‘literary history of forms’, ‘certain dominant ideological structures’ and ‘a specific set of relations between author and audience’,¹⁶ and the form of ‘an utterance’ is determined by ‘its social situation’.¹⁷ This means that, just as the novel could not have existed in Homer’s day, so the epic is an impossibility in ours, and there is no question of which of them is better than the other, but rather which social situation is.¹⁸ He touches on the whole question of what separates literature from science without going into much detailed discussion of the topic. He believes that science and art are distinguished not by their objects, but by the fact ‘that they deal with the same objects in different ways. Science gives us conceptual knowledge of a situation, which is equivalent to ideology.’¹⁹ Literature is therefore not, as Arnold, Leavis, Richards, Fry, and the New Critics would have it, a ‘surrogate for and complement to science’,²⁰ but rather superior to it in its ability to provide us with ‘a mode of [experiential] access [to ideology] more immediate than that of science’.²¹ Yet there is one point at which there occurs what could be called a spiritual conjunction between science and art – the novel: ‘The novel was born at the same time as modern science, and

¹¹ *MLC*, p. 63.

¹² Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, p. 361.

¹³ p. 14. See also, for instance, ‘The Revolt of the Reader’, in *AG*, pp. 181-4 (p. 183), and *HRP*, pp. 21-2.

¹⁴ *CI*, pp. 58-9.

¹⁵ For example, prose has his attention in *CI*, pp. 102-61, and of course in *EN*; poetry, again quite obviously, in *HRP*, as well as in ‘Poetry, Pleasure and Politics’, in *AG*, pp. 173-80. It is uncertain whether the fact that his own composition ‘Ballad of English Literature’ (which concludes *AG* on p. 185) mentions five novelists and one novelist-poet, but twenty poets, is of any significance.

¹⁶ *MLC*, p. 25.

¹⁷ *Ideology*, p. 195.

¹⁸ ‘Seamus Heaney’, in *FD*, pp. 222-9 (p. 228). See also *EN*, pp. 6-7; and *CI*, p. 61.

¹⁹ *MLC*, p. 17.

²⁰ ‘The Idealism of American Criticism’, in *AG*, pp. 49-65 (p. 51).

²¹ *CI*, p. 101.

shares its sober, secular, hard-headed, investigative spirit, along with its suspicion of classical authority.²²

As far as the cultural or geographical playing-field is concerned, Eagleton is firmly placed in the middle of British, Irish, and, up to a point, American writing. Though he praises Richards for his transnational curiosity and berates Leavis, ‘his piously parochial Cambridge colleague’, for having been unlikely to join Richards on the ‘Trans-Siberian railway’,²³ he himself appears to have investigated little that lies outside the English language in some form or other. His discussions of the history of literature, though they apparently (since he on occasion mentions Aristotle and Dante)²⁴ include European literature in general, are most specific when the history in question was written in English. Though a Marxist, he appears to have taken little interest in either the place in which Marxism was born (Germany), nor the places in which it was schooled (Russia and China, for example), and his work on poetry and novels is in the main concerned with the kind of writing taught in English courses at British schools and universities. He is as restricted in his scope (though this is not necessarily an important restriction) as the Practical Critics were, and whatever study he may have made of cultures outside the Anglo-American line does not significantly manifest its results in his published analyses.²⁵

The Value of Literature and of Literary Analysis

As we have seen, the Practical Critics considered themselves to be conductors between the literary work and its actual or potential audience, whose social function consisted of unlocking the achievements or otherwise of the literary text. Eagleton believes, however, that literary analysis, and not literature, is the true hero of the story. It is more capable than literature of achieving something of real value – and though he admits that a text can sometimes be directly valuable, it is its involuntary element, its Freudian

²² *EN*, p. 7.

²³ ‘I. A. Richards’, in *FD*, pp. 59-70 (p. 60).

²⁴ Both are mentioned in *HRP*, p. 13; Aristotle, further, in ‘I. A. Richards’, in *FD*, pp. 59-70 (p. 68) and the introduction to *CI*, n. p.; Dante in *CI*, pp. 177-8.

²⁵ Two rare, and brief, exceptions are ‘Ibsen and the Nightmare of History’, *Ibsen Studies* 8.1 (2008), 4-12 and his review of Ma Jian’s *Beijing Coma* (‘An Epic Political Novel About Tiananmen Square’) in *The Lancet* 371, 1829-30.

unconscious, that forms the raw material from which analysis can work social transformation.

On occasion, Eagleton presents literature as simply a commercial product whose use-value lies in the fact that we ‘get something out of it’.²⁶ In what way, though, is it useful? What do we get ‘out of it’? He believes that it has, for one thing, an ‘aesthetic effect’²⁷ as a source of truth, beauty, enjoyment and pleasure; and he agrees with Trotsky, that art can ‘reach beyond’ certain limits set by ‘capitalist society’ to ‘yield us a kind of truth – not, to be sure, a scientific or theoretical truth, but the truth of how men experience their conditions of life, and of how they protest against them’ (which, interestingly, contrasts starkly with Eliot and Empson’s opinion that experience cannot be properly communicated, only a transformation of experience into poetic material).²⁸ Poetry, for example, can, by ‘refraining from an immediate intervention in human affairs, [...] allow truth and beauty to come about, in ways which may then make things happen’. Its truth is a moral one,²⁹ and there are, he writes, ‘a pleasure of the signifier and a pleasure of moral cognition’, which are ‘semi-autonomous’ of each other.³⁰ A lack of ‘moral cognition’ can therefore prevent one’s enjoyment of the poem: ‘[s]illy, vicious or palpably wrong-headed beliefs in literature, whether sincerely held or merely strategic, can diminish our enjoyment of it.’³¹

In *Literary Theory*, he also declares that literature is capable of being a source of ‘[p]leasure, enjoyment’, and that those who do not have the possibility of ‘living by’ culture are ‘deprived’ of a valuable chance (pp. 185 and 187). Yet all this should not deceive us into thinking that literature does not have the potential to be a negative force. Fiction ‘may be a potent source of ideology, since one function of ideology is to present a specific situation as though it were a universal truth’,³² and in the process of making such a presentation, ‘empirical’ truths ‘may be bent into falsehood’.³³ Culture ‘is utopian

²⁶ *LT*, p. 182. See also *CI*, p. 168.

²⁷ ‘I. A. Richards’, in *FD*, p. 67.

²⁸ *MLC*, p. 68.

²⁹ *HRP*, pp. 31 and 90.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 59 and 64. See also ‘poems [...] yield us pleasure’ and thus ‘have a kind of pragmatic function’, *ibid.*, p. 41.

³¹ ‘I. A. Richards’, in *FD*, p. 66. See also ‘Poetry, Pleasure and Politics’, in *AG*, pp. 175-8, for his discussion of Yeats’s ‘Easter 1916’.

³² *EN*, p. 13.

³³ *Ideology*, p. 22.

in both a positive and a negative sense', he argues in *After Theory*: '[i]f it resists power, it is itself a compelling form of it' (pp. 100-1); it wields an 'ideological tyranny' that is 'more supple and deep-seated [...] than any other art-form'.³⁴ This tyranny consists of its being a 'threat, mystery, challenge and insult to those who, able to read, can nonetheless not "read"'.³⁵ It is perfectly evident from this that he joins the Practical Critics in believing that literature is supremely important, and that a lack of it, or a lack of access to it, equates to a kind of severe dispossession. The nature of its importance, however, depends for him very much on in whose hands it is, which may be contrasted with Eliot and Miller's belief, for instance, that its value depends, rather, on the general make-up of its time and place. While he assumes that the product of working-class literature is likely to be politically, socially and aesthetically precious – he welcomes 'the strongly emergent movement of working-class writing',³⁶ though he believes that working-class writers are still 'dismally thin' on the ground'³⁷ – the bourgeoisie, or whichever class is ruling at a given time, is liable to use literature to political and economic ends. The capitalist system itself is depriving it of its potential positive value, by denying it the status of uncorrupted artefact:³⁸ literature is 'an *industry*' and drama a 'business',³⁹ and because it is as much one of the constituents of ideology as a production of it, its function is partly 'to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society'.⁴⁰ The members of the ruling class are the ones who 'call the tune' when it comes to 'the uses of "literature" for ideological reproduction', and 'select the literary terrain on which battle is to be engaged'.⁴¹ The terrain in question is partly located in academic literary discipline. Academic critics and

³⁴ *CI*, p. 164. He explains this difference by pointing out that art galleries, concert halls and opera houses do not pretend to be democratic, but 'flaunt themselves' as 'flagrantly privileged spaces', in which 'the demarcation between initiate and ignorant is here taut and unmistakable'. Parts of this statement are convincing, others less so, and he omits further discussion of the matter which may have removed some possible objections. One of them might be that art galleries (at least in London) are to a large extent free, while one has to pay for books (unless one has access to a public library, and unless this library has the books one wishes to read), and that it is quite possible to gain some sort of comprehensible impression from a Verdi opera that does not require one to understand the intricacies of counterpoint.

³⁵ *CI*, p. 165.

³⁶ *LT*, p. 188.

³⁷ 'James Kelman', in *FD*, p. 264.

³⁸ 'Northrop Frye', in *FD*, p. 96.

³⁹ *MLC*, p. 55.

⁴⁰ *MLC*, p. 5. See also *Ideology* (passim) and *CI*, pp. 44-63.

⁴¹ 'The Idealism of American Criticism', in *AG*, p. 64.

teachers of literature are, he proposes, '(usually) hired by the state to prepare students ideologically for their functions within capitalist society',⁴² and in the process to 'train students in the [...] efficient mastery of a certain discourse, as a means of certificating them as intellectually qualified recruits to the ruling class'.⁴³ In the end, the 'power of critical discourse' is 'a question of the power-relations between the literary-academic institution [...] and the ruling power-interests of society at large'.⁴⁴

If literature is in the hands of the right kind of literary analyst, though, one can unlock another kind of value: that of literature as a source of our understanding of historical and social forces and conditions, and of an agent in the transformation of an unjust society. To this end, the right kind of analyst is certainly not the 'belle-lettristic gentleman', who imposes a 'doctrinal filter' between himself and the text.⁴⁵ It is also not the Practical Critic of Leavis's ilk, whose work is rooted, as Eagleton sees it, exclusively on liberal-humanist assumptions⁴⁶ inimical to his favoured Marxist ones, and pervaded by 'shoddily imprecise metaphysics', 'scrupulous empiricism', and critical judgements that are '*in the first place* "personal"'.⁴⁷ New Criticism, which he describes as having developed from this, was, though ostensibly opposed to the effects of an increasingly capitalist society, itself a typical product of that society, because it impersonated 'the reifying habits of industrial capitalism' by reifying the text. Not only did their liberal humanism '[re-enact] the classic paradigms of bourgeois ideology',⁴⁸ but historical materialism, his preferred method, operates by a 'simple incompatibility with empiricist and intuitionist techniques',⁴⁹ which necessarily invalidates these. General formalism, though in some ways promising because it has produced some useful ideas,⁵⁰ is similarly out of favour. In Eagleton's opinion, apart from their inability to recognise the variability of the ratio between the signifier and the signified in poetry and their unsatisfactory definition of

⁴² *MLC*, p. 55.

⁴³ *FC*, p. 91.

⁴⁴ *LT*, p. 177.

⁴⁵ *After Theory*, p. 94.

⁴⁶ See *LT*, p. 181, *FC*, p. 86 and *CI*, pp. 12-3.

⁴⁷ *FC*, pp. 75-81. For more on this subject, see Chapter IV of the same book (pp. 69-84), as well as 'The Rise of English' and 'Conclusion: Political Criticism', in *LT*.

⁴⁸ *FC*, p. 92.

⁴⁹ *CI*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ See 'Formalists', in *HRP*, pp. 48-64.

poetry as estrangement,⁵¹ formalists are also unable to explain why they have developed their theories in the first place. This leaves them without a strategy and therefore essentially useless.⁵² They are also far too ‘reductive’;⁵³ Eagleton prefers a method that is ‘concerned in some intuitive way with people’s experience of language, not a “formalism”, preoccupied simply with analysing linguistic devices’.⁵⁴ His most damning statement comes in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, where he calls it a ‘critical technocracy’ which ‘Marxist criticism has traditionally opposed [...], attacking that inbred attention to sheerly technical properties which robs literature of historical significance and reduces it to an aesthetic game’.⁵⁵ New historicism is a problem because of its failure to distinguish between ‘historical highways and minor footpaths, or indeed any hard-and-fast opposition between fact and fiction’ and the production of no ‘determinable truth’.⁵⁶ Postcolonialism’s mistake lies in its occasional ‘romantic idealization of the “other”, along with a simplistic politics which regards the reduction of the “other” to the “same” as the root of all political evil’; while on other occasions, it ‘ends up stressing their mutual implication’ and so ‘risks blunting the political cutting-edge of an anti-colonialist critique’.⁵⁷

Eagleton’s greatest opposition, however, is reserved for poststructuralists and postmodernists. His key objection is again very much based on their unwillingness to commit to some kind of radical politics. Calling both camps ‘politically sceptical’,⁵⁸ he accuses the ‘Yale poststructuralists’ (thinking of de Man, Miller, Bloom et al.) of fetishizing literature: ‘the repression of the work’s historicity means dematerializing the work itself, reducing it to a mirror in which the critic may find obediently reflected back his or her own interpretative strategies’ (that this may be the case, no matter what an analyst does with a text, does not seem to occur to him). He believes that the deconstructionist idea of free play thrives ‘on an ignorance of discourse as *power*’ and that its ‘grosser political and philosophical absurdities, which have managed to turn the heads

⁵¹ ‘Formalists’, in *HRP*, pp. 47 and 51.

⁵² *LT*, p. 180.

⁵³ *CI*, p. 166; see also his reference to ‘*mere* formalism’ (my italics) in ‘Introduction Part I’, *Marxist Literary Theory*, p. 11.

⁵⁴ *LT*, p. 179.

⁵⁵ *MLC*, p. 19.

⁵⁶ *LT*, p. 197.

⁵⁷ *LT*, pp. 205-6.

⁵⁸ ‘Introduction’, in *CI*, n.p.

of a whole younger generation of potentially valuable militants [...], merit the most implacable opposition'. It is, for him, evidence of a 'profound pessimism', which is counterproductive from the point of view of a radical politics hoping for a revolution, since revolution requires hope.⁵⁹ Likewise, postmodernism has not only 'helped to sabotage the sensitive readings of texts' because it denies the possibility of a 'genuine experience' and believes that 'everything that happened up to ten minutes ago is ancient history',⁶⁰ but has also, being 'rather closer to Walter Pater than to Walter Benjamin',⁶¹ caused the 'growth of philosophical scepticism and relativism',⁶² and so places itself quite at the opposite end of most Marxist-materialist theory, literary or otherwise. Postmodernism is in Eagleton's view 'more a revolution of the subject than a transformation of society', and prevents the prospect of a 'radical mass movement' because of its 'enduring love-affair with otherness'⁶³ and 'celebrations of the off-beat, marginal and minoritarian'.⁶⁴

With the right kind of political commitment and the right methodology, literary analysis can offer the world a version of literature that is at the same time a version of the world, as if holding a transforming mirror up to it. Through the proper analytical eyes, we can become historian and sociologist, and the slave can thus be emancipated. Although he holds on to Marxist tenets, Eagleton recognises that there are matters deserving attention which reach beyond the problems of the proletariat. The 'political downturn' of the left in the latter half of the twentieth century has taught it 'a certain degree of humility [...] and a soberly realistic insight into the limits of the political', and it has since then been compelled to consider 'humanity's relationship with Nature, [...] the relation between genders, and the tenacity of ethnic and national identities, none of which are to be dispelled at the mere touch of the dialectic'.⁶⁵ Facing the question of what 'politics [has] to do with literary theory' in the first place, he replies that there is 'no need to drag politics' into it, because 'it has been there from the beginning'. Having told us that 'there is no possibility of a wholly disinterested statement [and] no such thing as a

⁵⁹ 'The Idealism of American Criticism', in *AG*, pp. 53, 55 and 93.

⁶⁰ *HRP*, p. 17.

⁶¹ 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', in Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, p. 370. On p. 362, he calls it 'a cynical belated revenge wreaked by bourgeois culture upon its revolutionary antagonists'.

⁶² *Ideology*, p. 107.

⁶³ 'Postmodern Savages', in *FD*, pp. 1-8 (p. 1).

⁶⁴ 'The Nature of Gothic', in *FD*, pp. 17-23 (p. 18).

⁶⁵ 'Introduction', in *CI*, n.p.

“pure” literary critical judgement or interpretation’ (which makes us no doubt as suspicious of the purity of his judgements and interpretations, as of any other analyst’s, and thus perhaps even question the truth of this very statement), he adds that ‘the history of modern literary theory is part of the political and ideological history of our epoch’.⁶⁶ Literary theory does not, and does not have to, restrict itself to literature alone, and ‘what practical effects it might have will be diffused over a much broader field of signifying practice’.⁶⁷ In *Literary Theory*, he describes it as ‘less an object of intellectual enquiry in its own right than a particular perspective in which to view the history of our times’, and as ‘concerned with human meaning, value, language, feeling and experience’ related to ‘interpretations of past history, versions of the present and hopes for the future’ (p. 170). He maintains that the Practical Critics were, like he, interested in the improvement of man, but that this improvement was ‘narrowly abstract’ and not sufficiently ‘concerned with people’s political situations as a whole’ (p. 181). This is, of course, not true of all so-called Practical Critics. As we have seen, in particular Eliot, Empson and Leavis not only had concerns other than the improvement of man, but were also anything but ‘narrowly abstract’. Whether or not their principles and assumptions were valid, they did envisage that literary analysis could have a very concrete effect. If they were ‘narrow’ and ‘abstract’ in that they did not concern themselves with politics, Eagleton could be accused of being the same, in the sense that he does not concern himself with the custody of culture.⁶⁸

Eagleton thinks that the problem with contemporary theory is that it has ‘strengthened rather than challenged the assumptions of the power-system’ (p. 170), and that really only the ‘method or theory which will contribute to the strategic goal of human emancipation, the production of “better people” through the socialist transformation of society, is acceptable’ – that is, Marxism and feminism (p. 184 and 178). He justifies the validity of his kind of criticism (which he variously calls ‘socialist’, ‘materialist’ and ‘Marxist’) by pointing out that it does not represent a mere specialist interest, but that its political matters are, rather, like those of feminist criticism, ‘the very stuff of history, and that[,] in so far as literature is an historical phenomenon, they are the very stuff of literature too’ (p. 182). Added to this, oppression itself is ‘a discursive affair’,

⁶⁶ *LT*, pp. 12 and 169.

⁶⁷ *FC*, p. 95.

⁶⁸ Leavis, in fact, accused Marxists of not dealing with ‘the complexities introduced if one agrees that the cultural values – human ends – need more attention than they get in the doctrine, strategy and tactics of the Class War’ (‘Marxism and Cultural Continuity’, in *VC*, pp. 31-7 (p. 33)).

meaning that a particular ‘condition is identifiable as oppressive only by contrast with some other less or non-oppressive state of affairs, and that all this is cognizable only through discourse’;⁶⁹ and because ‘every important political battle is among other things a battle of ideas’, one needs to make ‘a contribution to that struggle, in one of the central areas of the humanities’, by unveiling oppression.⁷⁰ Concluding that most current literary theories are incapable of providing a contribution to this struggle, he proposes that a return to rhetoric is the only solution, arguing his case most expansively in *Literary Theory* and *How to Read a Poem*. In the latter, he argues that rhetoric was ‘born at the intersection of discourse and power’ (p. 10), and in *Literary Theory* he explains that he is therefore interested in ‘the kinds of *effects* which discourses produce, and how they produce them’ (p. 179).⁷¹ Rhetoric, at its ‘promising start in the ancient city-states’,⁷² was focussed on ‘grasping [discursive] practices as forms of power and performance’, and defined them as ‘forms of *activity* inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers, orators and audiences’. Because of its ‘preoccupation with discourse as a form of power and desire’, it was, and can again be, ‘a “creative” as well as a “critical” activity’, which begins with ‘asking first not *what* the object is or *how* we should approach it, but *why* we should want to engage with it in the first place. [...] [I]t is a matter of starting from what we want to *do*, and then seeing which methods and theories will best help us to achieve those ends’.⁷³ In other words, it is not the literary text, but what we intend to do with it, which ought to determine how we read – the text does not matter, except as a means to an end. This activity involves, in Eagleton’s dream of socio-political transformation, the analysis of the workings of pleasure in a poem, which may ‘tell us something useful about political society itself’, and enable us to work on a solution to

the problem of knowing how to harness pleasure to political ends [...] in a situation where [...] the relation between the kind of pleasure people take in art, and the pleasure they derive from striving to realize their political needs, has become extremely obscure.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ *Ideology*, p. 207.

⁷⁰ *MLC*, p. x.

⁷¹ *LT*, p. 179. See also *MLC*: ‘bourgeois’ criticism is ‘smug’ in its ‘assumption that art is one thing and propaganda another’ (p. 53).

⁷² *HRP*, p. 14.

⁷³ *LT*, pp. 180 and 183.

⁷⁴ ‘Poetry, Pleasure and Politics’, in *AG*, pp. 179-80.

It also demands a thorough investigation of the ‘internal relations between ideology and literary form’. This kind of an analysis, he believes, is capable of exposing the ‘ideological basis of organic form’ which is the tool of a ‘progressively impoverished bourgeois liberalism’⁷⁵ – an exposure he believes to have effected himself in the cases of George Eliot, Conrad, James and others. The ‘destruction’ of these ‘corporate and organicist’ ideologies in art ‘is essential not only for a scientific knowledge of the literary past, but for laying the foundation on which the materialist aesthetic and artistic practices of the future can be built’.⁷⁶ Since, in the texts he has studied, ‘it is a production of the hegemonic ideological formation from a particular *regressive* standpoint within [them] which lays the basis for literary value’, it follows that not only ‘progressive classes and ideologies produce significant literary texts’ (p. 182). Once again, then, Eagleton attempts to distinguish himself from his predecessors in literary analysis, in this case by asserting the inorganic nature of literature. Literature is once more held up as the product of material processes that are determined by, among other things, one’s political affiliations. Arguing that, for the bourgeoisie,

[l]ike private property, the literary text [...] appears as a ‘natural’ object, typically denying the determinants of its productive process. The function of criticism is to refuse the spontaneous presence of the work – to deny that ‘naturalness’ in order to make its real determinant appear. (p. 101)

He is apparently trying to make two points: firstly, that all literary texts are artificial (in some ways a redundant point, since texts clearly do not actually grow in the soil or are born of copulation – why else would so many, including the Practical Critics, call them ‘art?’), and secondly, that this artificiality can be dissected. Since Eagleton does not clarify to what extent his theory of the text makes it any less natural than that of his forebears, it is the second point that is most useful in our understanding of his valuation of literature. For him, the difference between the Practical Critics’ and his approaches to literature is,

⁷⁵ This ‘bourgeois liberalism’ probably includes the critical work of Eliot, Empson, Leavis and Richards. In *Walter Benjamin: Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, Eagleton argues that the 1940s and 1950s were decades of an ‘Anglo-Saxon criticism increasingly controlled by [...] organicist assumptions (“New Criticism” in the United States, *Scrutiny* in England)’ (p. 127); see also my comment, earlier, that the Practical Criticism of the kind practiced by Leavis is based, as Eagleton sees it, exclusively on ‘liberal-humanist’ assumptions.

⁷⁶ *CI*, p. 161 See also *MLC*, p. 18.

that while the former assumes that the principal determinant of a literary work is its author's individual talent, or genius, the latter supposes that there are multiple determinants based on material and ideological conditions which can, unlike talent and genius, be scientifically analysed. Without this assumption, which is arguably no less shaky than that of the Practical Critics, none of Eagleton's materialist criticism could possibly work out, and the kind of truth that he is after (the kind that reveals the ideologies that enslave humans, and the experience of oppression by these humans) could never be shown.

Another instrument of rhetorics, according to Eagleton, is the analysis of textual forms (ranging from genre to metre),⁷⁷ because forms 'produce and are produced by an ideological contradiction'⁷⁸ and are therefore able to show the problems of the writer's contemporary society and history: '[t]o speak of the politics or ideology of form is to speak of the way in which formal strategies in literature are themselves socially signifying.'⁷⁹ An ideological analysis of a novel, for example, can '[offer] us a version of contemporary history which is considerably more revealing than much historiography', and the 'value' of a work can be released as much because of 'its ignorance as [...] its insight: it is because there is so much the novels cannot possibly know that they know what they do, and in the *form* that they do'.⁸⁰ It is clear from this, that, although he writes in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* that Marxist criticism 'has to be assessed by how much it illuminates works of art' (p. viii), his partial retraction in *After Theory* ('theory can powerfully illuminate works of art. But it can also be richly illuminating in its own right' (p. 87)) is closer to the truth of his matter. Yes, his advocating of a rhetorical analysis of literature focusing on ideology and form is designed to shed light in the direction of the texts, but its light ends up by shining through them at our political, historical and social world. His aim is 'human emancipation', whoever is the oppressed human, and only once the revolution has succeeded, and the world is 'held politically and economically in common', can 'the theorist [...] relievedly lay down his or her theorizing, which would have been made redundant precisely by being politically realized, and do something more interesting for a change'.⁸¹

⁷⁷ For his detailed explanation of his idea of literary forms, see *HRP*, pp. 65-101.

⁷⁸ 'Form, Ideology and *The Secret Agent*', in *AG*, pp. 23-32 (p. 25).

⁷⁹ *CI*, p. 162. See the motto to the third chapter of *CI*, p. 64, by Marx: 'Adam Smith's contradictions are of significance because they contain problems which [...] he reveals by contradicting himself.'

⁸⁰ *CI*, pp. 70-1.

⁸¹ *LT*, p. 208.

Method

As we have seen, Eagleton has two principal interests: metacriticism, as he calls it, and the facilitation of the transformative power of literature via a rhetorical analysis of literary texts. As a literary theorist, he sees his task as, among other things, the analysis of literary criticism itself,⁸² and this is why he has written so much more than the Practical Critics about terms such as ‘literature’ and ‘ideology’, and about the pros and cons of all kinds of approaches to literary analysis. *The Function of Criticism*, *Ideology*, *Criticism and Ideology*, *After Theory*, *Literary Theory* and *The Significance of Theory* are such cases in point, in which he lays out not only his theories of literature, but also the ways in which other analytical methodologies fail. In these works, his various assessments do not leave us with any more conviction of their validity than some Practical-Critical notions. His definition of ideology is left frustratingly vague: ‘it is doubtful that one can ascribe to ideology any *invariable* characteristics at all’, he concludes after two hundred and twenty-one pages of investigation in *Ideology*. There are other such examples, for instance his more than equivocal treatment of ‘literature’, discussed above; his list, in *Marxist Literary Theory*, of the classical doctrines of Marxism, to which he adds the caveat that it is ‘possible for individuals to discount many of [these]’ and still be able to claim to be Marxists; and his loose use of class-based terms, such as ‘bourgeois’, whose specificity he sometimes denies,⁸³ and which ends in the rather disconcerting event of his assigning I. A. Richards to both the ‘upper-middle-class’ and the ‘petty bourgeoisie’ in the space of only thirteen pages.⁸⁴ Given his loose way with such definitions, it is difficult to trust them and his categories any more than Eliot, Empson, Leavis and Richards’s terms of beauty, sincerity, sensibility, understanding and so on. He also flaunts statements such as that it is not true that ‘the greatest art is that which timelessly transcends its historical conditions’,⁸⁵ that the ‘sign and its social situation are inextricably fused together, and this situation determines from within the form and structure of an utterance’,⁸⁶ that because humans ‘have’ language, ‘our biological behaviour is transfigured into history’,⁸⁷ and that

⁸² *LT*, p. 172.

⁸³ See, for example, *Ideology*, p. 193: ‘The phrase “bourgeois ideology” [...] is simply shorthand for an immense range of discourses scattered in time and space’.

⁸⁴ *LT*, pp. 13 and 26.

⁸⁵ *MLC*, p. 3.

⁸⁶ *Ideology*, p. 195.

⁸⁷ *The Significance of Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 25.

‘certain formative experiences in childhood’ determine one’s tastes,⁸⁸ without any evidence that could raise them from the mere expert witness statement to those of the forensic scientist he claims to be, when we take into account his idea that he is following a ‘science of the text’.⁸⁹ Considering that he sees himself as a scientific and historical materialist, one wonders to what extent his concepts and theories can truly hold water without much more evidence to support them.

What links his textual analyses in *William Shakespeare, The Rape of Clarissa, The English Novel, How to Read a Poem*, and *Exiles and Émigrés* to the other works already discussed, is the pervasiveness of his commentary on matters not immediately related to the text at hand. He is clearly trying to stay true to his intention to transform society by means of literary analysis, and this is what shapes his analytical method in these books. *William Shakespeare*,⁹⁰ for example, has comparatively little textual focus, and tells us much more about Eagleton’s Marxist philosophy than about Shakespeare’s. He sets out by proposing that Shakespeare’s plays ‘value social order and stability’ (p. 1), which is rather a sweeping case to make, and one which is not too convincingly argued in what follows. He then examines what he considers to be Shakespeare’s ‘deeply embarrassing dilemma’ of an ‘epistemology’ that is ‘at odds with his political ideology’, expressed through the conflict between the latter and his ‘extraordinary eloquence [...] flamboyant punning, troping and riddling’ (p. 1). He asserts that ‘much of Shakespeare’s drama is devoted to figuring out strategies for resolving it’, and what follows is his attempt at convincing the reader of this. The problem is that in the process he again makes certain assumptions that are presented as facts but are left unproven. For instance in the first chapter, on ‘Language’, he writes that *Macbeth*’s witches ‘are the heroines of the piece, however little the play itself recognizes the fact’, who ‘expose a reverence for hierarchical social order [...] as the pious self-deception of a society based on routine oppression and incessant warfare’ (p. 2). Rather than showing us how they are the designated heroines within the context of the play, Eagleton merely establishes them as his personal heroines. According to him the problem is, however, that the witches’ linguistic ‘transgression’, once appropriated by the ‘political system’, leads to a ‘disruptiveness of bourgeois individualist appetite, which, in its ruthless drive to be all, sunders every constraint and lapses back into nothing’ – and he follows this with a substantial quotation from the *Communist*

⁸⁸ *LT*, p. 12.

⁸⁹ See, for instance, ‘Towards a Science of the Text’, Chapter 3 in *CI*.

⁹⁰ (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

Manifesto on the same subject (p. 5). Eagleton thus does not tell us anything about the language of the play taken out of its socio-political context, but firmly places it within that context to such an extent that the play might as well not be there at all. He continues in the same manner when he discusses other plays. When he claims that ‘metaphor operates rather like money’, which ‘derives value only from its use within material forms of life’ (p. 14), this does not teach us as much about *Timon* or the others as it does about Eagleton’s opinion of money. This method is pursued throughout the rest of the book. In ‘Desire’, he argues that ‘a transformative, teasingly ambiguous language [...] has the power to shape reality to its own ends’, and links this to *Das Kapital*, in which Marx says something analogous about ‘the mutual traffic of commodities’ (p. 25); in ‘Law’ he discusses his own views on the subject, and at one point engages in an altercation with Portia about the nature of mercy – mercy is ‘not strained’, she says in the play, but Eagleton believes it should be ‘strained’ by what he thinks ‘justice’ is (p. 47); in “‘Nothing’”, he berates Iago because he ‘fails to see that all bodily appetite is caught up in discourse and symbolism, which are [...] part of its inward form’, that is, he berates him because he fails to see what Eagleton sees (p. 70) – and in ‘Nature’ *The Tempest* is described as ‘fail[ing] to draw attention’ to the fact that the “‘organic” restoration of a traditional social order [...] is actually set in the context of the very colonialism which signals the imminent victory of [...] “inorganic” [...] bourgeoisie’ (p. 96).

The case with *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* is similar,⁹¹ though he does not there confine himself to Marxism, but expands his scope to feminism, poststructuralism (the latter coming as something of a surprise, given what we know of his dislike of that approach), and other theories. In his preface, he declares that ‘*Clarissa* can now become a great novel for us’ because we have ‘new ways of reading, closely related to the nature of our own history and [...] the political interests of a Richardson’ (p. viii), and adds that he is most interested not in Richardson’s ideology (which is ‘repellent and irredeemable’) but in ‘his position as intellectual and literary producer within an emergent class’ and in ‘the genuinely subversive effects of *Clarissa*, which far exceed its author’s intentions’ (p. ix). He is thus clearly faithful to his view of literature as a process of production, and proceeds to examine *Clarissa* in terms of its social and philosophical background and content. In his ‘Introduction’ he gives us a history lesson on Richardson’s time, citing Antonio Gramsci to explain the class struggle that took place in eighteenth-century England, and positioning Richardson

⁹¹ (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

within this struggle by charting his development from ‘printer’s apprentice’ to ‘organic intellectual’ and ‘one of London’s leading printers’, who ‘played a key role in the English class struggle’ (p. 3). He argues that ‘Richardson’s novels [...] are [...] a material part of those struggles, [...], instruments which help to constitute social interests’, because they were so immensely popular, comparable to Superman and characters in modern-day soap operas (pp. 5-6). He goes on to write that Richardson’s novels ‘are not only or even primarily literary texts’, but ‘entwine with commerce, religion, theatre, ethical debate, the visual arts, public entertainment’ and so on (p. 6), with the result that Richardson ‘helped to construct’ the ‘bourgeois public sphere’ by ‘fashioning a whole social apparatus’ (p. 7). He also has much to say on Richardson’s relationship with women (his ‘crucial act of solidarity’ with them) (p. 11), his ‘massive policing operation’ of *Clarissa*, which is how he describes his process of creating two further editions of the novel (p. 23), how his writing ‘would seem in part aggressive compensation for a sense of social inferiority’ (p. 28), and, finally, how Richardson’s literary ‘project’ is ‘the task of regulating forms of discourse for the petty bourgeoisie and working classes, instructing them in the discursive rules of polite society’ (p. 38). Once he has launched into his analysis of *Clarissa* proper, he begins with an analysis of the book as literary performance, discussing ‘the ideology of representation’ and the fact that ‘[t]he letter in *Clarissa* [...] is the site of a constant power struggle’ (pp. 40-52), continuing with an analysis of its masculinity, femininity and sexuality (citing Freud) (pp. 52-63), and a discussion of the character of Clarissa’s rape and death (pp. 63-76), to conclude with a Marxist interpretation of the text. He analyses Clarissa herself as someone who ‘exposes the rift between bourgeois pieties and bourgeois practice’ (p. 77), recognises truth as ‘always a matter of power and position’, and whose death is simultaneously a ‘negation of property and progress’ and ‘meekly masochistic’ (pp. 89-90). He also interprets Lovelace’s final condemnation as a necessary tactic on Richardson’s part resulting from his intention that the ‘coherent bourgeois subject must be affirmed’, and ‘ruling-class rapacity is to be defeated’ (p. 85). His conclusion, after all this, is that Richardson is ‘a contradictory figure’, at the same time reactionary and radical, but valuable because he ‘is an indispensable moment of [the] emancipatory movement’ of women’s writing (p. 101). We have thus learned something about the workings of certain literary theories, but we are left with more information about these, and certain of Eagleton’s tenets about property, class and sexuality, than about *Clarissa*. Eagleton has here fully followed his principles: he has coaxed something out of the novel which reaches beyond its textuality. Though his analysis of *Clarissa*

requires that the reader agree with his principles, it is nevertheless entirely consistent with what he considers to be the value of literature and its analysis. If anyone, however, did not, and wanted to know why *Clarissa* was worth reading in the first place (unless one is interested in the ‘emancipatory movement’ of women’s writing); or wanted to know what its style was like, how Richardson created his characters, how the plot works; or wanted to know anything about the kind of experience the book can offer without one first having to acquaint oneself with political history and theory – then there is not much here to learn. There is naturally no objection to this in principle, and Practical Criticism also leaves empty spaces where someone with a different conception of literature would expect commentary. One is left wondering, however, whether Eagleton’s Marxist criticism (at least of the kind offered here) can really be any more illuminating than something like Leavis’s Practical Criticism, as Eagleton so firmly believes. By the end of his analysis, we are none the wiser about the specific value of *Clarissa* as a literary text, which begs the question: ‘Why *Clarissa*? Why not another book?’ It exists, it seems, as if it were a hook on which Eagleton may hang his theoretical coat.

In *Exiles and Émigrés*, Eagleton is preoccupied with ‘certain ambivalences in English writing between [...] ways of perceiving the problems of English culture’.⁹² He structures the core of the book around what he considers to be the ‘upper-class’ and ‘lower middle-class’ novel, and concludes that because the lower middle-class novel is ‘passively imprisoned within the texture of “ordinary life”’, and the upper-class novel ‘fixed at a point of anxious estrangement from the routine fabric of social existence’, both genres are unable to ‘discern and evaluate the total structure of which [they are] a part’ (pp. 69-70). He never really engages with linguistic detail beyond the ideological notions he discerns in the language of certain passages (see, for example, pp. 52, 79 and 83), and his intention throughout appears to be to convince the reader of the ghastliness of the upper classes and the unproductive equivocation of the lower middle classes. Here, as elsewhere in his work (theoretical as well as practical), Eagleton makes more assumptions than he provides evidence for. It is his Marxist intention which is speaking, not the text he is reading for us. He criticises Waugh for his creation of Paul Pennyfeather in *Decline and Fall*, because he is ‘passive, inert and uncritical’ and thereby ‘prevents this experience [of the upper classes] from being unduly criticised by the man who is its sacrificial victim’, instead provoking, by his ‘normality’, the reader to an ‘endorsement’ of ‘the system’ (pp. 42-3), and much the same goes for Anthony Last in *A*

⁹² *Exiles and Émigrés: Studies in Modern Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. 1.

Handful of Dust (p. 49). This is obviously not what Eagleton likes his writers to do, and he believes that if one identifies with an uncritical hero, one is less likely to revolt against that which is wrong – in this case, the power of the upper classes. The suggestion is, then, that if a writer's work does not embody an active commitment to the cause of the oppressed by containing an example of how a class-war can be fought, it is unworthy of praise; it becomes irreconcilable with any Marxist, or revolutionary, activity – and incidentally represents the same thing that he criticises about postmodernism and poststructuralism (see above), namely a lack of political commitment.

Exiles and Émigrés, *How to Read a Poem*, and *The English Novel* can all be seen as extensions of the fourth chapter of *Criticism and Ideology*, in which he analyses 'a selection of English literary production [...] in the light of the internal relations between ideology and literary form' (p. 161). True to his view that literature is not an autonomous object, and therefore again entirely in keeping with his general assumptions and principles, he hardly takes the novels or poems under examination out of their social, historical, and political context, and repeatedly fills his analyses with biographical detail about the authors. The majority of his judgements in *How to Read a Poem* are based on his agreement or disagreement with the philosophical notions that lie behind (or perhaps rather, within) the poetry, its world-view or ethics, such as when he declares that Dylan Thomas's 'A Refusal' is no good because it 'concerns the poet himself (and his artistic virtuosity) rather than the dead victim' (pp. 74-6) and believes that Yeats's 'Coole Park' is valuable because it displays 'an impressive degree of candour and moral courage' (p. 83). Throughout the book, he tends towards the kind of statement which is not entirely untrue, but seems to have been insufficiently thought out. For example when he criticises e. e. cummings's phrase 'the voice of your eyes' as 'surely just incongruous' (p. 131) – but cummings is not the only human, let alone poet, ever to conceive of eyes as having the ability to 'speak', which is indeed such a common instance of prosopopoeia that it is almost a cliché; and while the coupling of 'voice' with 'eye' is certainly scientifically doubtful, it is odd for Eagleton to criticise this in the context of poetry rather than, say, a biology textbook, given what he himself has said about the difference between poetic and scientific truth. In another example, he describes the substitution of 'crown' for 'monarch' as a 'synecdoche' in the main text, but in the glossary claims that 'crown' for 'monarchy' is a metonymy (pp. 139 and 167). All this does little to promote his ability to conduct detailed and consistent stylistic analyses, regardless of the fact that the book has been serialised in the *Saturday Times* and taken by less experienced readers to be an

authoritative guide to the analysis of poetry. It is clear that close textual analysis is not the main strength of this book, despite his declaration that it was ‘designed as an introduction to poetry for students and general readers’ (p. vii). Unless he is simply less than good at textual analysis, which is surely not the case, the reason for this appears to be that he is pursuing rhetorical analysis here as a strategy to a previously decided end, and end which is not in fact the criticism of poetry by means of close reading. In his preface, he suggests that ‘[l]ess experienced readers might [...] prefer to start with Chapter 4 (“In Pursuit of Form”), Chapter 5 (“How to Read a Poem”) and Chapter 6 (“Four Nature Poems”), before moving on to the more theoretical chapters’ (p. vii). The thing is, however, that no matter how ‘inexperienced’ some of his readers may be in the craft of literary analysis, exactly the most important thing for them to do would be to read the ‘more theoretical chapters’ first, because it is there that they will find out what he is trying to do with his analyses (that is, examine the rhetorics of discourse ‘as a form of power and desire’, and of ‘power and performance’).

In *The English Novel*, too, he writes much more about liberalism, artistic unity, one’s identity in the world and upper-class bohemian feminist liberalism, than about the text of Woolf’s work (pp. 308-30);⁹³ about the morality of art and what distinguishes and relates America from and to Europe, than about the text of James’s work (pp. 214-31);⁹⁴ about Victorian industrial society and identity, than about the text of Dickens’s work (pp. 143-62); and so on. Yet if we take account of the fact that he considers the text ‘overdetermined’ by, among other things, the general ideology of the time as well as the author’s ideology, and the author himself as a producer overdetermined by matters of economy, class and such, he could not possibly have done otherwise, here or in any of his other analyses. Yet in both *How to Read a Poem* and *The English Novel*, Eagleton indulges surprisingly much in the kind of evaluative statement which is reminiscent of the Practical Critics: ‘ravishing lines’, he calls a portion of *Antony and Cleopatra* (p. 79); ‘remarkably fine verse’, he says of ‘Coole Park and Ballylee’ by Yeats (p. 81); Stevie Smith ‘beautifully blends comedy and poignancy’ in ‘Not Waving But Drowning’ (p. 137), ‘[m]etres like these make a terrible racket’ (referring to extracts from Poe, Longfellow and others, p. 43); Tennyson’s ‘Mariana’ ‘lacks the faintest flicker of spontaneity’ (p. 112), and ‘Swinburne, alas, never ceases to be Swinburnian’ (p. 116). In *The English Novel*,

⁹³ See, for example, pp. 310-1 on liberalism, 311-3 and 326-7 on identity and reality, and 314-5 on artistic unity.

⁹⁴ Some examples are pp. 221-3 on art, and pp. 214-6 on America and Europe.

commentary on texts outside their social, economic or biographical contexts are rare, but still crop up now and then, such as when he writes that Woolf ‘forges a unique, astonishingly original style and form of her own’ (p. 308), and that Lawrence’s writing sometimes has ‘a sensuous delicacy and freshness of perception’ (p. 258). We recognise in these examples the language of his Practical Critical predecessors, and it is as if Eagleton, for whatever reason, occasionally cannot resist the temptation of this kind of commentary, despite his professed objections to it. This may be down either to an undisclosed strategic rhetorical choice determined by his intention at the time of writing; or to the fact that he does, somewhere in himself, value literature not only as a material product, but also as a transcendental art in the same way the Practical Critics did – which would characterise his disposition with an ambivalence that has until now (*How to Read a Poem* was published in 2007) not been fully resolved.

As we have seen, Eagleton considers the study of rhetorics to be the most useful and honest analytical methodology possible, but he does not seem to take his own advice, quoting without much consistency (when he quotes), and even in *How to Read a Poem* being insufficiently thorough, detailed and consistent to give one a sense of real rhetorical scholarship. Though he argues elsewhere for the possibility of a textual analysis which considers the exchange between the various gratifications of pleasure and politics,⁹⁵ he continuously avoids an in-depth analysis of the pleasure-effect of literature of the kind of, say, Empson’s *Ambiguity*. Eagleton reminds one, rather, of I. A. Richards in *Beyond*: judging by his method, he is certain that it is not so much literature which can transform society, as he himself, in the process of writing about it. His assessments of the workings or otherwise of literature often seem as easily come by as refutable – and in this, for all his animosity towards his ‘liberal humanist’ predecessors, Eagleton is not very far removed from some of them. At the same time, even the data which he needs to support his multitude of statements on historical, sociological or political matters which distinguish him from the Practical Critics is thin on the ground. It is for these reasons, that his literary analyses in the end largely fail to convince.

⁹⁵ ‘Poetry, Pleasure and Politics’, in *AG*, pp. 179-80.

Chapter Two: Elaine Showalter

(b. 1941)

The Definition of Literature

Feminist literary analysis has been another one of the most influential approaches to literary analysis since the second half of the twentieth century, and although Elaine Showalter is not without her critics in the camp, she was one of its pioneers and remains one of its most prominent figures. Unlike Eagleton, Showalter has not written much on the definition of 'literature' and, unlike him and the Practical Critics, she wastes little time with the analysis of literary genres in her effort to pursue her strategic aim. Something of her opinion on these matters can nevertheless be discerned in certain parts of her writing: thus she describes literature as 'art' in various places in her work,⁹⁶ speaks of artists⁹⁷ and fiction,⁹⁸ and, less often, of genius⁹⁹ and the masterpiece.¹⁰⁰ Yet she has her eye on a different goal than that of setting out what it is at which literary critics, theorists or historians are in fact looking while they are carrying out their work, and she attempts any kind of delineation of literature (as art) and its genres only insofar as it is relevant to her analytical strategy. In the final chapter on quilting in *Sister's Choice*, for instance, she refers to the concepts of 'craft' and 'art', but only in order to say that there have been, historically speaking, 'strongly gendered separations of craft and art', and that there has been a 'devaluation, even stigma, of the domestic, the feminine and craft within the value

⁹⁶ See, for example, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing*, revised edition (London: Virago, 1982; hereafter: 'LO'), pp. 4, 61, 111, 248, 319; 'Toward a Feminist Poetics', in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (London: Virago, 1986; hereafter: 'TFP'), pp. 125-43 (p. 135); Elaine Showalter, ed., *Scribbling Women: Short Stories by Nineteenth-Century American Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. xl; *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990; hereafter: 'SA'), p. 202; *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991; hereafter: 'SC'), pp. 75, 103.

⁹⁷ See, for example, LO, p. 202, 210, 281; SC, pp. 27, 88.

⁹⁸ See, for example, LO, pp. 28, 81, 175; *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 3; *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1985), p. 5; *Scribbling Women*, p. 35; SA, p. 15; SC, p. 73; and *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (London: Picador, 1998), p. 98.

⁹⁹ See, for example, LO, p. 264.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, *Faculty Towers*, p. 6.

systems of cultural history'. Though this might be seen as potentially central to her discussion of the process of quilting as analogous to that of women's writing, she refrains from a discussion of the difference between, or similarities of, 'craft' and 'art', and from naming those who have been guilty of making those 'strongly gendered separations'.¹⁰¹ Similarly, she uses the word 'culture' throughout her work without ever attempting to answer what culture is – beyond its being either female or male, subordinate or dominant and patriarchal.¹⁰² The most eye-catching instance of this occurs in 'Toward a Feminist Poetics', in which she argues that literature is the 'primary expressive form' of 'the culture of nineteenth-century American women' (p. 131). What is this 'culture' that is expressed in 'literature'? Is it everyday life? Leavis and Eliot might have objected here that culture includes language and the products of language, and that therefore literature is culture, not an expression of it. In any case, she does not state anywhere that she sees her task as that of defining any of these concepts, and though she praises the achievement of feminist criticism, in its having 'challenge[d] [...] the conceptual grounds of linguistic study', she does not claim that this achievement is one of her own.¹⁰³

Similarly, Showalter does not venture her own definition of the characteristics of novels, short stories and poems as genres, but describes them mostly in relation to their employment by, and attitudes to, women writers. In *Sexual Anarchy*, she argues that the one-volume novel, unlike its three-volume predecessor, allowed endings to 'open up', enabled the play of fragmentation and the dismissal of beginnings, middles and ends, and thus was a more amicable form for writing outsiders such as women (p. 18). In *A Literature of Their Own*, we are told that J. M. Ludlow's definition of the novel as 'the picture of human life in a pathetic, or [...] a sympathetic form, that is to say, addressed to human feeling, rather than human taste, judgement, or reason' was simply his attempt to fit the 'stereotype' (of women) to the 'product' (the novel as a feminine genre), which meant that he would and could not list 'the qualities he could not bring himself to see in women' – thereby suggesting that she does not think that his list is complete (without telling us what it missing; p. 83). We also learn that, when the short story form was taken up by American women writers, it was 'a flexible and innovative form, responsive to the

¹⁰¹ *SC*, pp. 146-7.

¹⁰² See, for example, 'female culture' in *LO*, p. 319 and in 'TFP', pp. 131 and 135; 'women's culture', in *SC*, pp. 2 and 73; 'male culture', in *The Female Malady*, p. 17; 'subculture', in *LO*, pp. 65, 80, 133; 'dominant culture' in *LO*, p. 381, and 'dominant culture' and 'patriarchal culture' in *SC*, pp. 43 and 44. These are only a few instances of many.

¹⁰³ 'The Feminist Critical Revolution', in *The New Feminist Criticism* (hereafter: 'FCR'), pp. 3-17 (p. 8).

scenes, dialects and conflicts of various regions and classes', and well-suited to allowing them 'to express their deepest private feelings'; and that short fiction, in the form of dreams, allegories, fantasias and keynotes was the preferred medium of women writers of the 1880s-1920s (pp. xxxvi-viii). Beyond these, Showalter allows herself a small number of fairly self-evident statements on the novel in general, even if, in her analyses, she appears to consider it largely in its incarnation as 'the realist novel'. In *Literature*, she writes that as 'a form of social realism and a medium for moral and ethical thought, the novel obviously required maturity and mobility in its creators. Further, it required a complete set of emotions', and that 'any novel *must* structure consciousness'; and in *Faculty Towers*, she proposes that 'the novel is always a belated form of social commentary'.¹⁰⁴ In *Literature*, in particular, one might have hoped for a more considered analysis of the novel as distinct from other forms of literature, since she focuses the book entirely on female novelists, yet she evidently felt no need to do this. As for drama and poetry, Showalter is far less concerned with these genres (one of the rare occasions on which she mentions poetry comes in *Sister's Choice*, where she distinguishes between a 'lyric' and a 'severe' poetry, the last of which was, according to her, favoured by Eliot and Pound because it 'transcended personal experience and emotion' (p. 109)). Though there is a hint that she prefers analysing prose to drama or poetry in the fact that she rarely, if ever, discusses the latter two in her analyses, why this should be so remains unsaid; she does not make a case, on principle, for the exclusion or inclusion of one or another genre in the category of texts with which a literary analyst, or she in particular, should work.

Because she presents us with so little definition, directly or indirectly, it is hard to tell to what extent she distinguishes the kind of literature that a literary critic tends to deal with from any other kind (contracts, treaties, political speeches and so on). Only once do we obtain a glimpse of her view, when she speaks separately of 'imaginative' and 'medical' literature,¹⁰⁵ but the distinction is in part undone when she writes, in *The Female Malady*, that '[t]he language of psychiatric medicine [...] is as culturally determined and revealing in its metaphors as the language of fiction' (p. 5). She also generally refrains from the kind of comparison of art with science that we have seen in the case of Eliot, Empson, Leavis and Richards, and even to some extent in Eagleton. She does not dwell for too long on questions of nationality, either, although she does at one point say that it

¹⁰⁴ *LO*, pp. 79 and 252; *Faculty Towers*, pp. 42 and 142. In the latter, also, Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein* 'barely qualifies as a novel', but we are not told why.

¹⁰⁵ *SA*, p. 128.

is nowadays hard to say what is and is not American, and concludes that perhaps the ‘themes, images, genres, cultural practices, and choices in the history of American writing’ by women are ‘no longer [...] uniquely American’. Yet it seems that she believes in the shared characteristics of women who live and work in the same geographical area, because ‘the legal, economic, and social status of women’ as a group (determined, of course, by their location) influences who they are.¹⁰⁶ This allows her to make statements such as that ‘there were few novels by English women in the nineteenth century as radical or outspoken with regard to the woman question as those by their American counterparts’,¹⁰⁷ but she does not further discuss questions of national heritage or national character, and does not appear to champion the American cause over any other country’s. The explanation for this is, that her focus is on the gender-question. Thus she may consider literature to be art, and writers artists, and some artists geniuses, and some works masterpieces (in the terminology so familiar to us from the *Practical Critics*), but she apparently takes this as a given; and – rather than pausing to investigate her own assumptions, even to the limited extent that the *Practical Critics* had done, let alone to the extent that Eagleton has – she moves straight on to fulfil a strategy based on a value of literature that has more to do with politics than an autonomous art, and is released by way of her particular method of analysis.

For that, of course, one assumption is key to understanding Showalter, one that lies beneath all that she has written: that women are different from men and that there is therefore a difference between male and female writing. While she does not believe that men and women are inevitably and innately different from each other,¹⁰⁸ she does believe in their social and cultural difference. They therefore write either from a man’s, or a woman’s perspective,¹⁰⁹ and also perforce read from it: ‘the experiences of women in and with literature are different from those of men’ (quoting Sandra Gilbert). This is an assumption which she never explicitly defends, though it may be surmised that she has gained this insight from her ‘exchanges with feminist theorists in other disciplines,

¹⁰⁶ *LO*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁷ *SC*, pp. 21 and 3.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, *LO*, p. 284: ‘masculine and feminine personality qualities are stereotypes’, and also p. 21; *SA*, p. 8, ‘masculinity is no more natural, transparent, and unproblematic than “femininity”’.

¹⁰⁹ See, for example, *LO*, p. 80; Though she claims, on p. 12, *ibid.*, that there is no ‘deep, basic, and inevitable difference between male and female ways of perceiving the world’, she believes that the relationship between ‘women writers and their society’ determines the existence a tradition separate from that of male writers.

especially history, psychology, and anthropology'.¹¹⁰ She is here evidently far removed from the 'universalism' of the Practical Critics, and even from Eagleton's Marxism (although he acknowledges the value of the feminist literary critical approach, it does not seem to have affected his fundamental thinking on the class-question). '[F]emale literature', writes Showalter, 'transcend[s] the personal and local, assume[s] a collective form in art, and reveal[s] a history', and there is a 'unifying voice in women's literature' that inevitably distinguishes it from its male counterpart.¹¹¹

The Value of Literature and of Literary Analysis

Startlingly, since she feels that there is something inimical to her own approach to literature in 'the old patriarchal institution of literary criticism and theory',¹¹² Showalter at one point makes the following statement: 'Feminism takes literature seriously as a criticism of life.'¹¹³ As we saw earlier, the capacity of literature to represent and initiate 'thought about life' is one of its key values for Leavis, and Showalter's 'criticism of life' is a repetition – perhaps unconscious, at least unacknowledged – of Matthew Arnold's assertion that 'poetry and eloquence' should 'be received and studied as what in truth they really are, – the criticism of life'. It may be that she objects to Arnold's belief that poetry is a criticism of life executed by 'gifted men', since it apparently excludes women, but even if she is critical of the very institution which has produced her thought in this instance, she is not shy to have the thought in the first place.¹¹⁴ The 'criticism of life' which is so important to her, is the activity which leads one to reach beyond the unjust status quo, and to right a wrong, and in this she is not at all far away from Eagleton's idea of the 'transformation of society'. It is the lot of women that is closest to her heart; and in her view it is 'a generation of women who liked books' which really enabled the 'women's movement'. It would 'not have occurred', she says, had it not been for these women, 'whose avid, devoted, socially-reinforced identifications with fictional heroines

¹¹⁰ 'FCR', pp. 4-5.

¹¹¹ *LO*, pp. 4-5 and 8-9.

¹¹² 'FCR', pp. 7-8.

¹¹³ 'Literary Criticism', in *Signs*, 1 (1975), 435-60 (p. 437).

¹¹⁴ Matthew Arnold, 'Literature and Science', in *Philistinism in England and America*, ed. by R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974), pp. 53-73 (pp. 68-9).

were coming into conflict with the sexist realities they encountered everyday[*sic*].¹¹⁵ The value provided by literature to the rest of the world, and the reason for which Showalter values literature, is twofold: first, it can cause a conflict between the reader and her (for she is assuredly a female reader) reality;¹¹⁶ and then there is the value added by the analyst, who makes of this a criticism of life and employs it as a tool to aid women's liberation. Showalter generally tends towards the opinion that literary writing is superior to any other activity, and women writers to other women. In *Literature*, for example, she laments the lack of collaboration among the so-called feminine novelists:¹¹⁷ 'Women novelists might have banded together and insisted on their vocation as something that made them superior to the ordinary woman, and perhaps even happier. Instead they adopted defensive positions and committed themselves to conventional roles.'¹¹⁸ She claims some pages later that women writers were not 'simply ordinary women who happened to write books; they were different from the start' because of their 'strong imaginative drives and achievement needs'; and believes that even those women who may initially have been 'ordinary' found themselves, after taking up the writing profession, 'more organized, more businesslike, more assertive, more adventurous, more flexible, and more in control of their lives' (p. 97). She clearly distinguishes between the ordinary and extraordinary here, and appears to assign these qualities to writing alone (rather than supposing that the personal qualities a woman could gain from writing, she may as well have gained from having any occupation at all which was satisfactory to her inclination). This suggestion of hers is strengthened by her complaint that some promising American women writers were lost to posterity because of their allegiance to the Communist Party, which resulted in their not having enough time for writing. Tillie Olsen is a case in point, whose 'writing self [...] has never been fully recovered', and whose one book of short stories and one unfinished novel 'are fragments of a career that was damaged by long deferral'. That she did have a career, and one that Olsen herself

¹¹⁵ 'Women's Time, Women's Space: Writing the History of Feminist Criticism', in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 3 (1984), 29-43 (p. 34).

¹¹⁶ Contrast this with Miller, who similarly believes in the 'virtual world' of literature as distinct from 'reality', but values it as escapism *per se*, more than as the beginning of a transformation of material conditions.

¹¹⁷ She distinguishes between the 'feminine' novelists, who wrote between 1840 and 1880, the 'feminist' (1880-1920) and the 'female' (1920-today) in her subdivision of women's literary history in *LO* (see, e.g., p. 13).

¹¹⁸ *LO*, p. 86.

would presumably have thought extremely valuable, is passed over; she did, after all, join the Young Communist League, and engaged in ‘political tasks’ that included ‘organizing women in factories’.¹¹⁹ Although one could argue that this kind of career might have had a more practical effect on women’s lives than any number of novels, what matters most to Showalter is that Olsen did not write herself into women’s literary tradition. One cannot quite help but be once more reminded of Arnold here (though, again, she does not acknowledge his influence), in that she apparently believes that writing is proof of the best that has been thought in the world. What both she and Arnold seemingly disregard is the rather obvious fact that literature can perforce only tell us something about its writers, not about human thought in general – and in that way it can only be what Richards denotes as the ‘recorded’ values, that we can learn about in literature. Who knows what excellent thoughts go unrecorded in literature?

Very occasionally in her writings, Showalter suggests that she also values the entertaining element of literature, though this remains a minor factor in her work. For instance, she calls Trollope’s *Barchester Towers* a ‘comic masterpiece’ and Amis’s *Lucky Jim* the ‘funniest academic satire of the century’,¹²⁰ and praises many of the ‘popular books by women sensationalists in the 1860s and 1870s’ for being able ‘still [to] startle and amuse’, and Woolf for her ‘amusing’ stylistic ‘tricks’ in *A Room of One’s Own*.¹²¹ And yet, what we can really gather from her writings is, that she assigns a particular value to literature as women’s literature, as the literature of a ‘subculture’ working against the principles of the ‘dominant culture’ – be it feminist, as in the majority of her work; non-masculine male, as in *Sexual Anarchy*; or, as she acknowledges here and there, postcolonial. Literature and literary analysis thus become political tools, and whatever the artistic merit of literature may be, whatever it may mean when Showalter talks about ‘art’ and ‘genius’, the right politics is paramount: ‘the ethic of a novelist becomes an aesthetic problem in his writing’, she declares, with reference to Georg Lukács (p. 296). It is in its potential ability to show us what women’s lives were and are like, its potential ability to present alternatives to the social status quo, and in its potential refusal to follow patriarchal orders, that literature counts most. It is the task of feminist analysis to facilitate this, as part of its more general ‘project of creating a criticism of our own’.¹²²

¹¹⁹ *SC*, p. 117.

¹²⁰ *Faculty Towers*, pp. 6 and 18.

¹²¹ *LO*, pp. 175 and 295.

¹²² ‘FCR’, p. 8.

In the essays she has contributed to *The New Feminist Criticism*, Showalter argues that feminist criticism as a whole has ‘profoundly altered the ‘assumptions of literary study’, in that it has ‘shown that women readers and critics bring different perceptions and expectations to their literary experience, and has insisted that women have also told the important stories of our culture’; it has even resulted in a ‘reappraisal of the whole body of texts that make up our literary heritage’. She distinguishes feminist criticism from both literary criticism and literary theory (which she calls the ‘philosophical branch’ of literary criticism, rather than, with Eagleton, the criticism of criticism), because these two are the ‘zealously guarded bastions of male intellectual endeavour’. Feminist literary analysis – in its threefold concern to examine ‘literary representations of sexual difference’, the ways in which ‘literary genres have been shaped by masculine or feminine values’, and the ‘exclusion of the female voice from the institutions of literature, criticism and theory’ – has ‘established gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis’, and thus rejects the universalist attitude of other methods (p. 3). Nevertheless, Showalter believes that, at the time of her writing in the 1970s and 1980s, feminism was an approach which still remained the most marginal ‘of all the approaches to English studies’,¹²³ in part because of the existing sexist bias against it in academia, and in part because of the lack of a single unifying ‘theory’.¹²⁴ She looks favourably, however, on the ‘many voices in which contemporary feminism speaks’,¹²⁵ which, though they may prevent it from becoming a widely established critical approach, are the result of the fact that, ‘unlike other contemporary schools of critical theory’, feminist criticism does not derive its ‘literary principles from a single authority figure or from a body of sacred texts’ (p. 4) (Practical Criticism, of course, also did not have that ‘single authority figure’ or ‘body of sacred texts’). Feminist criticism, on the contrary, depends on a number of sources, and is, crucially, interdisciplinary (p. 4).¹²⁶ Her particular contemporary enemies are the Marxists and structuralists who, she thinks, have based their theories largely on ‘the linguistic discoveries of Saussure’ and ‘*Das Kapital*’ respectively, and ‘see themselves as privileged critical discourse’ whose ‘manly and aggressive’ approach to analysis denies an ‘intuitive, expressive and feminine’ one. Because they allege that their methods are

¹²³ ‘TFP’, p. 128, and see also ‘FCR’, p. 16.

¹²⁴ ‘TFP’, pp. 126-8.

¹²⁵ ‘FCR’, pp. 3-4.

¹²⁶ See also *SC*, p. 2.

scientific, and ‘repudiate the personal, fallible, interpretative reading’,¹²⁷ it is from these theoretical camps that she and her colleagues need to, and are beginning to, ‘emancipate’ themselves.¹²⁸ Yet when she elevates the subjective ‘authority of experience’ in literature, and asserts that ‘the questions we most need to ask go beyond those that science can answer’, she does not appear to consider the fact that the ‘authority of experience’ is defended by many more than the feminists (was the subjective experience of the text not, after all, precisely what the Practical Critics were promoting?). The reason she disagrees with a ‘scientific’ literary attitude is, of course, clear when we consider her assumption that men and women are separate literary categories, and that the task of female criticism is to provide the woman’s point of view. The exclusion of what she considers to be feminine values is sexist, whether it occurs intentionally – as she seems to believe – or unintentionally, and though feminist critics are the ‘daughters of tradition’ just as much as structuralism and Marxism are its sons, they are simultaneously ‘sisters in a new women’s movement’ and therefore ‘committed to a revolution of consciousness’. The subjective ‘authority of experience’ is, for her, rather the woman’s authority of experience – and the ‘experience of women can easily disappear, become mute, invalid and invisible, lost in the diagrams of the structuralist or the class conflict of the Marxists’. The questions that science cannot answer are those that address the ‘feminine not-said’, the spaces between things (pp. 140-1). This emphasis on ‘experience’ gained and communicated picks up elements of Richards and Leavis’s writings, which relates her more closely to them than even their contemporaries Eliot and Empson.

Feminism is therefore the real ‘privileged critical discourse’, however much she may criticise this notion in practitioners of other analytical approaches. There is, for Showalter as much as for Eagleton and the Practical Critics, a certain narrow-mindedness in evidence, an unwillingness, conscious or not, to acknowledge possible similarities between feminist and other (older or contemporary) approaches to literary study, proposed by male figures; and also a reluctance to acknowledge the receipt, possible or actual, of anything valuable from these other criticisms. The one exception is postcolonialism, to which she thinks feminists ought to pay attention, because it has

¹²⁷ ‘TFP’, p. 139.

¹²⁸ Showalter has also directly criticised Eagleton, in her review of his work in ‘A Champion of Cultural Theory?’, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 23 January 2004, <<http://chronicle.com/free/v50/i20/20b00901.htm>> [accessed 13 August 2008].

‘many correspondences with feminist criticism and practice’.¹²⁹ In the end, though, it is everyone else who can benefit from feminism, not the other way around. She rejects the ‘male-oriented’ outlook of what she terms the ‘feminist critique’ of her colleagues which, by the very fact that it criticises sexism in literature, tells us ‘only what men have thought women should be’. Unlike gynocritics, her preferred method, it prevents us from ‘learning what women have felt and experienced’. She is willing, however, to connect with the male world, to the extent that male critics of other persuasions are ‘invite[d]’ to ‘share [the enterprise] with us’.¹³⁰ The task of gynocritics, Showalter believes, is ‘to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories’. It should therefore focus ‘on the newly visible world of female culture’ (p. 131). One way of practicing gynocritics is to establish a specifically female literary tradition. Believing that ‘women writers [have] a literature of their own’ that has been ‘obscured by the patriarchal values that dominate our culture’, she endeavours in her own work to contribute to the ‘narrative of female literary history’ that ‘defines and traces [...] the recurring images, themes, and plots that emerge from women’s social, psychological, and aesthetic experience in male-dominated cultures’.¹³¹ In this way, we can presumably begin to unveil ‘the repressed messages of women in history’¹³² and ‘locate’ that ‘feminine not-said’. As she notes in *Hystories* Freud thought that one could cure the hysteric by ‘editing[ing] or construct[ing]’ a ‘narrative’ that unmasked that which ‘was repressed’, and it is possible to see this as analogous to Showalter’s own attempt to cure women’s ‘hysteria’ (their absence from what should be also their literary histories, from academic literary studies) by restoring, with other feminist critics, ‘the silenced voices of women writers to literary history. Like other lost cultural histories, feminist literary history is necessarily a process of recovered memory’.¹³³ Showalter is keen not only to fill in the gaps and write a female literary history, but also to establish a tradition in Leavis and Eliot’s sense (filled with traceable lines of inheritance), and to set up a literary canon which can run in parallel to, or even fundamentally alter,¹³⁴ what she considers to be the existing, male-centred one.

¹²⁹ *SC*, p. 6.

¹³⁰ ‘TFP’, p. 142.

¹³¹ ‘FCR’, p. 6.

¹³² ‘TFP’, p. 141.

¹³³ *Hystories*, pp. 84 and 88.

¹³⁴ ‘FCR’, p. 6.

Method

We learn much about Showalter's valuation of literature not only through her essays and articles on the role of feminist literary criticism, but also by means of her analytical practice. Her more substantial works can be placed more or less into two groups. On the one hand, there are those, such as *The Female Malady* and *Hystories*, which use literature to shed light on aspects of psychology, psychiatry and medicine. Thus, literature can 'help us to understand' hysteria, and 'the hysterical narratives of fiction can tell us a lot more about the causes and cures of hysteria than most of the self-help books on the market';¹³⁵ and by using novels, among other things, the feminist can 'supply the gender analysis and feminist critique missing from the history of madness' and offer 'an indispensable perspective on the diagnosis, treatment, and theory of the female malady from those who were more often the subjects of psychiatric discourse than its theorists and shapers'.¹³⁶ On the other hand, there are those books, like *A Literature of Their Own*, *Sister's Choice* and *Sexual Anarchy*, which are ostensibly directly concerned with literature, and in which an examination of literary works themselves is the object of her effort. Yet even these are, in the end, about the protest against an unfair society dominated by male heterosexual priorities. What she does in these three books, is to register her protest by establishing histories, unmasking subcultural traditions and forming canons in an attempt to shore up the woman's voice in literature and literary study. The principle she follows in *A Literature of Their Own*, arguably her most significant work, is that she is 'a literary historian' first.¹³⁷ At the outset, she claims that her intention in the book is 'to fill in the terrain' between the 'literary landmarks' of Austen, Brontë, Eliot and Woolf, and 'to construct a more reliable map from which to explore the achievements of English women novelists'. She argues that past 'discussion of women writers has been [...] inaccurate, fragmented, and partisan', and that in order to repair this mistake, she is interested in the establishment of 'a more accurate and systematic literary history for women writers' as 'part of a larger interdisciplinary effort by psychologists, social historians, and art historians to reconstruct the political, social, and cultural experience of women'. She also believes that, quoting Patricia Meyer Spacks, 'a special female self-awareness emerges through literature in every period', and that the 'unearthing and

¹³⁵ *Hystories*, p. 99.

¹³⁶ *The Female Malady*, p. 6.

¹³⁷ 'Twenty Years On: *A Literature of Their Own* Revisited', *NOVEL*, 31 (1998), 399-413 (p. 404).

reinterpretation of “lost” works by women writers, and the documentation of their lives and careers’ can bring this self-awareness to light through an understanding of a ‘female literary tradition’ (pp. vii, 6 and 8). A problem with focusing on the four ‘elite’(p. 8) women writers is that ‘we need to see the woman novelist against the backdrop of the women of her time, as well as in relation to other writers in history’ (p. 9). As we can see, then, her aim is to describe a history, in order to set up a tradition. An explanation for the importance of setting up such a tradition is not quite provided in *Literature*, but we can find it elsewhere. Gynocriticism, she writes in ‘Towards a Feminist Poetic’, has to understand ‘the framework of the female subculture’ in order not to ‘miss or misinterpret the themes and structures of women’s literature’ and ‘fail to make necessary connections within a tradition’.¹³⁸ In ‘Twenty Years On’, she adds: ‘Feminist criticism and women’s literary history [...] depend [...] on the establishment of the continuity and legitimacy of women’s writing as a form of art.’ (p. 411). It is evident that she believes that having a history and a tradition is essential to the authority and stability of a concept.

What fits into this tradition, then? More than Austen, Brontë, Eliot and Woolf, certainly. Showalter criticises the fact that analyses of female novelists have ‘ignored those who are not “great,” and left them out of anthologies, histories, textbooks, and theories’, and that it is only by including the ‘minor novelists, who were the links in the chain that bound one generation to the next’, that we can attain a ‘clear understanding of the continuities in women’s writing’.¹³⁹ We are here reminded of Eliot, who also makes a case for the merit of minor writers in his essay ‘What is Minor Poetry?’, when he argues that ‘there are a great many casements in poetry which are not magic, and which do not open on the foam of perilous seas, but are perfectly good windows for all that’.¹⁴⁰ He, too, argues that the canon itself is not necessarily representative of those included in literary histories, and declares that ‘I should suspect that the person who only liked the poets whom the history books agree to be the most important, was probably no more than a conscientious student, bringing very little of himself to his appreciations’.¹⁴¹ Yet Showalter does not acknowledge the fact that, although her work may be new because it includes specifically female writers who are not ‘famous’ in the eyes of the dominant

¹³⁸ p. 133. See also her note in ‘FCR’, p. 11, that certain work by women has been ‘underrated and misunderstood by male readers inadequately trained to decipher their specific systems of meaning or to understand their contexts in a female tradition’.

¹³⁹ *LO*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁰ In *OP*, pp. 34-51 (p. 47).

¹⁴¹ In *OP*, pp. 37-8.

literary history,¹⁴² such a revaluation of the ‘canon’ was also a concern of Leavis’s and Eliot’s, who, moreover, with Empson and Richards, considered fresh valuation itself the constant task of reading and literary criticism. It would seem that, from what we have learned of her valuation of tradition, Showalter would include anything that was in the history; but again, though she may be inimical to what she terms ‘Great Traditionism’,¹⁴³ she does not seem to realise that the canon which she establishes as part of her history-writing and tradition-building is, of course, the same thing by a different name. Countering the criticism from some quarters, that canons are in themselves negative institutions, she justifies her ‘canon-formation’ as the ‘reclamation of devalued writers’, which ‘is an important part of critical revolutions’.¹⁴⁴ Her canon includes, however, more than the simply ‘devalued’, for otherwise it would, which it does not, include all one hundred and seventy-eight literary figures she mentions in her history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century women writers.¹⁴⁵ A reading of *Literature, Sister’s Choice* (her shorter version of *Literature*, on the American female literary tradition), *Sexual Anarchy*, and even (though to a far lesser extent) *Faculty Towers*, reveals a set of standards to which a writer needs to adhere in order to be seen as individually valuable in Showalter’s eyes. Aside from the factor of ‘amusement’ noted earlier, Showalter’s evaluative criteria are strictly linked to the ability of a literary work to display an attitude that leads to the ‘promised land of the feminist vision’.¹⁴⁶ Showalter has a few other standards reminiscent of those of the Practical Critics, for example those of ‘originality’¹⁴⁷ and ‘lyric force’,¹⁴⁸ but her literary analyses focus largely on the content of her subjects. ‘What is the “repressed message” to which we need to attend?’ is the question she is asking throughout her work, and in order to answer it she uses a method that looks at ‘patterns, themes, problems, and images’,¹⁴⁹ ‘myths, metaphors, and images’¹⁵⁰ and ‘themes, images, genres, cultural

¹⁴² See *LO*, p. 36.

¹⁴³ Quoting John Gross, in *LO*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Twenty Years On’, p. 407.

¹⁴⁵ Counted from the list of 213 ‘writers and activists’ included in the ‘Biographical Appendix’ to the book (pp. 320-50).

¹⁴⁶ Quoting Carolyn Heilbrun and Catharine Stimpson, in ‘TFP’, p. 129.

¹⁴⁷ For example in *LO*, pp. 112, 205; and in *Faculty Towers*, pp. 110, 140.

¹⁴⁸ See, for instance, *LO*, p. 296 and *SC*, p. 125.

¹⁴⁹ *LO*, p. 11.

¹⁵⁰ *SA*, p. 3.

practices, and choices’;¹⁵¹ all of which already represent a shortlist of all those available for discussion, that is, are exclusively those which deal with women’s matters (to which are added more generally sexual matters, in *Sexual Anarchy*). Showalter practices nothing like the kind of close reading we have observed in the Practical Critics, and instead focuses on an interpretation of the elements that are in her mind key to the establishment of a history and tradition in general, and of a positive feminist canon in particular – which shows the reader hardly anything of the original texts themselves. Instead, she frequently utilises mere plot-summaries and authorial biography to make her point, and the bulk of her quotations are, rather, taken from critics, historians, feminist and other activists, and it is often not clear why she felt the need to cite someone else’s words, rather than simply give us her view.¹⁵²

One set of her evaluative criteria concerns the allegiance which a woman writer¹⁵³ shows to other women in general, and to the female literary tradition in particular; that is, her ability to form part of a group rather than set herself apart as an individual, and to inspire others in the process. Political correctness is paramount, and a valuable work needs to either encourage, or contain it. ‘Feminist writers’ (that is, the writers of the 1880-1920 period), therefore, may not have been ‘important artists’, ‘[y]et in their insistence on exploring and defining womanhood, in their rejection of self-sacrifice, and even in their outspoken hostility to men, the[y] [...] represented an important stage, a declaration of independence, in the female tradition.’¹⁵⁴ Margaret Drabble is called a ‘traditionalist’ in positive terms, because of her ‘sense of connection to female tradition’ (p. 304), and Zora Neale Hurston is valuable because her *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is ‘one of the most important books in a literary tradition that continues to inspire [...] and enable the work’ of ‘many of the leading women writers, black and white, of the 1980s’.¹⁵⁵ Similarly, the short stories collected in *Scribbling Women* share, ‘besides energy, intelligence and commitment, [...] a wide-ranging imaginative vision and raise questions

¹⁵¹ *SC*, p. 21.

¹⁵² The instances are numerous, and easily found – see, for example, *SA*, p. 15, quoting Nancy Armstrong on the relation between ‘the history of the novel’ and ‘the history of sexuality’; *SC*, p. 128, her long quotation of Claire Kahane on the subject of the significance of the haunted castle in the Female Gothic; *LO*, p. 283, quoting M. C. Bradbrook on the elusiveness of Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*.

¹⁵³ In the case of *SA*, also the homosexual male writer.

¹⁵⁴ *LO*, p. 31.

¹⁵⁵ *SC*, p. 126.

we are still debating today'.¹⁵⁶ Dorothy Richardson, however, failed because she was 'an innovator who did not attract disciples' (p. 258), and Woolf was 'cut off from an understanding of the day-to-day life of the women whom she wished to inspire' (p. 294). Richardson and Woolf may only have been unsuccessful, but there are also those who intentionally detach themselves from other women writers – something that Showalter diagnoses as 'self-hatred', though without explaining why. Thus it is 'self-hatred that has alienated women writers from a sense of collective identity', and the 'female phase' of women's literary history was one of 'courageous exploration, but [...] carried with it the [...] legacy of feminine self-hatred' (pp. 12 and 33); and she criticises, for example, Sylvia Plath for her 'alienation from a female literary tradition' that is evidence for a 'self-hatred' (p. 441).¹⁵⁷ Those books, then, which engage with the female experience are favoured, and the more wide-ranging the representation, the better. For instance, *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*, which 'describe an extraordinary range of women's physical and social experiences, but also suggest experiences through the accumulation of images and symbols', are canonical (p. 112); Olive Schreiner's *From Man to Man*, albeit 'very odd, and extremely melodramatic', manages to evoke 'with outstanding power the female psychology of a generation', and Rhoda Broughton is praised for giving 'a more complete picture of family stress' than 'her predecessors', although she is forced, by convention, to 'conform to moral formulas' (p. 173). Alcott's *Little Women* 'stands as one of the best studies we have of [...] the tension between feminine identity and artistic freedom, and [...] between patriarchal models of the literary career and those more relevant to women's lives', and it allows one 'to engage with contemporary ideas about women's literary identity, critical institutions, and the American literary canon, as well as with nineteenth-century ideas of the relationship between patriarchal culture and women's culture'.¹⁵⁸ Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is important because the author 'went boldly beyond the work of her precursors in writing about women's longing for sexual and personal emancipation' (p. 65). Women writers should also use their own voice, not that of (male) literary convention: Alcott is lauded, because she wrote *Little Women* in a 'personal voice', and American women writers in the 1920s and 30s were valuable because they 'resisted the pressures to abandon their own visions and voices' and were thus able to 'record uniquely female perspectives' (pp. 57 and 125).

¹⁵⁶ 'Introduction', pp. xxxv-xlii (p. xxxvi).

¹⁵⁷ See also p. 318, *ibid.*, and *SC*, p. 111.

¹⁵⁸ *SC*, pp. 43-4.

Another set of criteria concerns a commitment to the presentation of a positive vision, one of resistance and hope. Dorothy Richardson and Woolf are in the end flawed because of their ‘helplessness’, their lack, that is, of a true ‘criticism of life’: ‘how much better would it have been if they could have forgiven themselves, if they could have faced the anger instead of denying it, could have translated the consciousness of their own darkness into confrontation’.¹⁵⁹ Richardson proves her failure of vision by being ‘afraid of an ending’, and ‘her inability to finish [her book *Pilgrimage*] is a statement in itself – like Olive Schreiner, who was ‘a novelist of very similar temperament, [and] found herself endlessly writing and rewriting the same unfinished book’ (p. 261). When it comes to their heroines, Showalter believes that women writers had the option of creating a heroine who stops ‘searching for her happiness in others, and begin[s] trying to generate it through her own accomplishments’ – happiness and self-assertion are therefore crucial standards. Woolf’s heroines are, however, marked as unworthy by the fact that ‘their anger, rebellion and sexuality [...] [are] articulated at a safe remove’, and end up ‘destroying’ ‘the woman herself’ (p. 265); Margaret Oliphant’s *Lady Car*, in her eponymous novel, is criticised for being ‘a perfect lump of passivity’ who ‘makes no resistance to her fate’, and such a heroine, when endorsed by the author, makes a novel ‘uncomfortable for the reader’ (pp. 178-9); and Jane Eyre’s ‘self-assertion’ is praised, while Maggie Tulliver’s ‘evasion of responsibility’ is not (pp. 124 and 129). ‘Feminist criticism’, Showalter writes in ‘Literary Criticism’, ‘builds from the awakening, the feeling, the vision’ (p. 460), and there is none of that in oblivion. Her preference for the right kind of political commitment and vision, then, as well as for ‘honesty’,¹⁶⁰ ‘authenticity’,¹⁶¹ ‘realism’,¹⁶² and ‘psychological complexity’,¹⁶³ has, as we can see, more to do with the usefulness of literary works as tools for a women’s movement in literature, literary criticism and elsewhere, than with the idea of their being in any way inherently or naturally necessary elements of a work of art – which would, in any case, be following a sexist line.¹⁶⁴

Eagleton thinks that Marxist literary criticism will have had its day when its political aim has been achieved, but Showalter does not believe this of her own field:

¹⁵⁹ *LO*, p. 262.

¹⁶⁰ *LO*, p. 178, and *SC*, p. 125.

¹⁶¹ *LO*, p. 231.

¹⁶² See *LO*, pp. 112, 125, 225, 220; *SC*, p. 52; *Faculty Towers*, pp. 91, 101.

¹⁶³ *SA*, p. 95; *SC*, p. 125; *LO*, pp. 80, 119.

¹⁶⁴ See Chapter Three, ‘The Double Critical Standard’, in *LO*, pp. 73-99 (*passim*, but see for example p. 90).

‘[F]eminist criticism is not visiting. It is here to stay, and we must make it a permanent home.’¹⁶⁵ It is not literature as a separate system, however, which matters most to Showalter as a literary analyst – as it did to Eliot, Empson, Leavis and Richards – but rather, as in the case of Eagleton, an analysis of literature that can improve the current state of a political aspect of society. In her case, it is her belief that the work of feminist critics can display ‘the value of the feminine perspective’,¹⁶⁶ and so truly emancipate women at large. It sounds as if its slogan is: ‘Ask not what you can do for literature; ask what literature can do for you.’ Once the ‘distinctions of gender’ have been relegated to ‘history’, which she believes may happen ‘soon’,¹⁶⁷ her method of literary analysis will then surely be as redundant as Eagleton’s. The objects of her study, however, will remain.

¹⁶⁵ ‘TFP’, p. 141.

¹⁶⁶ ‘Women and the Literary Curriculum’, in *College English*, 32 (1971), 855-62 (p. 860).

¹⁶⁷ ‘Twenty Years On’, p. 411.

Chapter Three: Homi K. Bhabha

(b. 1949)

The Definition of Literature

Postcolonialism continues to be an extremely strong focus for many literary analysts. Edward Said effectively introduced it with the publication of his book *Orientalism* in 1978, but Homi Bhabha has done much to inspire thinking in the field today, with an approach to literature coloured by the influence of figures such as Freud, Lacan, Derrida, Fanon, and Foucault. Bhabha gives us little by way of a definition of literature, and the very little we can discern is delivered mostly indirectly. In *The Location of Culture*, he includes it among those things which he considers to be ‘cultural experiences’, that is, ‘literature, art, music, ritual, life, death’, which are all socially specific ‘productions of meaning’.¹⁶⁸ This notion is compounded by his declaration in his essay ‘Aura and Agora’, that ‘language, action, signification, [and] representation’ – at least three of which are involved in the production of literature – are ‘systems of social exchange’.¹⁶⁹ Yet these apparently remain his only such distinct attempts at a categorisation. Elsewhere, he more or less indirectly gives us literature as something which is distinct from history and science,¹⁷⁰ and synonymous with ‘the house of fiction’.¹⁷¹ Yet in ‘Aura and Agora’ and in ‘Another Country’ (both purportedly about art in the sense of ‘art of design’, rather than in any wider sense) it soon becomes evident that he also considers literature to be a form of art. Not only does he quote Stephen Greenblatt’s *Shakespearean Negotiations* in the former, in order to illustrate his theory of the questionable identity of ‘the work of art as *a beginning, as an activity of authorship*’ (p. 9), but he also lists language, in the latter, as one of the ‘stuff[s] of art’, among others such as ‘paint, stone, thread, [...] canvas, film’.¹⁷² If we assume this to be his view of the nature of literature, then, we can derive from it more

¹⁶⁸ (London: Routledge Classics, 2004; hereafter: ‘LoC’), p. 247.

¹⁶⁹ In Richard Francis, *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996), pp. 8-17 (p. 9).

¹⁷⁰ LoC, p. 61.

¹⁷¹ ‘The World and the Home’, *Social Text*, No. 31/32 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 141-53 (p. 152).

¹⁷² In Homi K. Bhabha, Fereshteh Daftari, Glenn D. Lowry, and Orhan Pamuk, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), pp. 30-35 (p.31).

information about his definition of it than one have thought at first glance. In particular in 'Aura and Agora', he ruminates at some length on the work of art, the artist and the viewer, beginning with his assertion that 'speech and action' are 'the defining attributes of humanity', and the 'web and weave of life' (p. 9), and concluding that the structural relation between art and human is the same as that between God and human, in that it is something metaphysical which needs to undergo a 'metaphoric and substitutive process of representation' before it can be grasped. This is the point at which the artist enters. 'Artistic agency', so Bhabha believes, is 'an interpretational ethics and an interventionist aesthetics that is at once liminal and luminous', not characterised by originality and 'mastery'. The work of art, therefore, though 'somebody began it', has 'nobody [as] its author' (p. 15).¹⁷³ Thus the artist, and the poet, is reduced to the role of 'translator', of a 'narrator' who 'engineers' and 'produces' (p. 11); and suddenly, despite his talk of inspiration and rapture in this essay, Bhabha has entered the realm of the anti-Romantic, materialist-Benjaminian notion of 'the author as producer' which we have already witnessed in Eagleton.

In many of his other writings, Bhabha treats literature as if it were a straightforward given, useful for the explanation of other things. He frequently employs terms which are normally associated with a specifically literary field, such as 'narration', 'metaphor', 'text', in order to give definition to concepts such as nation, identity, time, place, ideologies. Thus we have, for instance, the 'poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees' (without meaning actual poems by exiles, or prose texts by refugees) (p. 7), the 'grim prose of power',¹⁷⁴ the 'narrative of traditionalism' (p. 51),¹⁷⁵ the 'metonymy of colonial desire' (p. 126), the 'fraught text of late nineteenth-century imperialism' (p. 152), 'the colonial text' (p. 182), '*black*, as cultural sign or social text',¹⁷⁶ "the act of writing the nation",¹⁷⁷ and 'the subject of cultural citizenship [which] becomes inscribed with [...] the striations of difference',¹⁷⁸ and so on.¹⁷⁹ Somehow, Bhabha either

¹⁷³ See also *LoC*, p. 257.

¹⁷⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, 'Introduction: Narrating the Nation', in *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990; hereafter: 'NN'), pp. 1-7 (p. 7).

¹⁷⁵ *LoC*, p. 51.

¹⁷⁶ 'Review: Opening the Floodgates', *Poetics Today*, 8.1 (1987), 181-7 (p. 181). See also *LoC*, p. 338.

¹⁷⁷ *LoC*, p. 201.

¹⁷⁸ 'Editor's Introduction: Minority Maneuvers and Unsettled Negotiations', *Critical Inquiry*, 23 (1997; hereafter: 'MM'), 431-59 (p. 434).

sees an inroad into extra-literary matters via literary concepts applied metaphorically, or believes, with Derrida, that ‘there is no outside-text’. Given that Derrida is one of the chief sources of influence for Bhabha’s work,¹⁸⁰ one may hazard the conclusion that the latter is likely to be the case. What matters, however, is that one is soon left wondering where literature begins and ends, if it begins or ends anywhere. As our list shows (and it is but a sample of many more such instances in his writings), it seems that there is little which cannot be literature: ideas, persons, countries, all become texts, or are capable of being interpreted as texts. The one thing we may assert with almost complete certainty, is this: whatever ‘art’ is for him, it is most assuredly not autonomous. When he discusses V. S. Naipaul’s ‘translation’ of Joseph Conrad’s ideas, for example, he argues that Naipaul does so in order to transform the despair of postcolonial history into an appeal for the autonomy of art: ‘[t]he values that such a perspective generates for his own work [...] are visible in the hideous panorama that some of his titles provide’.¹⁸¹ After listing five of these titles, Bhabha ends the paragraph, and says no more on the subject – his judgement that Naipaul is misguided is beyond doubt.

Bhabha nowhere substantially discusses the question of genre. On the few occasions that he does write of poetry and prose, he does so as if their distinguishing characteristics were a given. He therefore finds a ‘poetic image’ in the midst of the prose of *Beloved* (p. 24), thinks that Rushdie’s blasphemy consists of his interpretation of the Koran in ‘the form of the novel’ (p. 323), and that ‘the “calling” of art [is] the moment at which production and poetry come together’,¹⁸² but he does not explain what he means by them. When it comes to his literary analyses themselves, he quotes a mixture of fiction, poetry and reportage, which suggests to us that he does not discriminate between literary genres when it comes to analysis: all are welcome in his most democratic of methods.

¹⁷⁹ For further examples, see, for instance, *NN*, p. 2 and passim; also *LoC*, pp. 8, 46, 50, 56, 80, 133, 138, 180, 185, 202-3, and 246.

¹⁸⁰ See, for instance, *LoC*, pp. 194-5, where he lists Derrida among his ‘entire colonial concert party’.

¹⁸¹ *LoC*, p. 152. The titles in question are: *The Loss of El Dorado*, *The Mimic Men*, *An Area of Darkness*, *A Wounded Civilization*, and *The Overcrowded Barracoon*.

¹⁸² ‘Another Country’, p. 31.

The Value of Literature and of Literary Analysis

When he moved to Chicago in 1995, Bhabha was given an opportunity to survey the contents of his ‘book crate’, which he describes in ‘Unpacking My Library Again’.¹⁸³ Interestingly, he chooses to describe it as a ‘Pandora’s box’, rather than, as some might, a treasure chest – but he does not explain why he thinks that his crate could, on being opened, have unleashed evils, and not virtues, upon the world. Whatever the reason, a substantial part of the article amounts to a rather personal pronouncement on his relationship to literature. He twice, for example, towards the end of the article, calls a character in Athol Fugard’s play *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* a ‘friend’ (p. 16), and the unpacking of his crate throws up ‘memories of book-buying’, and thus revives ‘Bombay, Oxford, London, Hyderabad, Champaign-Urbana, [and] Jyavaskala’. Bhabha believes with Benjamin that, for the collector, ‘the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth’, and it seems, judging by the memories it prompts in him, that the rediscovery of his collection in turn causes its collector’s ‘rebirth’ (p. 5). He believes that his collection, just as any private collection of books, ‘challenges the shelved order of the study’ with its division into subjects according to the Dewey Decimal Classification; his own collection is simply ‘transdisciplinary’ (Adrienne Rich’s poetry, for example, is found sitting next to Martha Nussbaum’s philosophy), and it therefore becomes a personal object by ‘cod[ing]’ a particular ‘history of oneself and one’s time’. Yet such personal statements are rarely found elsewhere in Bhabha’s writings and he tends rather, in what might well be described as a materialist approach, towards drawing out the value of art in its relation to history, ‘the relation of art to social reality’: art is “‘the fully realized presence of a haunting” of history’,¹⁸⁴ he argues, and so it addresses ‘the historical world’.¹⁸⁵ (This materialism of his is, incidentally, more than similarity. In the ‘Acknowledgements’ to *Location*, Bhabha thanks Terry Eagleton, because his ‘early exhortations at Oxford to stay tuned to the materialist mode have proved to be sturdy advice’ (p. xxvii).) What is ‘contained within – and without – the realm of art?’ he asks elsewhere: the ‘very boundaries of what is art’ are uncertain.¹⁸⁶ What it definitely is, however, is part of, rather than autonomous from, the world, and ‘the aesthetic image’ leads a ‘twilight existence’;

¹⁸³ In *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1995), pp. 5-18 (p. 5).

¹⁸⁴ *LoC*, p. 18.

¹⁸⁵ ‘Another Country’, p. 31.

¹⁸⁶ ‘Aura and Agora’, p. 14.

‘art’s image’ is “the very event of obscuring, a descent into night, an invasion of the shadow”, that achieves a ‘distancing of the world’.¹⁸⁷ In this sense, the value of literature is inevitably linked to what it does to the world, and appears as one that is both negative and positive: the former, because it can create and represent oppression, and the latter, because it can provide a resistance and active opposition to that oppression. One might compare this to Showalter’s conception of the value of literature, albeit in particular for the emancipation of womanhood, as well as with Eagleton’s statement that the value of literature depends on who controls it, and on whether it is used for good or evil. (Just as Showalter and Eagleton have done, and as Empson, Leavis, and Richards also did, Bhabha argues as if there were only one set of values for literature, valid for all at all time, and his evaluative framework thus contrasts starkly with both Eliot’s hint at, and – as we will see later – Miller’s full acknowledgement of, the relativity of its social value.)

Bhabha’s treatment of literature expands what was, for the Practical Critics as much as for Showalter, a narrow category confined to the poetic, fictional/novelistic and theatrical/dramatic. In his hands, it is almost a metaphor, in that it transcends a restricted notion of the ‘literary text’ and becomes a name for a larger political statement or act. Thus it moves away from the Practical Critics’ vision of it as entirely the stuff of art, into something which can, and does often, act as a powerfully negative force in the world, just as we have seen it do in Eagleton’s and Showalter’s writings. ‘Narration’ and ‘discourse’ are the focus of much of Bhabha’s work, in the guise of an authoritarian telling of the tale of the nation and the communication of the coloniser’s authority and superiority to the colonies.¹⁸⁸

In his seminal article ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’, he presents us with the ‘English book’, as he calls it, as the embodiment of such national and colonial authority. It is a monolith with immense controlling power over the colonies, an ‘insignia of colonial authority’ whose ‘sudden, fortuitous discovery [which is ‘a myth of origin’] triumphantly *inaugurates* a literature of empire’.¹⁸⁹ The English book here represents not necessarily a particular English book, or even English literature in general, but the communication from the coloniser (who originates in the English nation) to the colonised. It is ‘a

¹⁸⁷ *LoC*, p. 21 (quoting Levinas). See also p. 26, *ibid*.

¹⁸⁸ See, for instance, *NN*, pp. 1-3; *LoC*, pp. 7, 62-3, 69, 73, 94-5, 100-1, 111, 116, 122, 124, 132, 140; 200-201, 209, 218, 226, 228-9, 304, 359; ‘Statement for the *Critical Inquiry* Board Symposium’, *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (2004), 342-9 (p. 345); ‘Unpacking My Library Again’, p. 10.

¹⁸⁹ *LoC*, p. 145-6.

signifier of authority' (p. 153),¹⁹⁰ yet its authority does not quite exist until it is challenged by the foreign land into which it is brought. Bhabha argues that it

acquires its meaning *after* the traumatic scenario of colonial difference, cultural or racial, returns the eye of power to some prior, archaic image or identity. [...] Consequently, the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference. (p. 153)

He provides us with three examples for such a moment of 'repetition': Anund Messeh's repetition of Christian doctrine when challenged by his countrymen on the nature of the Bible; the scene in *The Heart of Darkness*, in which Marlow only recognises the 'peculiarly "English" quality' of the book he finds in the jungle camp when he has turned away from the camp and reconsidered the event at a distance; and Naipaul's assertion of the value of 'the Western book' only when he 'turns his back on the hybrid half-made colonial world' and looks on literature in a new light (pp. 152-3). All three can therefore only turn towards the English book in the process of turning away from that which they should, in fact, embrace: away from the oppressed, towards the oppressor. This is 'the triumph of the colonialist moment in early English Evangelism and modern English literature', in which the 'discovery of the book installs the sign of appropriate representation: the word of God, truth, art creates the conditions for a beginning, a practice of history and a narrative' (p. 149). It is only, however, 'installing a sign', not telling a truth, for it 'communicates "the immediate vision of the thing, freed from the discourse that accompanied it"',¹⁹¹ which makes it a handmaiden to 'those ideological correlatives of the Western sign – empiricism, idealism, mimeticism, monoculturalism [...] that sustain a tradition of English "cultural" authority.' (Given that the Practical Critics, and also Eagleton, Showalter and Miller, have worked mostly with literature written not only in English, but also by writers who were English or British, what he says here may be interpreted as a more or less summary rejection of their work, based on their selection of texts.) The truth of the 'English book' resides in the desire for colonial control – in the case of the Bible, for example, it was a 'design of the Burdwan Plan to

¹⁹⁰ See also p. 157.

¹⁹¹ Quoting Derrida, in 'Signs Taken for Wonders', in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 29-35 (p. 32).

deploy “natives” to destroy native culture and religion¹⁹² which lay beneath the ostensible desire to spread the word of God. ‘The specific space of cultural colonial discourse’, so Bhabha writes, ‘is [...] a space of *separation* [...] from origins and essences’ (p. 171), and therefore ‘the dazzling light of literature sheds only areas of darkness’ (p. 149; see also p. 21). The word, that is, creates silence.

Against these negative narratives and discourses, against this literature whose value is advantageous only to the colonising nation, Bhabha places two positive versions of it: minority literature and a particular type of literary analysis. The ‘right to narrate’, he argues in *The Location of Culture*, is the ‘means to achieving our own national or communal identity in a global world’ (p. xx and xi), and nobody’s right to narrate is more important, and no one’s narration more fruitful, than that of those whose number is small. It is therefore ‘from those who have suffered [...] subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement’ that ‘we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking’, forcing us to ‘confront the concept of culture [...] beyond the canonization of the “idea” of aesthetics [...] as a strategy of survival’ (pp. 246-7; see also p. 12) in the face of cultural oppression. The ‘Western metropole’ is thereby able to ‘confront its postcolonial history’ – as ‘told by its influx of [...] migrants and refugees’ – as a ‘native narrative *internal to its national identity*’. Such minority writing thereby ‘reinscribe[s] the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity’ (p. 9). Elsewhere, Bhabha asserts that it those ‘who experience the partial and incipient conditions of global life with the greatest intensity, and inequity, are minorities’, and that if we ‘rethink the minority [...] as a process of affiliation [...] that eschews sovereignty’, then it can convert its ‘liminal condition [...] into a new kind of strength based on the solidarity of *the partial collectivity* rather than sovereign mastery.’¹⁹³ It is clear, then, that he does not believe that these minorities ought to be aspiring to the surmounting of the majority in a game of leapfrog, but that they are precious because they are minorities. Their value for us today, as he sees it, resides in the fact that nations ‘are becoming heterogeneous because minorities turn their alterity into the conditions of ethical life at the level of the culture of communal life while being, at the same time, active participants in the [...] procedures of political and juridical citizenship’.¹⁹⁴ What is thought of as ‘minority’ is no longer the name for an external citizen of a (Western, European) empire, but also exists within the nation – in the words

¹⁹² *LoC*, p. 167.

¹⁹³ ‘Statement’, p. 348.

¹⁹⁴ ‘MM’, p. 436.

by Hannah Arendt which he quotes, ‘internal exclusion replaces external separations’. He warns us that we should not think of minorities as a homogenous group opposed to a homogenous enemy, but as a ‘multiple universal’ (p. 437) whose equality is understood as ‘the complementarity and reciprocity of singularities’.¹⁹⁵ The valuable elements of ‘minority writing’ are therefore, firstly, its ‘resistance to metaphor’ (which directly answers the ‘metaphoric displacements’ of the modern Western nation,¹⁹⁶ and ‘metaphoric writing of the West’)¹⁹⁷ and, secondly, its ‘commitment to utterance as an ongoing negotiation of aberrant and adjacent, side-by-side [...] causalities on the borderlines of difference’.¹⁹⁸ Throughout this, Bhabha is inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘What Is a Minor Literature?’, and he praises their endeavour to ‘deterritorialize the very language of the literary institution’, their ‘desire to establish revolutionary conditions within the heart of the major literary and linguistic traditions’, and their definition of minor literature as ‘the possibility of setting up a minor practice of major literature from *within*’ (p. 440). Minority literature, then, is a ‘strategy for survival’ for those who have been in one way or another damaged by the colonising powers, by way of a ‘deterritorialization’ of the national majority.

Bhabha, like Eagleton and Showalter, spends a significant proportion of his writings both on justifying his own literary theory, and on discrediting that of others. In ‘Opening the Floodgates’, he severely criticises the pedestal on which the notion of originality was customarily put by the Practical Critics (calling it a ‘myth’ which was ‘contained in the authoritarian idioms of cultural nationalism’) as well as ‘the epistemological and ethical alignments of literary realism and empiricist criticism’. He approves of those who resist this kind of criticism by engaging in a radical political revision, which results in a ‘rupture of the *history* of “Eng. Lit.” by the *textuality* of “Literature in English”’.¹⁹⁹ He is set against ‘the traditional academic discourse of canons and cores’, and favours ‘the complex bend towards freedom’ that has ‘diverted’ such criticism ‘in the cause of the recognition of minorities or the representations of

¹⁹⁵ ‘Statement’, p. 348, quoting Balibar. Throughout his work, Bhabha promotes the idea of ‘cultural difference’ as preferable to a notion of ‘cultural diversity’, because it more productively assumes the non-existence of strict cultural identities, and instead only a relationship of cultural identities to each other.

¹⁹⁶ *NN*, p. 2.

¹⁹⁷ Citing Derrida, in *LoC*, p. 149.

¹⁹⁸ ‘MM’, p. 438.

¹⁹⁹ ‘Opening the Floodgates’, p. 183.

multiculturalism',²⁰⁰ The right kind of literary analysis works away from the 'intentional mastery of the "author"', and towards a state 'beyond theory' enabling a 'representation of "experience" without the transparent reality of empiricism'.²⁰¹ He rarely names those predecessors (or contemporaries) of his whom he believes to have practiced the wrong kind of literary analysis, but he does once, briefly, refer to 'Leavisian universalism', and Q. D. Leavis's 'paranoid system of "English reading"'.²⁰² He dislikes 'the traditions of Anglo-American liberal novel criticism' because, when he was working on Naipaul as a student, he 'found that I couldn't fit the political, cultural or chronological experience' of *A House for Mr. Biswas* into these traditions: the 'sovereignty of the concept of character, grounded as it is in the aesthetic discourse of cultural authenticity and the practical ethics of individual freedom, bore little resemblance to the overdetermined, unaccommodated postcolonial figure of Mr. Biswas'.²⁰³ The problem might also, of course, have been that this kind of 'Anglo-American liberal novel criticism' demands a reading of the lines, whereas Bhabha thought that 'Naipaul's [...] fiction was capable of being read against the author's intention and ideology'.²⁰⁴ 'The textual process of political antagonism', he argues in *Location*, does not allow one to 'passively follow the line of argument running through the logic of the opposing ideology', but 'initiates' a 'reading between the lines'. The 'agent of the discourse' becomes the 'object of the argument' (p. 35), and this is why 'postcolonial interpretation demands [a] kind of reading against the grain' (p. 250).

Bhabha believes that postmodernist theories do not represent an appropriate opposition to these empirical, 'Practical' forms of literary analysis, and that postmodernism 'is a profoundly parochial enterprise' because its 'interest [...] is limited to a celebration of the fragmentation of the "grand narratives" of postenlightenment rationalism' (p. 6). He is opposed to its 'relativistic notions of cultural diversity' (p. 85), as well as its idea of 'cultural plurality' (p. 179), both of which are not able to 'accommodate' the 'incommensurability of cultural values and priorities that the postcolonial critic represents' (p. 249). Marxism is similarly restricted, by its being in attendance to matters of class before all else: "The great connective narratives of

²⁰⁰ 'MM', p. 454.

²⁰¹ *LoC*, p. 257.

²⁰² *NN*, p. 6.

²⁰³ 'The World and the Home', p. 142. One's assumption is that by this Bhabha is referring to Practical and New Criticism, but this is by no means certain, since he again refrains from providing any key names or texts that represent the method he so dislikes.

²⁰⁴ *LoC*, p. xii.

capitalism and class drive the engines of social reproduction, but do not, in themselves, provide a foundational frame for those modes of cultural identification [...] that form around issues of sexuality, race, feminism' (p. 8). Rather, it is 'race and cultural difference' which ought to be studied before 'issues of sexuality and gender' and 'the social alliances of class and democratic socialism' (p. 251), and he criticises in particular Fredric Jameson's 'inability' to move beyond the binary dialectic of [...] base and superstructure' and his faith in 'the specularity of class consciousness [which] provides race and gender with its interpellative structure' (pp. 317-9). The 'postcolonial project', by contrast, enters the world's stage of the 'postcolonial age' (p. 273) at a moment when matters of gender and class are no longer the 'primary conceptual and organizational categories', when there is an 'awareness of subject positions' and the need to 'think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences' (p. 2; see also p. 246). It is 'this form of partial, minoritarian affiliation, across class interests and gendered identities', which might well be 'the wave of the future for all of us – irrespective of nation, race, and culture – who hope to survive the destructive element'.²⁰⁵ By contrast, what postcolonialism, and 'the initiatives of feminist criticism', have achieved, is a revision of 'the archive of "English" literature', and a rebuttal to the very idea of a progressive, linear '*narrative* of tradition, cultural cohesion and national, patriarchal or racial authority' in the 'annals of literature in English', resulting in a 'shift in literary value'.²⁰⁶ Postcolonialism is an 'intervention [...] aimed at transforming the conditions of enunciation at the level of the sign',²⁰⁷ and destroys the binary formulation of the self and the other, power and culture; it 'forces a recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries' between the so-called First and Third Worlds, and it is 'from this hybrid location of cultural value [...] that the postcolonial intellectual attempts to elaborate a historical and literary project' (p. 248). The method which he employs, in his endeavour to transform the negative power of discourse into a positive situation, is a poststructuralist one. As has already been noted, Bhabha warns of the dangers of essentialism, and this is no less the case when it comes to theory. In his chapter on 'The Commitment to Theory' in *The Location of Culture*, he answers those who believe that theory is an 'elite language of the

²⁰⁵ 'Adagio', in *Critical Inquiry* 31, Winter 2005 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 371-80 (pp. 377-8).

²⁰⁶ 'Opening the Floodgates', pp. 182-3.

²⁰⁷ *LoC*, p. 354.

socially and culturally privileged' (p. 28) and ask for a more practical engagement with politics, by suggesting that, in fact, theory and politics cannot do without each other, because the 'political subject [...] is a discursive event' (pp. 31-4). This requires an 'attention to rhetoric and writing', that 'reveals [...] the discursive ambivalence that makes "the political" possible' (p. 36), in a process of '*negotiation*, rather than *negation*' (p. 37) which constitutes a 'strong, principled argument against separatism of any colour'. Theory thus becomes a 'revisionary force' whose 'radical contribution' is the 'emphasis on the representation of the political, on the construction of discourse' (pp. 38-40), and is necessary for postcolonialism, in that it enables it to do away with 'the restrictive notions of cultural identity with which we burden our visions of political change' (p. 55).²⁰⁸ It is, Bhabha writes, his use of such poststructuralist theory that allows him to 'attempt to represent a certain defeat, or even an impossibility, of the "West" in its authorization of the "idea" of colonization' (p. 252). Such a theory is necessary also for the particular analysis of literature. Rather than conducting interpretations of works of art as 'merely second-order readings that belatedly elaborate some pure essence or expression that the work emanates *ab novo*', interpretation needs to '[turn] the work inside out' until 'the entire fabric is transformed, its structure laid threadbare and visible'.²⁰⁹ There is no single truth to be found, no essence that exists in advance of interpretation that cannot be 'transformed' in the revolutionary analytical act.

Method

As we move from Bhabha's valuation of literature and literary analysis to his method of literary analysis – while remembering that literature has two values for him (the value to oppress, and the value to resist and undo oppression) – we find that the focus of his writings is indeed provided by these values. He spends more time on examining notions of 'narration', 'discourse' and 'culture', than on the analysis of specific literary works, thereby carrying out his 'project' of breaking through the authoritative barriers of negative discourse. When he does engage in strictly literary analysis, he includes poetic,

²⁰⁸ In 2004, Bhabha sees the need for such an approach as, if anything, even more crucial than before: "The aftermath of 9/11 has made even more urgent the endeavour to think of issues relating to political and cultural differences beyond the polarities of power and identity." – in 'Statement', p. 344.

²⁰⁹ 'Aura and Agora', p. 12.

fictional and dramatic works, as well as those more journalistic texts which were commonly excluded by the Practical Critics, but also by Eagleton and Showalter. In *The Location of Culture*, as one might have expected, ‘culture’ in its totality plays a far greater role than literature in its particularity. We learn that culture can be enunciated, inscribed, translated, narrated, discoursed upon – but what culture is, exactly, Bhabha leaves undefined beyond the ‘cultural experiences’ of ‘literature, art, music, ritual, life, death’ mentioned earlier, which has to be an incomplete list when we consider the other things he touches on in his writings on the subject (such as food, rumour, mythology, clothing, religion).²¹⁰ Given that culture is the reason for the existence of *The Location of Culture*, this is rather startling. He does admit at one point that we need ‘to confront the concept of culture outside *objets d’art* or beyond the canonization of the “idea” of aesthetics’; but then conceives of culture as ‘a strategy of survival’ that is ‘transnational’ and ‘translational’, without explaining further how he would revise the concept. His conclusion may be that culture is constructed,²¹¹ but he refrains from explaining what the material elements of a constructed culture might be, or what he would do with the concept once its illusions have been laid bare. He also investigates the idea of the ‘partial culture’ produced when people settle in foreign countries, and argues that it is this which ‘is the contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures – at once the impossibility of culture’s containedness and the boundary between’.²¹² It is certainly his attempt to stay within the poststructuralist method, in order to attain the destabilisation of oppressive discourses, which prevents him from pinpointing the essence of culture – his desire to establish a continuously forming and reforming cultural difference capable of unshackling those who are oppressed or appropriated by an authoritarian culture. The only problem is, that while he seems more than prepared to stay away from categorisations when he discusses this particular topic, he is apparently much less so when he discusses that against which he is working. He is, as we have seen, keen on doing away with a formulation of ‘the enemy’, but still cannot resist essentialising it: mentions of the ‘West’, ‘North’, ‘South’, and ‘metropole’ abound,²¹³ which indicate that he cannot himself fully carry out that which he attempts in his investigation of culture.

²¹⁰ See, for example, *LoC*, pp. 48-9, 146-8, 286, 287-97, 301-2, and 320.

²¹¹ *LoC*, pp. 246-7.

²¹² Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Culture’s In-Between’, in David Bennett, ed., *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 29-36, p. 30.

²¹³ See, for example, *NN*, pp. 1 and 6; *LoC*, pp. xxi, xxii, 9, 28, 30, 62, 70, 95, 149, 200, 252, 304, 305, and 319; ‘Terror and After ...’, p. 4; and ‘MM’, p. 436.

Bhabha analyses specific literary texts only within the context of a broader (postcolonial) purpose, and there are no essays or chapters to be found which take, as their first objective, the critique of one or more texts on their own account. Even ‘Unpacking My Library Again’, which initially appears to be a comparative study of poems by Adrienne Rich and an essay by Martha Nussbaum, was delivered at a ‘conference [...] devoted to the question of identity’ (p. 16), and it is this question on which the paper centres. Its focus is on identity in Britain around the time of the Second World War, and in an attempt to argue against nationalist narratives, he analyses not only Rich and Nussbaum (briefly), but also a 1939 leader from *The Guardian*, an extract from a book on ‘The Women of New Germany’ published in 1937, Tom Nairn’s *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*. In comparing Rich’s poem ‘Eastern Wartime’ and Nussbaum’s ‘Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism’, Bhabha discerns a ‘scene for making a map of the late modern world’, and discovers in these works a complement to his own ideas of ‘translational temporalities’ which he has ‘tried to develop’ in *The Location of Culture*. Rich is closer to his own mind, when her poem shows how ‘the incommensurable “localities” of experience and memory each time put the “I” in a different place’, than Nussbaum, who ‘neglects those identities [which] “arise from fissures in the larger social fabric”’ (pp. 6-7). His analysis is distinctly conceptual, and is not based on a particularly sophisticated close reading:²¹⁴ his note on the ‘I’ in the lines from ‘Eastern Wartime’ which he quotes does not tell us something that is not already clear from a straight reading, and his statement that, for Rich, ‘the boundaries and territories of the cosmopolitan “concentric” world are profoundly, and painfully, underscored and overdetermined’ is not accompanied by convincing evidence, textual or analytical (p. 7). Bhabha judges Rich and Nussbaum only according to the degree to which they meet his own assumptions and principles,²¹⁵ and therefore favours Rich over Nussbaum, because Nussbaum’s ““identity” of cosmopolitanism demands a spatial imaginary’, whereas Rich’s structure is temporal. The same goes for the *Guardian* leader, whose contents (a profile of Hitler) he relates to Arendt’s phrase of ‘the banality of evil’, and which then causes him to ask whether

²¹⁴ Although he agrees with Said’s opinion that there is a need for a close-reading ‘philological humanism’, Bhabha does not tend to follow his own advice (see ‘Adagio’, pp. 373-5).

²¹⁵ One does not wonder that a philosophical essay is not judged by its artistic merits, but by placing philosophy and poetry next to each other in this way, Bhabha shows that in his mind they can be analysed on the same terms, something with which the practical critics would have strongly disagreed.

‘Nazism provoke[s] anxiety’, or whether ‘the Hitlerian body politic itself [is] in a state of anxiety’.²¹⁶ After some further discussion of ‘banality’ and ‘anxiety’, punctuated by passages and quotations from ‘The Women of New Germany’, Žižek, Fichte and Nairn, he finally turns to Ishiguro. His analysis of *The Remains of the Day* tells us little about the book, however, and what it does tell us is reasonably questionable. Bhabha argues, for instance, that the novel is ‘centred in the very British bathos of the butler Stevens’ (p. 13), but he does not explain in what sense this might be so (and the *OED* does not help us, either, since the definitions of ‘bathos’ it provides do not appear to be reconcilable with the novel).²¹⁷ He also raises the notion that the butler, Stevens, is in its pages forced ‘to confront his unwitting anti-semitism’ (p. 10); that there is an ‘unwitting anti-semitism’ is presented as granted, and justified by Bhabha only indirectly, when he refers to the fact that the housekeeper charges Stevens with it; yet the question of this anti-Semitism or otherwise surely demands a more thorough analysis. Then, in a familiar move from textual reference to a general commentary on the world outside the text, Bhabha turns the ‘silver’ which Stevens is polishing when the housekeeper calls him anti-Semitic into a metaphor for the British nation, in a moment of possible overinterpretation:

The English silver [...] becomes engraved with the image of Judas Iscariot – the sign of racial alterity [...]. But the anti-semitic historic past [...] produces *a narrative where Jew and colonized native, anti-semitism and anti-colonial racism, are intimately linked in a textual and temporal montage.*

²¹⁶ This is another moment which resonates with *The Location of Culture*, specifically with Chapter 10 (‘By Bread Alone’), in which Bhabha concludes that the ‘British attempted to contain and “objectify” their anxiety’ by projecting it onto the natives (and, indeed, what he says in ‘Unpacking’ is introduced with a reference to ‘the early nineteenth-century discourses of Oriental despotism’ (p. 8)); see *LoC*, pp. 291-2.

²¹⁷ One might reasonably ask whether Bhabha might have used the word ‘bathos’ merely because of its alliterative effect next to ‘British’ and ‘butler’, given his extreme fondness for alliteration. This fondness reaches a dizzying intensity in ‘MM’, for instance, where ‘the *battle of books*, the *subtle subvention* of popular cultural traditions in the national(ist) *cause* – *conflagrations* *connected* with *conflicting* *conceptions* of the *core* of a *syllabus* or a *society*’ on p. 433 is only one of numerous occurrences on pages 431-33. Other examples can be found in ‘Aura and Agora’ (‘the *high horizons of humanity*’), p. 10; and in *LoC*: ‘Norway’s *nationalist nostalgia* cannot drown out the *babel on the bluff*.’ (p. 11), Fanon’s ‘*desperate, doomed search for a dialectic of deliverance*’ (p. 58), ‘What part does the *feint* of writing play in evoking these *faint figures of identity*?’ (p. 77), ‘a *contemporaneous cultural cohesion* *connecting* its national subjects’ (p. 134) [all italics are mine].

If this is a description of the novel, there is not nearly enough by way of textual analysis to sustain it. The paragraphs which immediately precede and follow these sentences, however, show that the novel exists in this paper as really very little more than a hook for Bhabha's theoretical hat. His exposition of the British 'naming of the butler as *gentleman's gentleman*'²¹⁸ as an instance of 'metonymic mimicry' in the service of the class system; his presentation of 'Jewishness' as a 'historical and racial *in-betweenness* that [...] resonates with the Benjaminian view of history as a "view from the outside [...]"; Fichte's 'national mirror where the *paternal* authority is [...] affirmed'; the 'British fascists [who] argued for the Nazi cause on the grounds that Hitler's success was intimately bound up with the preservation of the British Empire' (pp. 14-5) – all these represent Bhabha's thinking on subjects external to the novel. Bhabha does not deal with Ishiguro's plot-construction, character-formation, language, or any other such matters, either in this paper, nor, it seems, elsewhere. Yet this is, after all, not that what interests him most; his eye is elsewhere, always somewhere beyond the novel. This paper is only one example of how Bhabha works in a conceptual fashion, always approaching a text tangentially, rather than carrying out a close reading of it. One of the many other occasions on which this becomes immediately obvious, is that of his discussion of Adrienne Rich's poem 'Movement', in 'Minority Maneuvers': although he refers to her phrases 'a black or a red tulip opening' and 'unfurling like a redblack peony', he avoids reading these very closely, and instead treats them rather as if they were synonymous with each other (p. 446) – without asking why the poet decided to use two similar, but different, images. This is not in itself a wrong thing to do, but serves very well to highlight the difference between him and those literary analysts who practice close reading. They simply could not have let those tropes pass without comment.

Bhabha's repertoire is fairly limited in its number of authors and works, but even so does not produce any kind of specialist literary analysis – it is the postcolonial that takes precedence over the literary, and one quickly learns that the value of literature for Bhabha's theories is restricted to its usefulness as evidence or illustration of a point beside itself. In 'Four Views of Ethnicity: On the Irremovable Strangeness of Being Different' he introduces *A Passage to India* with the unexpected compliment that it is 'perhaps the greatest of all novels about the complications between oriental bazaars and

²¹⁸ A mistake – a butler is not the same as a gentleman's gentleman.

English clubs'.²¹⁹ As it turns out, Bhabha is praising Forster's ability to appear to create divisions between the 'lowly bazaar' and the 'European club', while simultaneously denying the full separation of these two environments. Forster does this, argues Bhabha, by introducing the image of the 'overlapping, oscillating energies of the Ganges that drive everything down' (p. 37). This at first seems sound enough, and characteristic of his poststructuralist approach to boundaries, but a closer reading of the passage that has prompted Bhabha's thought reveals its flaws. In it, if not in Bhabha's vision of the British-Indian borderlines, the Ganges does not in fact 'drive everything down', but only 'might be expected to wash the excrescence back into the soil': might be expected to, but does not. Bhabha provides the beginning of the sentence which follows: 'Houses do fall, people are drowned and rotting', but cuts it short with an ellipsis. When we turn to the original text, however, we see that Forster's text continues: '[...] but the general outline of the town persists, swelling here, shrinking there, like some low but indestructible form of life'. In the novel, then, the Ganges does not unsettle, as Bhabha suggests, the boundary between club and bazaar even as it creates it, for 'the general outline [...] persists'.²²⁰ The 'toddy palms and neem trees and mangoes and peepul' which add an additional boundary to the Ganges in the novel, are also transformed by Bhabha into something else, which he does by reading them through the poem 'Anxiety' A. K. Ramanujan (p. 35). Elsewhere, Bhabha produces Forster as an example of an author who completes a 'line of descent of the mimic man', in order to illustrate his own theory of mimicry;²²¹ and the 'imperial delirium' in *A Passage to India*, as represented by the pivotal incident in the Marabar caves, becomes an example of a wider 'estrangement of the English book', in 'the disturbance of its authoritative representations by the uncanny forces of race, sexuality, violence, cultural and even climatic differences' (Rider Haggard's 'necrophilia' and Rudyard Kipling's 'moments of gloomy doubt', neither of which Bhabha shows us, are said to 'mark' the same 'disturbance') (p. 161).

Derek Walcott, Conrad, Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, and Naipaul all undergo a very similar treatment by Bhabha, a treatment which hesitates on the edge between a close reading which is not quite close enough to be convincing, and an integration of their texts into his own postcolonial, poststructural and psychological

²¹⁹ It is, interestingly, a rather ambiguous compliment, too – how many novels have there been about 'the complications between oriental bazaars and English clubs'? *PMLA*, 113.1 (1998), 28-51 (p. 36).

²²⁰ E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 31.

²²¹ *LoC*, p. 125; the other authors in the list are Kipling, Orwell and Naipaul.

theories and philosophies.²²² We are reminded of his declaration, in the preface to *The Location of Culture*, that he found Naipaul's work 'intriguing' because it could be 'read against the author's intention and ideology': again, it is not a reading of, but a reading between the lines, which he considers to be the most useful form of interpretation, and what enables the value of literature. A most telling point about his approach to literary analysis, however, is that a work which has not been written from a colonial, or postcolonial, standpoint – or at least one which deals with questions of cultural identity – has no actual value for him, and will not appear in his writings. Just like Showalter, he is restricted, from the start, to a certain part of the world's body of literature, which may cross national and temporal boundaries, but not subjects, and it is clear that he would not place the autonomy (in which he does not, in any case, believe) of the literary text over the 'postcolonial project'. One senses that what Bhabha reveals in his writings concerning the problems of oppression, cultural or otherwise, would lose little if his work contained no references at all to literary texts. He believes, like Showalter and Eagleton, that theory can illuminate the world, and therefore strives to improve the state of the world's power-play by getting at the more metaphorical world-text behind the literary text he is reading; in this way, he can uncover the nature and flaws of colonial injustice. While Bhabha is not a specialist in the literature produced by a particular author, language, period, or such, he is a specialist in postcolonial theory; and he may have been able to tell the Practical Critics far more about colonisers and colonies than they could have told him. Yet in his analytical process the literary text ends up transformed into a mute tool, which he employs in order to achieve a purpose which seems to have very little indeed to do with such a text, other than in the most abstract terms. Literature becomes a means, not an end, left behind as the silent remainder of a study which is not at all the study of literature.

²²² For his analyses of Walcott, see for example *LoC*, pp. 331-7; for Conrad, see *LoC*, pp. 149, 152, 177, 194-7, and 303-5; for Morrison, see for example 'The World and The Home', *passim*, and *LoC*, pp. 13-27, 284-5, and 360; for Rushdie, see for example *LoC*, pp. xxiii, 7-8, 239-42, and 323-4; for Naipaul, see for example 'Adagio', p. 373, and *LoC*, pp. xii, xiii, 125-5 and 153. In 'MM', he goes so far as to analyse Kafka not by means of his works, but only through that which Deleuze and Guattari have said about him (see pp. 440-2).

Chapter Four: J. Hillis Miller

(b. 1928)

The Definition of Literature

Miller, who is most often associated with the so-called ‘Yale School’ of deconstructive critics, may be distinguished from the Practical Critics by his profound attachment to a philosophy which intensely colours what and how he reads, while he shares their affection for literature and, as the only one among the four analysts in Part II here, never directly or entirely rejects their ways of reading. He may be distinguished from the other ‘modern literary theorists’ in this part of the thesis by his dedication to the literary text, while he shares their professional self-consciousness. Deconstruction may now have gone a little out of fashion, but Miller’s work continues to exert a considerable influence on literary analysis today. In terms of textual acreage, he is one of the most vocal of the eight literary analysts under discussion on the topic of the definition of literature. If he defines it in multiple terms, they are nevertheless all more or less categorical. There is little of the Leavisian ‘This is so, isn’t it?’ appending his various assertions on the subject, even while he acknowledges that the term ‘literature’ is contingent upon the circumstances in which it is used.²²³ He believes that the question of whether or not literature is taken to include only novels, plays and poetry and such, or includes all that is written, changes over the course of time.²²⁴ (In the case of modern perceptions of it, for instance, he argues that there are two current definitions. The first is semi-political and semi-academic, and linked to the idea of ‘vernacular literature’ which arose together with the growth of the nation-state, that is, ‘literature written in the language and idiom of a particular country. This concept remains strongly codified in school and university study

²²³ Perhaps the most striking of these exceptions occurs in his preface to *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985; hereafter: ‘LM’), when he writes: ‘I believe all right-thinking readers will come to agree with what I say if they go on thinking about my poems long enough.’ This, even if ‘there is always more to say about a given poem [...]. The word *finis* can never be written to the work of interpretation.’ (p. xx). This kind of statement from Miller is so rare that one wonders if he is making fun of the reader here.

²²⁴ See *On Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002; hereafter: ‘OL’), especially pp. 1-2.

of literature.²²⁵ In his view, this sense of the term is now becoming obsolete with the ‘weakening of the nation-state’s separateness, unity, and integrity’ brought on by ‘[f]orces of economic, political, and technological globalization’ – it is now, he argues, recognised that nations are internally divided into a number of co-existing languages and cultures, a recognition which is ‘ending literary study’s institutionalization according to national literatures [...] written in a single national language’ (p. 8): separate language departments at university, therefore, will need to be ‘reconfigur[ed]’ (p. 4), or they ‘will soon seem as outmoded as old-fashioned nationalisms themselves. Such study must be replaced by multi-lingual and multi-ethnic disciplines of collective research and teaching’, and will thus serve a ‘new transnational democracy’.²²⁶ The second definition, one which is for Miller just as superficial and arbitrary as any other, defines literature as ‘whatever bookstores put in the shelves marked “Literature” or some other subset of that: “Classics,” “Poetry,” “Fiction,” “Mysteries,” and so on’, and therefore perhaps affects the reading public more than the first. There are ‘certain formal features’, Miller believes, which ‘allow anyone dwelling within Western culture to say with conviction, “This is a novel,” or “This is a poem,” or “This is a play”’, which include title pages and print format, and are ‘as important in segregating literature from other print forms as internal features of language that tell the adept reader he or she has a literary work in hand.’²²⁷

For his own purposes, however, Miller seeks a more a-temporal definition, separating the meaning of the term into its particular and general aspects: on the one hand, it is ‘a certain use of words or other signs that exists in some form or other in any human culture at any time’ – on the other, it is a ‘universal aptitude for words or other signs to be taken as literature’. These definitions may be true, but they are in an odd way so true that they are unhelpful to an understanding of what Miller really makes of it. What he himself means when he mentions the word ‘literature’ is not always the same. Though he sometimes distinguishes ‘novelists proper’ from literary theorists,²²⁸ between

²²⁵ *OL*, p. 3.

²²⁶ *TN*, p. xi. Related to this is Miller’s idea of the Western canon, and of ‘the Western tradition’ as something illusory and obsolete as a safe category (if the old canonical writers are still worth reading, they are no longer safe as they are) – see, for instance, *TN*, p. 391, and *OL*, p. 100.

²²⁷ *OL*, p. 13.

²²⁸ *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987; hereafter: ‘*ER*’), p. 39.

criticism and ‘literature proper’,²²⁹ and between literary criticism, theory, philosophy, and ‘properly “literary”’ texts,²³⁰ other occurrences of the word in his writings are unaccompanied by definition. Yet his opacity, or fickleness, only pertains to his use of the word as denotative, as an answer to the question: ‘Is this a novel, a Ph.D. thesis or a recipe for goulash?’. There may be a superficial ‘clue’ to whether or not something is literature,²³¹ but there is more to be found out – to say that something is ‘a poem’ does not tell one enough. And it is this remnant of the to-be-told with which Miller is most concerned. What, precisely, is literature like, once we have decided that it is, in fact, literature?

A work of literature is ‘a species of artwork’, he writes in *The Ethics of Reading* (p. 28; see also p. 66), and the idea of literature as ‘art’ appears also elsewhere: in *Victorian Subjects*, as ‘works of art’ (p. 318), and in the shape of one of its special subcategories, ‘perspectivist art’ (p. 59); in *On Literature*, as ‘art’ (p. 146) and in particular ‘the art of the novel’ (p. 59); and in *Theory Now and Then* as something separate from nature (‘nature imitates art’).²³² Miller rarely attempts a definition of ‘prose’, or of ‘poetry’. Instead, when he specifically talks about one or the other, it is because this is what he happens to be discussing a given article, essay or book – for example, the novel in *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*²³³ and in his chapters on George Eliot, Trollope and James in *The Ethics of Reading*, and poetry in his various writings on poets such as Hopkins, Browning, and Tennyson elsewhere – and there is no suggestion that he makes any qualitative distinctions between the genres. His most significant pronouncement on this matter comes in his chapter on Trollope in *The Ethics of Reading*, in which he takes issue with Trollope’s declaration that ‘he has written his novels in the same way that a shoemaker makes his shoes’: ‘[m]ost of us,’ he counters, ‘even if we followed his recipe, could produce nothing at all so good as *Orley Farm* or *The Last Chronicle of Barset* or *He Knew He Was Right*. We would be more likely to learn in time how to make a good shoe.’²³⁴ He may not explicitly name writing as an art here, but he clearly distinguishes it from a craft that can be learned. What separates authors from craftsmen, what makes at least the

²²⁹ ‘Béguin, Balzac, Trollope and the Double Double Analogy’, in *Victorian Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991; hereafter: ‘VS’), pp. 213-28 (p. 215).

²³⁰ *ER*, p. 42.

²³¹ See also *OL*, p. 43.

²³² ‘The Function of Rhetorical Study at the Present Time’, in *Theory Now and Then*, pp. 201-16 (p. 212).

²³³ (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).

²³⁴ *ER*, p. 89.

more skilful of their kind an ‘artist’,²³⁵ is their ‘genius’.²³⁶ Miller never rejects the involvement of beauty in literature outright, like Richards did, but neither does he, with Empson, place it in the foreground. Rather, he hesitates around it, such as when he talks about Hopkins’s ‘beautiful landscape drawings’, or the four ‘beautiful figures’ with which Pater describes Plato’s work as being the host of older texts²³⁷ – and, regardless of this last comment on Pater, we are sure that he is not of one mind with the Aesthetes when he criticises Tennyson’s ‘The Palace of Art’ for representing a ‘guilty self-enclosure in aesthetic beauty’ on the part of the poet.²³⁸

Matters are complicated, however, by the fact that, despite all this, he does not propose that art is very different from science. Science, he argues, is not ‘the effacement of the subjective before the objective’, but ‘the opposite: an assimilation of nature into an interior realm where everything can be manipulated as number and calculation and where the energies of nature can be harnessed to human ends’.²³⁹ Seen from this point of view, Eagleton could be said to be underestimating scientific texts when he claims that ‘[s]cience gives us conceptual knowledge of a situation, which is equivalent to ideology’, while literature is superior to it because it provides us with ‘a mode of [experiential] access [to ideology] more immediate than that of science’.²⁴⁰ For Miller, instead, ‘[t]he imagination necessary for both scientist and novelist presupposes a turning inside-out of the objective world and its assimilation by the mind’, which means that science is just as unideological (or just as ideological) as literature. This has significant consequences for how one reads scientific works, and for the use of science, such as psychoanalysis, in the analysis of literature.²⁴¹ Although, having said all this in one essay, Miller writes in another that ‘[a] poem, unlike a scientific formula or a mathematical proof, cannot [...] be understood if the reader is too detached from it and regards it with too critical an eye’, for the reason that it ‘exists partly as the emotions inhering in it, and these come into being only when it is read with sympathy’.²⁴² Poetry, therefore, unlike science, has an

²³⁵ *OL*, p. 64.

²³⁶ See, for instance, ‘Béguin, Balzac, Trollope’, in *TN*, p. 217) and ‘Trollope’s Thackeray’, in *VS*, pp. 271-77 (p. 273).

²³⁷ *OL*, p. 82.

²³⁸ ‘The Theme of the Disappearance of God in Victorian Poetry’, in *VS*, pp. 49-77 (p. 61).

²³⁹ ‘Some Implications of Form in Victorian Fiction’, in *VS*, pp. 70-90 (pp. 82-3).

²⁴⁰ *CI*, p. 101.

²⁴¹ See *TN*, p. 260, for details, including his use of Freud’s work as an example.

²⁴² ‘Literature and Religion’, in *TN*, pp. 63-78 (p. 63).

emotional element; this ought not, however, to be taken as a contradiction of his other statements, since, although literature and science are not made of the same material, the texts written in the name of their two names are the result of interpretation and imaginative assimilation, and are just as unstable as each other.

The reason for Miller's vision of such an instability is his conception that literature is not an author's representation of the objective world, but an interaction of the author's consciousness (or mind, or imagination) with it,²⁴³ and that it is then also a communication of his consciousness with the reader's – and all sorts of things can happen along the line between the real world and the reader's imagination.²⁴⁴ What a reader experiences when he reads is 'an imaginary reality'; it is a characteristic of literature that it gives the reader 'access to a realm that seems to exist apart from the words, even though the reader cannot enter it except by way of words'.²⁴⁵ Every time one opens a book, one is invited into a virtual reality: each book is a 'virtual reality apparatus', creates or discovers a 'new, supplementary world, a metaworld, a hyper-reality',²⁴⁶ and opening sentences work towards 'the creation of a fictive world', a 'genesis'.²⁴⁷ (Balzac, for instance, 'has the power to create an alternate world to that of the creation, with its own laws, its own time, its own characteristic population, its own atmosphere of a distinctive color and texture', an entire 'second universe'.)²⁴⁸ Because this world is not entirely physical, but presented to us by means of language with only little referentiality,²⁴⁹ we cannot obtain any significant information about this world from anywhere else other than the text which presents it to us. Therefore a 'novel, a poem, or a play is a kind of testimony' which it is impossible 'to verify or supplement'. This is how literature 'keeps its secrets',²⁵⁰ and so we never can be absolutely sure whether or not 'the alternative

²⁴³ 'The poet [...], however much he may be apparently imitating the external world in his poetry, is actually speaking himself, *doing* himself. The poet poets.' In *VS*, p. 15.

²⁴⁴ See the following for details of his notion of literature as consciousness speaking to consciousness: *VS*, pp. ix, 58, 83, 216, and 233-4; *TN*, pp. viii, 14 and 33; *TPP*, p. ix; *ER*, p. 65; *OL*, pp. 21-3, 65, 109, and 111.

²⁴⁵ See, for example, *OL*, pp. 37-8 and 54.

²⁴⁶ *OL*, pp. 113 and 18. This idea is emphasised in, and runs through the entirety of, *OL* ('virtual reality', pp. 17, 28, 44, 111; 'imaginary world', p. 20; 'a new world', p. 21; the 'genesis' of a 'fictive world', pp. 32 and 97; 'alternative world', p. 77; 'metaworlds', p. 81).

²⁴⁷ *OL*, p. 32. This is one of the aspects of what Miller considers to be the 'violent' element in literature (see *OL*, p. 28).

²⁴⁸ 'Béguin, Balzac, Trollope', *VS* p. 218.

²⁴⁹ For more on this quality of literature, see, for instance, *OL*, pp. 16-7 and *VS*, pp. 211 and 233.

²⁵⁰ *OL*, p. 38.

world opened up by a given literary work is created by the words of the work or just revealed by them', even if it is of utmost importance for us to answer this question (p. 44). It is Miller's contention that this alternative world probably does pre-exist the work, and is therefore more 'revealed' than 'created' by the text: 'I [...] think of the actual literary work, the words on the page, as the material embodiment of events that exist in some imaginary realm in all their richness of detail, waiting, perhaps indefinitely, to be incarnated in words' (pp. 69-70). He admits that this view is not, at the time of his writing, fashionable, and something normally associated with the mediæval notion of dream visions, though the difference between his theory and the mediæval one is, that he believes that these alternate worlds differ from one work to another, whereas mediæval dream visions were said to draw their material from one and the same realm (pp. 45-6). The fact that these worlds differ from work to work is accompanied by Miller's firm belief that each literary work is 'singular, *sui generis*, idiosyncratic, heterogeneous [...] counter, original, spare, strange'.²⁵¹

This 'keeping of the secret' is one of the factors that make literature, in the end, inherently 'unreadable'. Miller accounts for the details of this 'unreadability' in a number of ways. In *The Ethics of Reading*, it is early on described as 'the fact that the text commits again the error it denounces, namely [...] the error of claiming to be able to speak directly for the law and with the direct authority of the law', and as 'the text's inability to read itself' (pp. 33-4 and 38). In a later chapter, Miller adds that, because the text 'gives only itself' and 'hides' the 'thing' expressed in it 'as much as it reveals it', it is 'unfaithful to the thing by being what it is, just these words on the page' – and that it is 'in this specific sense' that the text 'is unreadable' (p. 121); moreover, 'unreadability [...] is to be defined as the impossibility of distinguishing clearly between a linguistic reading and an ontological one. What is only a linguistic necessity or imperative is infallibly misread as a transcendental one' (p. 122).²⁵² Finally, in *Pygmalion*, he defines the text as unreadable because the text 'may be read this way or that way, but the text itself justifies the reader neither in choosing between the two nor in reconciling them in some dialectical synthesis'.²⁵³ In short, a text is unreadable both because one cannot determine its meaning and because it does not in fact do that which it claims to be doing. The problem

²⁵¹ *OL*, p. 33. See also p. 34, *ibid.*, and *VS*, pp. 9 and 53.

²⁵² This strongly echoes Miller's definition of ideology as 'the taking of a linguistic reality for a material one', in *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990; hereafter: '*VP*'), p. 83.

²⁵³ *VP*, pp. 236-7.

with this definition lies not so much in its internal logic, as in the unexplained assumption that the text can do anything in the first place – is it not, rather, an act of prosopopoeia on Miller's part? If the text itself has no consciousness, but is the author's consciousness on the page, is it not then the author who commits errors, hides, is unfaithful, and places ambiguity into the text? This presentation of the text as a personality is visible throughout Miller's work, not least in the way in which he continually speaks of it as something that 'demands' something from us.²⁵⁴

The Value of Literature and of Literary Analysis

Though literature has always 'been in one way or another granted great authority in the West', says Miller, we have come up with many 'quite different and quite incongruous answers to the question of why we should read (or not read) literature'.²⁵⁵ These answers change, just as the definition of literature itself does, from context to context, and are closely linked to the social function played by literature at a given time and in a given place. According to him, just as the epic and tragedy had for Aristotle a 'pragmatic, down-to-earth function' in his time (p. 97), in Victorian England novels also fulfilled 'an irreplaceable social function', as in fact any literature does at any given time; and he is the only one of the eight analysts studied in this thesis who fully acknowledges this possibility. Yet even within a single period, the perception of what that function is can change from person to person, and therefore Trollope's idea, for instance, that the function of a novel is 'to give us fictional characters on whom to model ourselves', and that novels should 'combine pleasure and moral instruction', is not George Eliot's, and it is not what 'Foucaultian or Marxist critics' say about it today.²⁵⁶ He suggests elsewhere that the novel as a genre has somehow managed to 'make and maintain' communities of readers, by means of the 'fictions of character and the characteristic lifelines of characters that it sustains and creates';²⁵⁷ and that, if this is true, its value lies in the fact that it can 'assuage' its readers' 'covert suspicion' that they may not, after all, be able understand

²⁵⁴ See, for example, *OL*, pp. 38, 59, 84; *ER*, p. 102; J. Hillis Miller, *Tropes, Parables, Performatives: Essays on Twentieth-Century Literature* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990; hereafter: 'TPP'), p. viii; 'The Imperative to Teach', in *TN*, pp 305-8 (p. 306) and 'The Ethics of Reading', pp. 329-40 (p. 338).

²⁵⁵ *OL*, p. 82.

²⁵⁶ *ER*, pp. 82, 85 and 89.

²⁵⁷ *TN*, p. 212.

those around them ‘by expressing it overtly’, and thus ‘short-circuits a doubt that, left free to act in the real social world, might destroy both self and community’ (p. 213). Although he would not go as far as some of the more sociologically-minded literary theorists, he also refuses to consider the value of literature, as it is taught at university, as the ‘mere superficial adornment of the serious business of preparing for a job or a profession in our technological and industrial society’ (pp. 336-7). Although an activist view of literature ‘as active in personal life and in society’, he argues, ‘raises all sorts of dangers of shallow misinterpretation and blind censorship by special interest groups’, literature is by no means ‘harmless, useless’ – and it is not true that ‘works of literature, even those everyone agrees are classics, will have a beneficial effect on all those who read them, all of the time, or be socially constructive’ (the implication of his phrase ‘all of the time’ being, of course, that some of them may have it some of the time) (p. 330).

He points to a number of worthy characteristics of literature. Among the minor ones is included its ability (one which was also asserted by Empson) that it can help one to understand one’s own and other cultures.²⁵⁸ He also (like Arnold, Richards and, to some extent, Leavis) attaches some importance to literature as a repository of ‘traditional humanistic values’,²⁵⁹ Although he attaches to this the caveat that this should only be done, however, if it is ‘accompanied [...] by an adequate reading’ of the text, and that this does not make literature ‘a means of salvation’ to replace religion (pp. 65-6). In addition, there is its value as a facilitator for the teaching of ‘good writing’ (p. 203), perhaps because, as he argues in *The Ethics of Reading*, ‘great writer[s]’ know ‘how to put things in words’ – their writings have ‘finish, wholeness, and rounded completeness.’²⁶⁰ Literature, finally, can also add value to human life because it represents, in a turn from him which is deconstructionist but also touches on Marxist theories, a critique of certain ideologies. The reason for this is that, although authors are subject to current ideologies, they are not subjected to them. They may rework and transform, but they do not merely reflect.²⁶¹ The bulk of his value of literature, however, concerns two particular qualities which he attributes to it, namely that it can be pleasurable, and that it contributes to the life of the imagination. The former is the one which, one suspects, initially gave birth to Miller’s dedication to literature. In *On Literature*, for instance, he records how he ‘loved *The Swiss*

²⁵⁸ *OL*, p. 90.

²⁵⁹ *TN*, p. 205.

²⁶⁰ *ER*, p. 105.

²⁶¹ *VS*, p. viii-ix. See also *RN*, p. 16 and *OL*, p. 123.

Family Robinson as a child, how he was ‘enchanted’ by it; and how, when he read *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, he found ‘joy in the scene with Humpty Dumpty or the one with the White Knight’.²⁶² What he calls ‘real reading’ is in his opinion ‘characterized primarily by *joy*’, which,

when it comes, is [...] surprising, unpredictable [...], in that sense anarchic, a dissolution of pre-existing orders, the opening of a sense of freedom that is like a new earth and a new heaven, an influx of powers. The joy of reading is [...] apocalyptic. It has to do with transfiguration in the end but also has to do with a momentary lapse of the fear of death. [...] I am, at least in part, because I read, and that is the widest import of the joy of reading.²⁶³

Literature, he writes, ‘seizes me and carries me to a place where pleasure and pain join’ in a movement of rapture, which occurs because literary works ‘are in one way or another wild. That is what gives them their power to enrapture.’²⁶⁴ Yet his vision of pleasure is not the same as Richards’s utilitarian, ‘satisfying-the-greatest-number-of-impulses’ vision, and also unlike Aristotle’s praise of literature for social reasons (pp. 98-9). The pleasure granted by literature is, rather, something extremely private, and less useful than good (echoing Oscar Wilde’s notion of the ‘uselessness’ of art). For Miller, ‘real reading’ lies ‘outside the institution, [is] allergic to institutionalization, private, solitary’: neither weighty social critique nor disinterested appreciation of aesthetics,²⁶⁵ his vision of reading is characterised by the ‘explosions of laughter’ he experiences when he reads a particularly good pun²⁶⁶ – though he allows for the fact that others may reasonably disagree with him, because the freedom of literary works means that they are ‘free to be reappropriated for whatever use we want to make of them’.²⁶⁷

The mind, writes Miller in the concluding paragraph of an essay on D. H. Lawrence, ‘(in its ability to modify, transform, and interrelate the data of experience by means of its “coadunating [that is, unifying] imagination”) is the source of man’s most important enjoyment of “vivid life”’. Referring to Lawrence’s preoccupation with the

²⁶² *OL*, pp. 126 and 158.

²⁶³ ‘President’s Column’ *TN*, pp. 295-304 (p. 296). See also p. 300, *ibid*.

²⁶⁴ *OL*, p. 29.

²⁶⁵ ‘The Search for Grounds in Literary Study’, in *TN*, pp. 263-75 (pp. 263-4).

²⁶⁶ *OL*, p. 28.

²⁶⁷ ‘The Search for Grounds’, in *TN*, p. 264.

metaphor of sexual experience as man's true 'vital' experience, he objects that 'there still remains another source both for value, "vivid life," and for man's worst evil, a source which interposes itself constantly to transform and combine elements of that rudimentary vital experience' – namely, man's imagination.²⁶⁸ He characterises literature as something created by, firing up, and dwelling in, the imagination, principally by means of 'the creation or discovery' of a new world. This 'new world' is not an escape, but 'an irreplaceable addition to the already existing one',²⁶⁹ and when Miller reads, his 'experience is most like that 'of encountering another human being [...] giving deeper and more intimate knowledge than I have even of those persons I am closest to in the "real world"'.²⁷⁰ This is mainly the case because literary texts contain enough references to physical reality to make the virtual one accessible – transporting the reader, as they do, 'magically, from the familiar, the verisimilar, to another, singular place that even the longest voyage in the "real world" will not reach', and the best way in which to put it to 'its best use' is by 'only by noticing local oddnesses in language and following them as far as asking questions about them will take you.²⁷¹ In this sense, a work of literature is like one long daydream, with all its attendant oddities; and while most daydreams 'are short and intermittent – mine at least', he 'need[s] to read novels'.²⁷² Books live on beyond the end of the reading, and their 'protagonists [...] haunt our brains and feelings' for a long time after, like 'ghostly apparitions'.²⁷³ In short, he sees literature as 'the invitation to dwell with sympathy in a fictitious world', and that his reading of *The Swiss Family Robinson* as a child may have been exactly the kind of escapism so despised by Kant, 'the beginning of a bad habit that has kept me in lifelong subservience to fantasies and fictions rather than soberly engaged in "the real world" and in fulfilling my responsibilities there' (pp. 94 and 96). His own move from studying physics to studying literature as an undergraduate was born of 'a quasi-scientific curiosity about what seemed to me at that point (and still does) the radical strangeness of literary works',²⁷⁴ and he

²⁶⁸ 'D. H. Lawrence: *The Fox* and the Perspective Glass', in *TPP*, pp. 13-4.

²⁶⁹ *OL*, p. 18.

²⁷⁰ 'The Antitheses of Criticism', in *TN*, pp. 1-12 (p. 7).

²⁷¹ *OL*, p. 20 and *TPP*, pp. vii-iii.

²⁷² *OL*, p. 51. See also pp. xii and 53, *ibid.*

²⁷³ *OL*, p. 43.

²⁷⁴ *OL*, p. 124. See also *TPP*, p. vii: 'Appearances notwithstanding, I do not think this commitment to close reading is "an inheritance from the New Criticism." It springs rather from an initial and persistent fascination with local strangenesses in literary language' which 'was my motivation for turning from physics

repeatedly testifies, both directly and indirectly (through his method) to this ‘fascination with what seems strange and unaccountable in particular works’:²⁷⁵ the ‘strangest and most surprising things are present in those great books if we have the wit to see them’.²⁷⁶ Because of this, and because of literature’s ‘daydream’-quality, ‘reading a single literary work is never enough. The person who is hooked on reading always needs more virtual reality. No one of them ever fully succeeds in doing its work.’²⁷⁷ Literature, then, is something like a pleasurable addiction, or an obsessive-compulsive (dis)order.

‘Obsessive-compulsive’, in truth, seems to be the most appropriate adjective to describe Miller’s conception of the ‘real reading’ which is necessarily to be carried out, so he believes, by those who take this task ‘at all seriously’.²⁷⁸ It quickly becomes clear that he does not – in the manner of Eagleton, Showalter and Bhabha – think that literary analysis is valuable in and of itself. Rather, we can establish two facts about his literary philosophy: firstly, that analysis is a demand placed by the text upon the reader in order to secure its survival; and secondly, that the kind of analysis which it demands is close reading.²⁷⁹ Following on from his own notion that literature makes something happen, and is therefore a performative and ethical act, and in agreement with Walter Benjamin’s and the Geneva School’s idea that a text requires translation by simply having been written,²⁸⁰ Miller believes that the ‘ethics of reading’, as he calls it, ‘begins with the reader’s response to a parallel demand that each text be read, and even read again and again.’²⁸¹ The verb ‘to demand’ and noun/adjective ‘imperative’ crop up throughout his work in relation to the reading of literature:²⁸² ‘*Tolle, lege*, is the first law of reading’,²⁸³ and

to literature in about 1946, and [...] has remained as strong as ever in all the years since’. This recalls Empson’s own move from Mathematics to Literature at Cambridge.

²⁷⁵ *VP*, p. viii. See also *TPP*, p. ix.

²⁷⁶ ‘The Ethics of Reading’, in *TN*, pp. 338-9.

²⁷⁷ *OL*, p. 146.

²⁷⁸ *VP*, p. 19.

²⁷⁹ In *OL*, Miller makes a distinction between ‘*allegro*’ and ‘*lento*’ (or: ‘innocent’ and ‘demystified’) ways of reading (see its fifth part, for ‘How to Read Literature’, in particular pp. 118-26), and his preface to *LM*, pp. xix-xx. Since the *allegro* method does not, however, lead to literary analysis as such (is, rather, a reading for pleasure alone), it is not further discussed here.

²⁸⁰ See ‘Béguin, Balzac, Trollope’, in *VS*, p. 216.

²⁸¹ *VP*, p. 18. See also p. 1, *ibid*.

²⁸² See the following for details of how Miller conceives of the text as law: *ER*, pp. 4 (the ‘ethical moment in the act of reading’ is ‘a response to something’ that is driven by ‘an imperative, some “I must” or *Ich*

as such it is part of ‘the conduct of life’.²⁸⁴ But how to read? And how, by reading, analyse? Miller sees reading, and literary analysis, as something inevitably and infinitely problematic. Even to begin one’s reading, to start one book before others, is ‘a betrayal of my obligation to all the other books. [...] To read one book is therefore to get even further behind in fulfilling my duty to read all those other books. Still I must read.’ The text does not, however, command one to conduct just any kind of reading: it demands a reading that is faithful to it. Faithfulness to the author’s intention is of no consequence, for authors are, according to Miller, not in control of their work once it has been written and published. The author’s intention is like a promise, and therefore performative,²⁸⁵ and there is ‘inherent in all performatives’ the possibility ‘that it will be impossible ever to confirm with certainty whether the form of language in the performative makes happen what it promises will happen’ (p. 32; see also p. 76). Once the work has been written, it is closed off from the author, and perambulates the world having all kinds of unpredictable effects ‘when it is read or misread, and even when it is not read at all’ (p. 106). Reading is a text’s initial ‘effect’, and is in turn also a performance, because the nature of the text demands that one commits ‘all one’s powers to bringing the work into existence as an imaginary space within oneself [...] in believing in a fiction or at least into suspending disbelief’,²⁸⁶ even if ‘the reader can never know’ whether what he experiences ‘is just what [the author] intended’.²⁸⁷ This is how Miller can justify his idea, in which Leavis’s ‘Third Realm’ resonates, that a poem ‘comes into existence as a poem only in the mind and feelings of its reader or auditor. Though its meanings are intrinsic, they are intrinsic to an experience which includes the reader as well as the black marks, the listener as well as the sounds.’²⁸⁸

Faithfulness to the text is the only matter of consequence. Of course, Miller is known as a deconstructionist; and one might therefore be tempted to assume that he promoted a deconstructionist analysis of literature that is separate from the more

kann nicht anders. I must do this. I cannot do otherwise), 59, 101-2, and 120; *VP*, pp. 14 and 15; *TN*, pp. 118 and 305-7; *VS*, p. 217; *TPP*, pp. vii-iii; *RN*, pp. 44-5; and *OL*, p. 59.

²⁸³ *VP*, p. 20.

²⁸⁴ See, for example, *ER*, pp. 59 and 101-2, and *VP*, p. 14.

²⁸⁵ *ER*, p. 37.

²⁸⁶ *OL*, pp. 38 and 111. See also J. Hillis Miller, *Reading Narrative* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998; hereafter: ‘*RN*’), p. 5, *VP*, p. 11, and *LM*, p. 228.

²⁸⁷ *OL*, p. 112.

²⁸⁸ ‘Literature and Religion’, in *TN*, p. 63.

traditional close reading. This would be, however, to misunderstand his approach to the subject – because for him deconstruction is less a method than a philosophy. Even if his own pronouncements on the subject now and again tend towards a description of it as a ‘procedure’,²⁸⁹ he is much more inclined to consider it a ‘hypothesis’ or point of view. Thus he equates deconstruction with a ‘hypothesis of a possible heterogeneity in literary texts’, which allows for the greatest critical flexibility and makes it ‘more open to a given work, than the assumption that a good work of literature is necessarily going to be “organically unified.”’²⁹⁰ Deconstruction becomes, in his hands, a disinclination simply to follow critical suit, or to conclude anything before the text has been read except that it might surprise us (‘[y]ou can never be sure what is going to happen when someone in a particular situation reads a particular book’),²⁹¹ and the belief that there might be a ‘possibly self-subversive complexity of meanings in a given work’. For an understanding of Miller’s approach, the two important characteristics of deconstruction (from his perspective) are, firstly, its refusal to ‘claim’ that any ‘patterns’ discovered are ‘universal structures’, be it ‘for the text in question’ or ‘for literature in general’, and secondly, its attempt ‘to resist the totalizing and totalitarian tendencies of criticism. It attempts to resist its own tendencies to come to rest in some sense of mastery over the work. It resists these in the name of an uneasy joy of interpretation [...], always in movement’.²⁹² The two cornerstones of Miller’s preferred method of literary analysis are present here: his belief in the uniqueness of texts, and his belief in the inability of any reader, amateur or professional, to seize hold of a work and command its meaning. In order to conduct the right kind of literary analysis, in order to be a ‘responsible’ reader, one has to read closely, take nothing for granted, and never expect to arrive at the truth.²⁹³ Given Miller’s definition of literature as in some ways utterly unreadable, the only valuable kind of literary analysis can really be the kind that ‘identif[ies] an act of deconstruction which has always already, in each case differently, been performed by the text on itself’, and in this sense, ‘great works of literature are likely to be ahead of their critics. They are there already. They have anticipated explicitly any deconstruction the critic can achieve’.²⁹⁴

²⁸⁹ See ‘The Critic as Host’, in *TN*, pp. 143-70 (p. 153).

²⁹⁰ This is its ‘ultimate justification’ (‘The Critic as Host’, in *TN*, p. 169). See also ‘How Deconstruction Works’, *ibid.*, pp. 293-4 (p. 293), and ‘Rhetorical Study’, pp. 202-3.

²⁹¹ *VP*, p. 21.

²⁹² ‘The Critic as Host’, in *TN*, p. 169.

²⁹³ *VP*, p. 79. See also *ER*, *passim*, and *VP*, pp. 33-4 and 79-80 on the notion of ‘responsible’ reading.

²⁹⁴ ‘Deconstructing the Deconstructers’, in *TN*, pp. 95-110 (p. 109).

Deconstructive criticism thus becomes paradoxically constructive, in its use of ‘rhetorical, etymological, or figurative analysis to demystify the mystifications of literary and philosophical language’, and therefore, ‘[r]ather than surveying the text with sovereign command from the outside, it remains caught within the activity in the text it retraces.’²⁹⁵ It is only ‘an extreme interpretation of that text, going as far as one can with the terms the work provides’ that can show its deconstructive element (p. 154). If criticism lies within, then the only possible method appropriate to the expression of the deconstructive theory can be close reading: if the text has already deconstructed itself, how else can one tell that it has done so, if not by pointing out where and how it has done it? Miller firmly believes that ‘neither “method” nor “theory” amount to much when taught as such, detached from the activity of reading this or that particular text’,²⁹⁶ and that, if anything, the danger of theory is that what one finds in a text is a foregone conclusion, one that is ultimately not telling the truth about the text. ‘Each poem,’ he argues in the preface to *The Linguistic Moment*, ‘is *sui generis*, a species with one member’ and therefore ‘[t]he work of both reading and critique has to be performed anew on each occasion. The results have validity, if they have it at all, only for that occasion.’²⁹⁷ Of course, just as the text can ‘bend’ a ‘presupposed theory’ for one analyst, it can itself be bent by the theory of another. In *On Literature*, written at the beginning of this century, he explains how he feels that the ‘writing and teaching’ of the ‘younger faculty members [...] often marginalizes or ignores literature’, principally because of a turn, at the university, ‘from literary study to theory, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, media studies [...], popular culture studies, Women’s studies, African-American studies, and so on’. These ‘younger faculty members’, he says, are ‘not stupid, nor are they ignorant barbarians’, but ‘they have a deep and laudable interest in film or popular culture’ and ‘a proleptic sense that traditional literary study is on the way to being declared obsolete by society and by university authorities’. To having interests outside (or beyond) literature, therefore, or to simple pragmatics, Miller has no objection; but all this is, nevertheless, ‘[o]ne of the strongest symptoms of the imminent death of literature’.²⁹⁸ Being faithful to the demand of literature to be read, interpreted, taught, and written about, is therefore

²⁹⁵ ‘The Critic as Host’, in *TN*, p. 169.

²⁹⁶ ‘President’s Column’, in *TN*, p. 298.

²⁹⁷ *LM*, p. xxi.

²⁹⁸ *OL*, p. 10. Miller hereby does not, however, mean the death of literature in general – see also the first part of *OL* (‘What is Literature?’).

the most important task of literary analysis, and not staying with the text is to do ‘violence’ to it.²⁹⁹ This is true even if, as Miller believes, there will never be a ‘mastery over the work’, even if each act of reading and interpretation has to be begun afresh every time a book is picked up, a book which is in so many ways unreadable. In ‘The Deconstructive Angel’, M. H. Abrams argues that Miller’s form of literary analysis ‘dismantles’ the ‘uniqueness, the rich variety, and the passionate human concerns in works of literature, philosophy, or criticism’ as so many ‘linguistic illusions’,³⁰⁰ suggesting a distinctly cynical or pessimistic attitude. In truth, however, Miller repeatedly affirms the actual uniqueness of, and variety within, literary works, alongside their tendency to deconstruct themselves. The deconstructive element of a text consists of the absence of a single, identifiable interpretative truth about its words and the worlds it presents, not of the absence of any truths whatsoever; and so, while literary works deconstruct the illusion that they have one name, one meaning, they do not deconstruct themselves into oblivion. If, as Miller argues, the imagination is one of the vital functions of human life, and if literature gains its highest value by being part of the imagination, then it is necessarily an essential and positive force. Deconstruction can thus lead to ‘joyful wisdom’,³⁰¹ even if this wisdom consists of the knowledge that one’s reading can never be done and only opens into an infinite abyss under one’s feet. This is how it is possible for Miller to think with Satan of *Paradise Lost* that ‘[b]eneath the deepest deep a deeper deep still opens’,³⁰² but not to perceive this ‘deep’ as hellish: after all, ‘[o]ur professional vocation, with all its responsibilities, begins and ends in that joy of reading.’³⁰³

Miller thus takes what can perhaps best be described as a lover’s attitude towards literature, which is also evident in the work of the Practical Critics discussed in Part I: he does not deny that literature can be used by to produce an intentionally adverse effect by some people, but his writings do not leave one with quite the same impression of there being a vast field of negative, or oppressive, literature as those of his three companions in this part of the thesis. Even if one might reasonably presume that Eagleton, Showalter and Bhabha have, at least at one point in their lives, loved literature, and even if traces of this love are visible here and there between their more stridently political utterances,

²⁹⁹ *ER*, p. 17.

³⁰⁰ *Theory’s Empire*, p. 208.

³⁰¹ ‘The Critic as Host’, in *TN*, p. 153.

³⁰² ‘Geneva or Paris: Georges Poulet’s “Criticism of Identification”’, in *TN*, pp. 31-61 (p. 56). See also *ibid.*, p. 55, and *ER*, p. 97.

³⁰³ ‘President’s Column’, in *TN*, p. 296.

what they emphasise in the professional manifestations of their readings is a seemingly constant need to fight against, or fight for, something other than literature, by means of literary analysis. The world is not, in their eyes, a better place for the existence of ‘great’ literature alone – rather, it is the analysis of literature which drives or finishes off whatever contribution literature might make to the public good. Miller has his theories as much as they do, and it is not a rare occurrence by any means that we encounter philosophical escapades in his writings which float towards the edge, sometimes even climb out, of the pool of what we might call ‘the text being read as such’; yet what distinguishes him from them is his proposition that one is, as a practitioner of literary analysis, at risk of losing one’s literary focus if one places a greater weight on literary theory than on the text one is reading.

Method

Miller’s direct interest in criticism does not lie in the judging of works or writers as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘moral’ or ‘immoral’, ‘great’ or ‘minor’. Apart from a few moments of praise, as when he writes that he ‘loved’ *The Swiss Family Robinson* as a child, that certain texts or passages are ‘beautiful’, ‘artful’, ‘eloquent’, ‘brilliant’, or ‘great’ (all without an attempt at providing supporting evidence, if such a provision is in fact possible),³⁰⁴ he is much less interested in telling us whether or not a work of literature is any good, than in what it is and what it does. At any one point of his analyses, he aims to answer one of two questions, questions inspired, respectively, by deconstructionist philosophy and by the idea that literature is a representation of an author’s consciousness: first, what is the deconstructive element (or ‘linguistic moment’) in a given text? And second, what can we learn about the author’s consciousness, in general or in relation to a specific topic? He answers these by placing the texts which he analyses under a microscope, by looking at their concerns and their language, while holding on to his vision of the ‘ethics of reading’ – which ‘begins with and returns to the man or woman face to face with the words on the page’ – and rejecting a ‘politics of interpretation’, which ‘tends to be vague and speculative, often unhelpfully polemical’.³⁰⁵ ‘Aristotle’s Oedipus Complex’, in *Reading*

³⁰⁴ In *OL*, p. 82, *VP*, p. 1, *ER*, p. 101, ‘The Creation of the Self in Gerard Manley Hopkins’, in *VS*, pp. 1-23 (p. 19), and ‘Implications of Form’, in *VS*, p. 84 respectively.

³⁰⁵ *ER*, p. 4.

Narrative, is an example of how he attempts to answer the first of these questions, and of how he manages strongly to hold on to his theory of the ‘ethics of reading’ without losing sight of the text. He sets out, in the book, to create a ‘commentary on what is problematic in Aristotle’s formulations about narrative, and in this particular chapter he shows us the incongruity between his *Poetics* and Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, the latter work taken by Aristotle, in the former, to be ‘exemplary of tragedy in general’ (p. 4). He begins by describing how Aristotle ‘conspicuously assumed that everything can and should be explained rationally’, and that ‘a good tragedy must itself be rational’; this rationality is, in a play, determined by the fact that ‘it can be completely seen through’ and ‘must have none of the opacity of the irrational’ (pp. 5-6). Miller asks, then, whether *Oedipus* is ‘really what a reading of the *Poetics* would lead us to expect it to be’, that is, a rational tragedy which is therefore good? Or is their relationship ‘not rather a spectacular example of the way great philosophers choose examples that [...] confound and dismantle’ whatever ‘doctrine they are propounding’ (p. 7)? After explaining Aristotle’s vision of the rational and good tragedy, he argues that the narrative of *Oedipus* does not really follow Aristotle’s ‘stipulations’ of what the beginning, middle and end of a narrative ought to be like, because it has ‘no plot in the ordinary sense of the word’ (quoting Thomas Gould – pp. 9-10). He makes his case by providing a summary and analysis of the plot: its action, in the sense of ‘decisive physical occurrences’, takes places either ‘before the play begins (Oedipus’s abandonment as a baby [...], his murder of his father, his solving of the Sphinx’s riddle, his sleeping with his mother) or takes place offstage (Jocasta’s suicide, Oedipus’s self-blinding)’. This means that the play does not begin at the beginning of the story, but ‘long after the real action has taken place’ (p. 10). Its middle is, in turn, taken up not by a ‘seamless sequence of events’, but of ‘more or less fortuitous and discontinuous events’, it is ‘not rational that all of these should happen on a single day, however well they work as a concatenation leading Oedipus to his recognition’. The end of the play is, also, ‘not really the end. [...] We know that something will follow next’. This is why *Oedipus* ‘is not a self-sufficient whole’, as Aristotle would have it, but ‘an arbitrarily excised segment of a larger action’. All this is convincing, not only because Miller’s argument is strong, but also because he shows us both the plot of the play and the stories that surround it in Greek mythology. Then, however, he introduces a new theory which destabilises what has gone before, namely that ‘in *Oedipus the King* language is the action, [...] it is a play about the action language can perform’ (p. 11). He spends the rest of the chapter explaining this theory, and along

the way provides us with over twenty pages of close analysis of the lexis of *Oedipus*, ranging from its prosopopoeias, its figure of the ship, and its images of ‘feet, eyes, seeing, tracking, doubling, mounting, and plunging’, to etymologies of ‘adultery’ and ‘metaphor’ (pp. 27-37). The concluding ten pages are a study of the play’s irony, which he calls the ‘rhetorical name’ for the ‘duplicities of language and of represented events’ (p. 35). Yet, deconstructively, he disagrees with those who think that irony is simply a ‘double logos (saying one thing and meaning another)’, and argues that it is really the event of ‘multiple logoi’ (p. 36) – and that, just as reading *Oedipus* is itself ironic because it is ‘like trying to think an indefinite multiplicity of incongruent things at the same time’ (p. 19), the play’s own relationship with the *Poetics* is also ‘a deeply ironic one’ (p. 38). The reason for this is, that ‘Aristotle has imported into his treatise a parasitical presence that radically undermines its premises’:³⁰⁶ all that anyone, within the play or without, can ‘learn to see in *Oedipus the King* is that whatever we say or do may be subject to some entirely other logos than the one we intend.’ After dedicating a handful of pages to a further explanation of why the play does not really end, even in language – because its language, at its climax, is ‘the most violently irrational language in the play’ (p. 40) – and showing how this is the case by means of several quotations from the text, Miller concludes: ‘I claim to have shown in two examples how unexpectedly strange and threatening to received ideas canonical texts in our tradition turn out to be’, and that *Oedipus the King* is not at all ‘exemplary of tragedy in general’, according to Aristotle’s own principles, but rather ‘shows the disastrous consequences of following the desire for rational knowledge that Aristotle recommends and exemplifies’ (p. 45). Therein lies the self-deconstruction of his *Poetics*. Close reading, then, coupled with deconstructionist theory, has provided us with an analysis with which we may well disagree if we disagree with Miller’s hypotheses (in which case one could easily take the same texts and make them mean something different altogether); yet by showing us what goes on in the texts of both *Oedipus* and the *Poetics*, and by providing detailed quotations, examples and etymologies with which to support his argument, he makes it much harder for us to argue against him. Other useful examples of this method are his analysis of Tennyson’s ‘Tears, Idle Tears’ in *Topographies*,³⁰⁷ and of the ‘linguistic moment’ in Browning’s ‘The Englishman in Italy’ and Yeats’s ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ in *The Linguistic Moment* (pp. 118-228 and pp.

³⁰⁶ See ‘The Critic as Host’, in *TN*, pp. 154-66, for an illustration of Miller’s thought about the relationship between the literature and the ‘parasitical’.

³⁰⁷ (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 134-49.

316-48) – in particular his work on Browning’s poem is astonishing in its wealth of close textual analysis.

Miller’s work on Lawrence in *Tropes, Parables, Performatives* may serve as an example of those of his analyses which have as their aim the discovery of what we can learn about their authors’ consciousness. What begins as an attempt at revaluation in the manner of Leavis and Eliot turns into a close analysis of the themes ‘that most preoccupied Lawrence throughout his work’ (p. 1). After examining the terms ‘metaphor’ and ‘perspective’, he settles upon an ‘obsolete meaning’ of the latter (‘a telescope or [...] any system of mirrors and lenses used to play tricks with light and apparent distance and shape’, common in the seventeenth century) to explain Lawrence’s quality as a writer concerned with ‘the exploration of a single key metaphor’ (p. 5), and traces Lawrence’s mythology – whose subject is ‘man’s sexual experience’ (p. 8) – with the help of thematic, dramatic and philosophical evidence collected from a selection of Lawrence’s fictional and personal writings (including *The Fox*, *Women in Love*, letters, *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, and *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*). By comparing him to Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley, Miller shows that ‘Lawrence’s work merely re-expressed the key romantic idea in terms of sexual experience’ (p. 11), while adding to it by ‘broaden[ing] the definition of sexual experience’, from something merely represented by the actual sexual act to ‘the whole of the relationship between man and woman’ (p. 12). Miller believes that he thereby usefully brought literature ‘down from a subjective cloud where the poet, all sensibility, confronts the universe alone, to the realm of the personal relations of men and women. The romantic idea is thus transformed from lyric to dramatic’. Despite a number of shortcomings, then (not least of which is, according to Miller, his ‘dependence’ on a mythology that has none of the capability for ‘more permutations and developments’ of those of some other writers (p. 10)), and despite his erroneously ignoring the vital importance of the mind to human life, Lawrence contributes, by his single metaphor or perspective, something valuable to ‘our consciousness of ourselves and of the world we live in’ (p. 5). Miller shows us that he has in fact engaged in close reading, by virtue of his range of sources, his incessant quotation (there are approximately eighty-four lines of quotation in five hundred and sixty lines of analysis, a refreshingly substantial fifteen percent after a reading of Eagleton, Showalter and Bhabha), and the expository detail he has taken from Lawrence’s private and public writings. His ideas are interesting and instructive on the subject of Lawrence, even if it is

always possible that one might disagree with his interpretations, and even if at least some of his readers are no doubt left wanting to investigate the matter further for themselves.

Miller takes a similar line with Dickens in *Charles Dickens*, where he employs direct textual references on almost every page, and makes hardly a statement without providing accompanying evidence from one or the other of Dickens's works. He makes his way through a chronological sequence of the novels and, by a close reading rather than by, say, a Showalterian listing of themes, goes some way to fulfilling the ambition which inspired his research – that is, to 'assess the specific quality of Dickens' imagination in [...] his work', and thereby 'to identify what persists throughout all [...] his novels as a view of the world which is unique and the same, and to trace the development of this vision of things [...] throughout [...] his career' (p. viii). By the time that we have arrived at its last chapter it will be difficult indeed, in the face of so much textual evidence, to deny the essential plausibility of Miller's idea that that the 'development' of Dickens's 'imagination' consists of the way in which his protagonists move from initial alienation (from the world they live in and themselves), via evasion and false identities, to the attainment, in *Our Mutual Friend*, of an identity based, not on some authority of the past or on providence, but on an orientation towards the future and a 'reaffirmation, after a withdrawal, of [their] particular, limited, engagement in the world and in society' (p. 333).³⁰⁸ It is true that in this book, too, as he did in his essay on Lawrence,³⁰⁹ Miller indulges in some less substantiated comments on Dickens's quality as a writer (for instance that he is a 'great writer', a writer of 'extraordinary talent', whose novels are 'animated by an immense energy, the spiritual energy of Dickens himself' – pp. x, 86, 330). Yet in both books his immediate aim has not been to explain why these writers or their works are worth reading, even if this may be a side-effect of his analyses; his aim has been, rather, to show us what they are like and what preoccupies their minds. To that extent, it may be reasonable to call Miller's work convincing; if not convincing in its philosophy or its conclusions, then at least it is more convincing in its thoroughness

³⁰⁸ For other useful examples of Miller's method in his attempts to solve the puzzle of an author's consciousness, see also *VS, passim*, especially his essays on Hopkins ('The Creation of the Self in Gerard Manley Hopkins' and "'Orion" in "The Wreck of the Deutschland", in the second of which he spends five pages on the single occurrence of the name "Orion" in the poem, covering both Greek and Christian mythology and Bible-scholarship in the process, pp. 1-24 and 25-30); and essays such as 'The Theme of the Disappearance of God in Victorian Poetry' (on Arnold, Browning, Tennyson and Hopkins), pp. 49-68 and 'Implications of Form' (on Conrad, Dickens, Eliot, Trollope, Meredith and James), pp. 79-90.

³⁰⁹ See, for example, pp. 8 and 9 of 'D. H. Lawrence: *The Fox* and the Perspective Glass', in *TPP*.

and attention to the text than the work of most of the other analysts in this thesis, Empson being perhaps the only exception.

When one looks, then, at what Miller does when he is faced with a text, and bears in mind those of Miller's assumptions discussed earlier in this chapter – that literature belongs to the imaginary realm, as a communication of the author's consciousness with the reader's; that literature is allegory, parable, trope, performative; that literature executes its own deconstruction and is unreadable; that close attention to the text is essential; that no reading is innocent, or finite – then his analyses can only be called honest, even if one disagrees with their basic propositions. He can be observed at work, can be seen to try to do what he would like to do (although he would no doubt be the first to admit to the great distance that lies between him and critical perfection). As a deconstructionist by philosophy, he is much more overtly conscious of his fallibility as a critic than most of the other analysts we have looked at; even Leavis, with his 'This is so, isn't it?', perhaps talked more about tolerance than really walked it. Miller, however, thinks that the work of the critic is never done, and so hesitates to come to a definite conclusion; and he thinks that nothing is innocent, and therefore on the whole retreats from asserting his authority. This, as well as his opinion that the 'work of a particular critic tends to be defined by where he stands on the mountain',³¹⁰ is surely why we always encounter, in the introductory pages of those of his works of literary analysis, an acknowledgement of the limitations of his work, both in the sense that it is not complete, and that it is not objectively true. In *Victorian Subjects*, for instance, he writes that 'the reader would be in error if he were to expect to find some teleological unity in these essays' (p. vii); in *The Ethics of Reading*, he admits that, in principle, he could have 'explored' the 'ethics of reading' by means of

examples chosen from poetry, from philosophy, even from political texts or essays in literary criticism. The choice of work by novelists [i.e., his choice of these, in this book] is therefore to some extent arbitrary, though of course it will determine the strategy of the argument. (p. 2)

Moreover, 'no choice of examples is innocent', and neither is 'their ordering' (pp. 2 and 11).³¹¹ Similarly, in *Tropes, Parables, Performatives*, he describes how the essays were 'brought

³¹⁰ *TN*, pp. 2-3.

³¹¹ See also p. 13, *ibid.*, and *RN*, p. xvi.

here by the accident that all are on twentieth-century works', and argues that each one is 'the result of a specific occasion [...] the memorial record of a discrete event of reading, not a stage in some predetermined itinerary [...]. You can't get there from here' (p. vii). And again, in *Pygmalion*, he emphasizes the lack of a 'coherent narrative' of his chapters and stresses that they are only partial accounts of many more possible versions of 'Pygmalion', even if their 'range' can at least 'indicate' the truth of what he is trying to contend (pp. 2-3). It is almost as if he considers all his writings to be mere attempts to 'work [his] insights out in detail on paper',³¹² a testing of his theory, with the final stamp of authority hovering above it all without ever being placed – he is the advocate, in other words, who leaves it up to the judge or jury, the text or reader, to do the judging. He also repeatedly confirms his belief in the uniqueness of texts and in one's inability to uncover a truth, or pattern, within a text which can speak either for the whole text, or for all of literature (let alone anything outside literature). He has at least tried, he argues, not to let theory get in the way of the text, and we may say that he has quite succeeded in this; he has always started afresh, not wanting to rely on anyone else's previous authority, and has sought to use examples that are, if not innocent, then at least closely-read enough to allow him reasonably to make his case. As he writes in *Reading Narrative*:

Which takes precedence over the other, theory or example? It is impossible to answer that question. On the one hand, the theoretical formulations are important for me in their sequential development. On the other hand, the examples have received my full and fascinated attention. [...] Yielding joyfully to them in this exclusive way and following them as far as they lead allows them fittingly to play their role as examples and put in question the theoretical points I use them to exemplify. (pp. xvi-vii)³¹³

Always, then, in the end, there is the joy of reading. Miller shows his reader how modernity can be done in literary analysis: how theory does not have to invalidate a criticism based on scholarship, how a belief in the infinite complexity of the literary text does not necessitate a complete detachment from it in the manner of Eagleton, Showalter and Bhabha.

³¹² RN, p. xv.

³¹³ See also 'Creation of Self', in *VS*, p. 8; *ER*, p. 2; *LM*, pp. xv-ii; *TPP*, p. 7; *VP*, pp. 2-3.

Epilogue

There is a substantial amount of interesting material to be found in the theoretical and analytical writings of all the analysts here, but there is also, in particular in the case of the first three, a strong and categorical opposition to certain theoretical camps. Thus Eagleton, the Marxist, rejects the Practical Critics (in particular Leavis), New Criticism, formalism, new historicism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism, and only credits feminism with being a worthy partner to Marxist analysis; Showalter, the feminist, rejects not only any male-dominated, but also almost all ‘contemporary schools’ of critical analysis, especially Marxism and structuralism (postcolonialism is the only one which has any validity); Bhabha, the postcolonialist with a poststructuralist bent, favours only feminism among the different theories, and rejects in particular the Practical Critics, postmodernism, and Marxism. A third party reading their work, however, can extract from all of them something fruitful to the exploration of literature. Ironically, however, if one were to attempt to bring the three of them together in one room, only Showalter and Bhabha would be able to work with each other, but only on female writers; Miller would no doubt try to engage all of them in a discussion, but only Showalter would be likely to respond, assuming that the subject was a female writer, and only if Eagleton and Bhabha left the room first (as for the Practical Critics, one would have to book a separate room for them, with Miller perhaps forever shuttling between them and his conversation with Showalter). This, as much as anything, shows how much can be lost when representatives of one or another approach to literary analysis excludes a different approach in its entirety.

PART III: THE VALUE OF THOMAS HARDY

Prologue

Now that the discussion of the eight analysts' conceptual foundations and analytical methods has been completed, this final part of the thesis will be spent in comparing their respective approaches to the work of Thomas Hardy. For the purpose of this case-study, it was important to select a writer who provides as wide as possible a coverage of the sort of literature with which these analysts have worked, and although it was not possible to find a single writer on whom all of them have written, let alone written extensively, Thomas Hardy comes close to being an ideal instance. He has published both poetry and prose, and his writings have arguably touched on the kinds of questions concerning culture, gender, and class which are so close to the eight analysts' heart. Having said that, Homi Bhabha will be found to be conspicuous by his absence in Part III. The reason for this is, simply, that he does not once mention Hardy in the ten pieces of his which were investigated for this thesis, and apparently does not mention him in any other context, either. This is, however, not surprising, and not only because there are few elements of anything that might be classed as 'postcolonial' in his poetry and novels. Unless one extends Bhabha's postcolonial and cultural theory to include battles between, for example, urban and rural areas, or between industry and agriculture, or between the social 'thou shalt' and the individual 'I shan't', which one might well do (and productively so), there are very few moments to be found in Hardy's work which in some way conjure up images of 'the East' – and these perhaps more interesting to an orientalist, than to a poststructuralist (we come across the following, for example: in *The Return of the Native*, someone 'appear[s] on the dark ridge of heathland, like a fly on a negro', and 'Venn sat with lips impassively closed and eyes reduced to a pair of unimportant twinkles; he scarcely appeared to breathe. He might have been an Arab, an automaton';¹ in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, a woman talks about 'that story of the black man who murdered his wife

¹ (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), pp. 127 and 226.

Desdemona';² and in *The Well-Beloved* a 'young man' is described by the protagonist as 'never [having] been sublimed by a single battle, even with defenceless savages').³

This event, or non-event, was therefore quite expected, given what we know of Bhabha's valuation of literature and literary analysis. Postcolonial literary analysis, he hopes, can perform a revision of 'the archive of "English" literature', and a rebuttal to the very idea of a progressive, linear '*narrative* of tradition, cultural cohesion and national, patriarchal or racial authority' in the 'annals of literature in English'. If this kind of an analysis can result (or, as he believes, has resulted), in a 'shift in literary value', then it is quite logical that an author whose work has been valued in the context of a 'tradition' of 'English Literature' may have no place in postcolonial criticism.⁴ If literature has, for Bhabha, both the value to oppress and the value to resist, or undo, oppression, then an author whose 'Englishness' is largely unquestioned (and whom, moreover, it is difficult to describe as the voice of a narrative minority) cannot, as a member of a colonial power, feature in postcolonial criticism. In 'Signs Taken for Wonders', we recall, Bhabha presents us with the 'English book' as the embodiment of such national and colonial authority, and from this we might deduce that his view of Hardy, if he has one, would be at one with this – that it stands as a monolith which has an immense controlling power over the colonies, and is an 'insignia of colonial authority' whose 'sudden, fortuitous discovery triumphantly *inaugurates* a literature of empire'. Hardy's novels would thus, in their having been produced under the aegis of the British Empire, be just as much agents of its tyranny as the *Bible* was. For all we know, he may once, or today, have a private affection for Hardy, but what is important here are his public declarations. When he tells us, in 'The World and the Home', how one day he thought of 'some of the great homes of English literature – Mansfield Park, Thrushcross Grange, Gardencourt, Brideshead, Howard's End, Fawcety Towers', and 'knew' that it was, rather, 'in the ruins of the Biswas bungalows [in Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*] and their unlikely, unsettled lives' that he had 'found [...] my small corner of the world of letters – a postcolonial place', we know that Hardy is unlikely to be found there. The irony of his silence on Hardy is, as we will see when we have studied Eliot, Empson, Leavis, and Richards's analyses, that an

² (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 269.

³ *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved' and 'The Well-Beloved'* (London: Penguin Classics, 1997), p. 263.

⁴ That this is the case is also suggested by the fact that an extensive search of libraries and the internet have not uncovered any postcolonial literary criticism of Hardy, not even since Widdowson pointed this fact out in 1999 (see *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Dale Kramer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 89).

unlimited love for Hardy might have been the greatest swipe he could have taken at ‘the traditions of Anglo-American liberal novel criticism’ (p. 142). Bhabha’s writings on literature in relation to culture and nationhood may not suit the inclusion of a writer like Thomas Hardy, but this does not mean that his ideas on the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, cultural difference and nationhood could not be employed to elucidate some of Hardy’s work,⁵ only that an investigation of Hardy is unlikely to be able to help his particular approach to the postcolonial cause, in the same way in which other writers can.

The question which this final part of the thesis is attempting to answer, is: ‘What is the value of Thomas Hardy?’ Subsidiary questions, asked of each critic in succession, include: How have they tackled him? Does he occupy an important part in their literary analyses? And what judgements have they made about him and his work? The result of all this is to demonstrate that what analysts say about a writer is truly the result of what it is they value in literature, and that how they treat him or her is down to what they value in literary analysis; and that, given the divergence in the approaches to literary analysis which we continually witness invalidate statements along the lines of ‘we should read A, and read him like this’. Such a statement, which is more valid than another and valid for all readers, is simply impossible. This does not mean that an analyst ought not to argue a case for or against one or the other writer, or for or against one or the other analytical approach – only that we need to be conscious that differences of opinion about a writer or a literary work are rooted in a missing common denominator which cannot simply be created; and that it is not possible to say that one of them is right, or one of them is wrong. Knowing why critics value literature, and with it the work of literary analysis, is of cardinal importance before one can begin to pay due attention to what they have written, and decide whether or not one agrees with them. Criticism is always personal, even when it is political.

⁵ See, for example, Edward Neill, in *The Secret Life of Thomas Hardy: ‘Retaliatory Fiction’* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), p. 61, in which he applies a statement of Bhabha’s from ‘Interrogating Identity’ to *A Laodicean*: ‘As Homi Bhabha claims, with startling relevance to her appearance in it “opposite” De Stancy and De Stancy’s posing in the ancestral portrait: “the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation, where the image ... is confronted with its difference, its Other”.’ Yvonne Bezrucka also refers to Bhabha’s theory of ‘nation and dissemination’ in her article ‘*The Well-Beloved*: Thomas Hardy’s Manifesto of “Regional Aesthetics”’, in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 36 (2008), 227-245 (p. 232).

Chapter One: The Poet and God

Eliot and Empson

How much of his or her writings are spent on an author may be considered a fair indication of the author's importance for a certain analyst: if the author is significant, one can reasonably assume that the critic will usually have much to say about him – at least, if he is so in a positive way. On that account, Hardy fares rather badly with Eliot: the third lecture of *After Strange Gods* contains three hundred and eight lines, of which a hundred and seven are on Hardy, ninety-four on Lawrence, and the rest on the concepts of blasphemy, heresy, the role of 'personality' in the creation of literature, and biblical quotation. Elsewhere, Hardy occupies a mere fifteen words in an essay about Andrew Marvell which comprises around four thousand seven hundred and thirty in total; twenty-one words in an essay on *In Memoriam* of roughly three thousand seven hundred and forty words; forty-seven of the approximately six thousand eight hundred and sixty-four words of 'To Criticize the Critic'; and five lines in an essay on Kipling.⁶ Eliot did not publish a single article of substantial literary criticism about Hardy, confining himself instead to a few asides on him in a literary context, and one more extended critique in relation to his own religious principles. What all this tells us is, that Hardy simply did not constitute a real and positive literary entity for Eliot, though when we look more closely at what he says about Hardy when he does mention him, it becomes apparent that Hardy simmers in Eliot's thought to a greater extent than one might have thought, from a mere numbering of lines. From what Eliot has written, we glean the outline of a Hardy who is

⁶ The calculation for *After Strange Gods* is based on the 1934 Faber & Faber edition (*After Strange Gods: A Primer in Modern Heresy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934)); the one for the essays on 'Andrew Marvell' and '*In Memoriam*' are a rough calculation based on the 1999 Faber & Faber edition of his *Selected Essays* ('Marvell' contains four hundred and seventy-three lines with an average of about ten words, and the '*In Memoriam*' essay is made up of three hundred and seventy-four lines, with an average of ten words – shortened lines containing quotations from poems in italics were treated as if they were whole lines of non-italicised text); the essay 'To Criticize the Critic', in the eponymous book of essays published by Faber & Faber in 1965, contains five hundred and seventy-two lines, with an average of about twelve words each; the Kipling essay, in T. S. Eliot, *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941) pp. 5-36, is a thousand one hundred and ten lines long.

partly a poet and prose writer, and partly a man who, though he may be a writer, is accountable to Eliot and us as a being of morality and religion.

In his 'Andrew Marvell' of 1921, Eliot thinks of Hardy in the main as a poet. Speaking of 'wit' – that is, 'a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace' – he establishes Marvell as a poet who is superior to some others with regard to this particular quality, and after he has proceeded to list some of the poets who do not display 'wit' in their work, he adds: '[A]mong contemporaries Mr. Yeats is an Irishman and Mr. Hardy is a modern Englishman – that is to say, Mr. Hardy is without it and Mr. Yeats is outside of the tradition altogether.' This tells us more than simply that Hardy does not have 'wit'; it tells us that Eliot considers Hardy to be at once within and outside a tradition. True, he is not with Yeats 'outside of the tradition altogether', presumably because he is an English writer (assuming that his emphasis on Yeats as 'an Irishman' is an element of his argument), but he is nevertheless not part of the particular tradition of poets of 'wit', which includes, according to Eliot, Milton, Cowley, Lafontaine, Gautier, and others, in addition to Marvell.⁷ In 1921, only about a year after he wrote *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot was still very much concerned with the notion of literary tradition and how a writer may attain a place within it, either in general or as part of a particular line – and this is, presumably, why the Hardy we read about here is treated in such a way. In May 1933, however, when Eliot delivered his lecture on 'Personality and Demonic Possession' at the University of Virginia,⁸ it is clear that he had begun to (if he had not always already done so) consider Hardy as a man with two different functions, the artistic and the moral, and to judge him a different man in each of these two roles. Returning for a moment to what was discussed in relation to Eliot's attitude towards literary criticism earlier in this thesis: though he advocated, in *The Sacred Wood* and elsewhere, a certain amount of attention to 'the object as it really is', he still believed (in his later writings, if not in his earlier ones) that the critic is someone who has certain 'convictions and principles', and who has 'knowledge and experience of life', with the result that literary criticism of a truly objective nature is not really possible, even if it is desirable. '[M]oral, religious and social judgments', he argues in 'The Frontiers of Criticism', 'cannot be

⁷ In *SE*, pp. 293-4. The oddity is here, of course, that Lafontaine and Gautier are not English, either. To what extent Yeats's Irishness is relevant as *Irishness*, rather than mere *foreignness*, is therefore not entirely certain.

⁸ The three lectures delivered to the University of Virginia in May 1933 were later collected and published as *After Strange Gods*. See <<http://www.vqronline.org/vault/2004/03/16/eliot-suppressed-lecture/>> [accessed 13 August 2008].

wholly excluded' from literary analysis; '[t]hat they can [...] is the illusion of those who believe that literary merit alone can justify the publication of a book which could otherwise be condemned on moral grounds'. He adds to this the *caveat*, however, that, despite this, if the 'primary interest' of a given literary critic is not to 'help his readers to *understand and enjoy*' literature, his or her work ought to be 'judged as a contribution to psychology, or sociology, or logic, or pedagogy, or some other pursuit [...] to be judged by specialists, not men of letters.'⁹ He follows this rather more moralistic line on the occasion of his 1933 lecture, seeing himself, in that particular context, clearly as a 'specialist' in a field not quite related to what he would call true literary analysis; a reading of it shows us that the number of words expended on a writer is not always a reliable indicator of his value for the critic. After all, if it is true that '[t]he extent to which I have criticised the authors whose names find place, is some measure of my respect for them' (p. 11), then Eliot respects Hardy very much indeed here, but in truth the reverse is the case.

The reason for his focus on Hardy's moral dimension in the lecture is made clear by him in his preface to *After Strange Gods*: the lectures, he writes, were not a work of literary criticism as such. Not intending to 'set forth [...] my opinions of the work of contemporary writers', he was instead 'concerned with certain ideas in illustration of which I have drawn upon the work of some of the few modern writers whose work I know'. He explains that his reason for not including certain writers had nothing to do with his consideration of their general 'importance', but was based on the fact that they did not 'provide such felicitous illustration of my thesis, or because they [we]re rare exceptions to it, or because I am unacquainted with their work'. Only the 'best' examples would do, and of these Hardy is clearly one.¹⁰ Having introduced the third lecture itself with the statement that the modern world is both provincial and corrupting, Eliot moves on, via a brief definition of what he considers to be true blasphemy (which is 'not a matter of good form but of right belief', and can only be committed by someone who 'profoundly believes in that which he profanes' (p. 52)), to the conclusion that blasphemy is no longer what it was, since 'the modern environment is so unfavourable to faith that it produces fewer and fewer individuals capable of being injured by blasphemy'. The 'most fruitful operations of the Evil Spirit' today are therefore, he thinks, no longer to be

⁹ *OP*, pp. 129-130.

¹⁰ *After Strange Gods*, p. 11.

found in the blasphemous, but can now be found in the ‘aggrandisement and exploitation of personality’ in literature (p. 53).

Thomas Hardy, explicitly raised here by Eliot in his incarnation as an ‘eminent’ contemporary novelist,¹¹ is the first of two examples of writers who are subject to producing the ‘Evil Spirit’ (the other one being Lawrence):

The work of the late Thomas Hardy represents an interesting example of a powerful personality uncurbed by any institutional attachment or by submission to any objective beliefs; unhampered by any ideas, or even by what sometimes acts as a partial restraint upon inferior writers, the desire to please a large public. He seems to me to have written as nearly for the sake of “self-expression” as a man well can; and the self which he had to express does not strike me as a particularly wholesome or edifying communication. (p. 54)

Hardy is thus part of the ‘aggrandisement and exploitation of personality’ which is for Eliot intimately connected to ‘heresy’, and his flaw is no longer merely that he is outside a tradition of ‘wit’, but that he is outside any kind of ‘institutional attachment’ altogether. While he is at it, Eliot throws in a seemingly oddly-placed aside on Hardy’s talent, accusing him of, as he puts it, an ‘indifference’ to ‘the prescripts of good writing: he wrote sometimes overpoweringly well, but always very carelessly; at times his style touches sublimity without ever having passed through the stage of being good’ (pp. 54-5). He does not further explain this point, yet its relation to the ‘operations’ of the ‘Evil Spirit’ is suggested by the fact that Hardy ignores the ‘prescripts’ of ‘good writing’ and thereby lacks the kind of ‘restraint’ which the recognition of something, anything, superior to the pressure of his own ‘personality’ would have imposed – with the result that he is too free (‘careless’) to write either badly, or excellently. As Eliot said in his introduction to *After Strange Gods*, this lecture is not literary criticism as such; if it were, he would (one assumes, judging by what we have learned about his valuation of literature) scarcely denigrate Hardy for his ‘sublimity’. Because he is, however, intent on making a particularly moral, or religious, point here, Hardy fails to live up to his standards. It is Hardy the man, then, who is in the wrong: the man who is outside tradition, the man

¹¹ See his comment, on p. 53, which introduced the section on Hardy, that ‘I regret [...] that I have not a more intimate, accurate and extensive knowledge of the English novelists of the last hundred years [...]. But it seems to me that the eminent novelists who are more nearly contemporary to us, have been more concerned than their predecessors [...] to impose upon their readers their own *personal view of life*’.

who asserts his freedom to write what he wants; while Hardy the writer is still capable of being commended for his style.

Hardy's other fault is that he 'makes a great deal of landscape', which is 'a passive creature' suited to 'the purposes of an author who is interested not at all in men's minds, but only in their emotions'. To make a great deal of emotions is another point of heresy: the 'extreme emotionalism' in him 'seems to me a symptom of decadence', he writes, because 'strong passion is only interesting or significant in strong men' – implying that this is not the case with, or in, Hardy. The problem for Eliot is, at bottom, that 'unless there is moral resistance and conflict there is no meaning', and this moral resistance is lacking in Hardy's novels (p. 55).¹² That he should attribute an 'extreme emotionalism' to Hardy's characters *en masse* is a highly questionable thing for him to do, for there is certainly a case to be made for a description of them (at least, of some of them) as being subject to exactly that 'moral resistance and conflict' which he seems to find lacking. (Eustacia Vye, Edred Fitzpiers and Aeneas Manston may really be characters who place emotion (mostly in the form of 'love') above anything else, but Edward Springrove, Bathsheba Everdene and Giles Winterborne are only three of the characters who spring to mind as ones who are engaged in a seemingly constant struggle against their emotions. One particular piece of evidence to quote against Eliot's accusation could be *The Well-Beloved*, and the comment from Hardy's narrator that the 'ever-bubbling spring of emotion' is something 'which, without some conduit into space, will surge upwards and ruin all but the greatest men' – is he here not on the same side as Eliot himself? Jocelyn Pierston, also, is described, towards the end of the first part, as one who grew from a man 'green in judgment' to someone who later 'loved with [...] ardour – though, it is true, also with [...] self-control'.)¹³

The next indication of the heresy, which 'introduces a note of falsity into Hardy's novels', is 'that he will leave nothing to nature, but will always be giving one last turn of the screw himself, and of his motives for so doing I have the gravest suspicion' (p. 56). Eliot then describes a scene towards the end of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* ('which has always seemed to me his finest novel as a whole'), in which Michael Henchard discovers an effigy of himself in a stream: in this scene, he argues, Hardy 'comes the nearest to

¹² The notion that passion is 'the surest evidence of vitality' is, he thinks, an indication of the grounds for 'Hardy's popularity'.

¹³ *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* and *The Well-Beloved*, pp. 211-2.

producing an air of inevitability', and its 'arrangement' is a 'masterly *tour de force*'.¹⁴ Yet this quality of 'arrangement' in a scene from one novel is not enough to lead to general praise for the novelist. The reason a comparable scene from *Far from the Madding Crowd* fails, is that there 'the motive intrudes itself more visibly': when Bathsheba 'unscrews Fanny Robin's coffin', the event 'seems to me to be deliberately faked', he declares, meaning 'that the author seems to be deliberately relieving some emotion of his own at the expense of the reader. It is a refined form of self-torture on the part of the writer, and a refined form of self-torture on the part of the reader'. One wonders what Eliot means by this 'self-torture', exactly: does he object to the fact that the scene is pervaded by touches of gothic and suspenseful sensationalism? Or does he object to its dramatic irony, in that the reader already knows what Bathsheba can only find out by beholding a corpse?¹⁵ It is, he explains, really the 'intrusion of the *diabolic*' – which 'intrusion' he analyses in his critique of *A Group of Noble Dames*. He begins by describing the book as a 'volume of [...] masterly short stories', and applauding the fact that, in it, 'you get essential Hardy without the Wessex singing; without the scenery dear to the Anglo-Saxon heart or the period peasants pleasing to the metropolitan imagination'. Both are comments made about Hardy as a writer, a craftsman, an artist, and they are literary-critical in the strictest and most judgmental sense of the word, answering the question: 'Is *A Group of Noble Dames* a good or bad piece of literature?', and also: 'What is the problem with some of his other creations?' Eliot does not, however, leave it at that, and begins to criticize the morality of 'Barbara of the House of Grebe', one of the stories in the volume: 'This is not realism,' he says, 'it is [...] "romance and fantasy"'. The trouble he has with it, is that the fact that it is not 'realism' allows Hardy to 'do exactly what he wants to do' (a problem in itself), which is to write a story containing horror without its opposite:

I do not object to horror [...]. But there is horror in the real world[,] [...] a world of Good and Evil. In 'Barbara of the House of Grebe' we seem to be introduced into a world of pure Evil. It would seem to have been written solely to provide a satisfaction for more morbid emotion. (pp. 57-8)

¹⁴ Note how very differently Showalter interprets this scene in 'The Unmanning of the Mayor of Casterbridge' (see here, Part III, Chapter Three).

¹⁵ See *Far from the Madding Crowd*, pp. 258-9 – the reader has found out about Fanny Robin's pregnancy on p. 254.

By the end of this lecture, we have witnessed something like the making of a Hardy both of occasional Good (as writer) and of Evil (as man). Hardy knows how to write, and technically there is some praise to be given him – and the audience of the original lectures, or today's reader of *After Strange Gods*, might as a result of this praise from Eliot be tempted to read *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *A Group of Noble Dames* (if not 'Barbara'), and maybe one or two others of Hardy's works. Yet his 'personality' intrudes too much into his work to be morally, religiously correct enough for Eliot; it is even, to quote the title he originally gave this third lecture, a case of the 'demonic possession' of writer, text and reader. The 'gravest suspicion' which Eliot has of Hardy's motivation for playing god in his novels is more than a pun: it is a horror. The 'truth' of Hardy's 'view of life' is veiled by the force of 'the personality which makes it plausible', and reading texts in order to discover the 'truth' beyond the 'personality' can 'help render them safer and more profitable for us', and so undo the horror they present (pp. 62-3).

As has become patently clear, then, in 1933-34 Eliot had great difficulties in reconciling his views of religion with Hardy's, and he seems to admit in 'To Criticize the Critic' (written in 1961, the last decade of his life) that for this reason his treatment of him may not have been entirely fair:

[C]ensure of a great writer – or a writer whose works have had the test of time – is likely to be influenced by other than literary considerations. [...] I do not regret what I have written about Milton: but when an author's mind is so antipathetic to my own as was that of Thomas Hardy, I wonder whether it might not have been better never to have written about him at all. Perhaps my judgment is less assured about writers who are contemporary or nearly so, than about writers of the past. Yet my valuation of the work of those poets with whom I feel an affinity, remains unchanged.¹⁶

He evidently did not trust his ability to assess Hardy objectively as a writer, because their opinions, on a subject so important to Eliot, were simply too different from each other: on the one hand, we have a man who converted to Anglicanism – on the other hand, a man who wanted very little to do with the Christian, or perhaps any, god.¹⁷ This conflict

¹⁶ 'To Criticize the Critic', in *CC*, pp. 11-26 (pp. 23-4).

¹⁷ See, for instance, Adam Kirsch's article 'God's Undertaker: How Thomas Hardy Became Everyone's Favorite Misanthrope', in *The New Yorker*, 15 January 2007

between two philosophies is no doubt the reason Eliot did not expend much space on critiquing Hardy's work. Apart from the 1933 lecture and the 1921 essay on Marvell, there are a mere three further small instances of Eliot mentioning Hardy to be found. The first is from the introductory essay to his 1941 selection of Kipling's verse, in which he briefly argues that Hardy (as well as Meredith and Lawrence) might have been a better poet had he 'chosen to dedicate [his] whole li[fe] to that form of art', because it is 'doubtful whether any man can so divide himself as to be able to make the most of two such very different forms of expression as poetry and imaginative prose' (p. 5). The second is from an essay on Tennyson's 'In Memoriam', in which he describes Tennyson's 'despair' as 'of a religious kind', which 'elevate[s] it above most of its derivatives. For *The City of Dreadful Night*, and *A Shropshire Lad*, and the poems of Thomas Hardy, are small work in comparison with *In Memoriam*: It is greater than they and comprehends them.'¹⁸ The third is in 'To Criticize the Critic' again, in which he states that Hardy lacks 'a sense of humour', a 'failing' he shares with Lawrence.¹⁹ Both of these last statements can again be tied to what Eliot said in his 1933 lecture (Hardy's lack of religion in his 'despair' on the one hand, and on the other hand his lack of a sense of humour, which Eliot saw as the only possible palliative to heresy),²⁰ and so it really does seem as if he just could not bring himself to read Hardy without his immorality, and that Hardy's value for him was very much affected by the writer's religious incorrectness, despite some artistic or technical accomplishment.

If we remind ourselves for a moment, of some of the things that Eliot valued in literature – that it is, among other things, an element of culture on which 'the health and illustriousness of a civilization' depend; that it has a value for the individual reader, in that it makes life 'worth living'; that it permits one to acquire wisdom; and that it is a source of pleasure – we can gather something of the source of Eliot's ambivalence towards Hardy. The fact that he calls *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *A Group of Noble Dames* 'masterly', and that he credits him with at least occasional stylistic 'sublimity' and includes him among the 'great' (or at least the 'classic') writers, suggests that Hardy has some,

<http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2007/01/15/070115crbo_books_kirsch> [accessed 13 August 2008].

¹⁸ *SE*, pp. 328-38 (p. 336).

¹⁹ 'To Criticize the Critic', in *CC*, pp. 11-26 (p. 25).

²⁰ '[T]he only disinfectant which makes either blasphemy or obscenity sufferable is the sense of humour: the indecent that is funny may be the legitimate source of innocent merriment, while the absence of humour reveals it as purely disgusting.' *ASG*, p. 51.

sometimes even perhaps a significant, value. In comparison to Hardy in the Virginia lecture, though, Lawrence is considered to be the ‘greater genius’, and possibly ‘a greater artist’ (p. 58), and the ‘dæmonic powers’ may have ‘found an instrument of far greater range, delicacy, and power’ in him than in Hardy (p. 60). Of one thing, however, we may be sure: for Eliot, Hardy’s work is not worth preserving for the sake of ‘the health and illustriousness of a civilization’, and in fact he considers it to be operating quite against it. For all we know, Eliot may have found poetic inspiration from Hardy for one or more of his own poems, but the value of Thomas Hardy is, judging by his critiques of it, largely negative.

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When Robert Lowell wrote to his friend Empson in 1958, and declared that ‘it can’t be denied that almost no praise would be too high for your poems. [...] I think you are the most intelligent poet writing in our language and perhaps the best. I put you with Hardy and Graves and Auden and Philip Larkin’,²¹ one wonders how long it took Empson to decide whether or not Lowell was being insulting, since he himself was far from considering Hardy to be someone to whose poetic talent he ought to aspire. Like Eliot, he did not produce a substantial critique of Hardy’s work, preferring to handle him tangentially, by way of what others had already written about him. Most of his critiques of that kind are found in *Argufying*. ‘Foundations of Despair’ (1937) is a review of A. E. Housman’s *More Poems*, and mentions Hardy only insofar as it illuminates what Empson takes to be Housman’s religious views (pp. 418-20); ‘*Zuleika Dobson*’ (1944) is a review of the novel by Max Beerbohm, into which Hardy’s attitude to God and gods is introduced almost as an aside ((pp. 467-9 – though he is in illustrious company: Shakespeare and Homer are the only other two writers whose stances on fate and deities Empson discusses in this review); ‘Still the Strange Necessity’ (1955) is about four literary-critical works by Edmund Wilson, R. S. Crane, W. K. Wimsatt Jr, and R. P. Blackmur, in which Hardy gets a mention only insofar as Empson praises Blackmur’s chapter on him in *Language as Gesture* (“To have him rewrite a poem by Hardy [“The Moth-Signal”] so as to make it a bit less bad is entirely convincing; the whole article on Hardy I think is direct

²¹ Letter from 29 January, in John Haffenden, *William Empson: Against the Christians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 166, n.2. Also quoted by Haffenden in *Among the Mandarins*, pp. 373-4.

and very good.’) (pp. 120-28);²² and ‘The Voice of the Underdog’ (1975) is a review of Wayne C. Booth’s *A Rhetoric of Irony* (pp. 178-83), in which Empson’s point is to take issue with a statement by Booth concerning irony in Hardy’s poem ‘Hap’. The fact that *Seven Types of Ambiguity* has no examples taken from Hardy’s poetry suggests that it was not ‘beautiful’ enough for Empson to care to investigate it more closely; and *Some Versions of Pastoral* has, appropriately or not, no comment to make about him, either.²³

Like Eliot, Empson had a serious problem with Hardy’s religious attitude, but not at all for the same reason. In ‘*Zuleika Dobson*’, in which he analyses the novel’s notions of fate, doom and freedom of choice, he criticises his ‘solemn “pessimism” when he produced the “Spirit Ironical” in the *Dynasts* and the remarks about the gods “finishing their sport” with Tess of the D’Urbervilles’. Contrasting Hardy’s philosophy with Shakespeare’s in *King Lear*, he accuses the former of not making enough fun of deity:

[N]obody is allowed to call Hardy’s Spirit Ironical a clown; it is a pompous upper-class entity in the clouds uttering part of the sentiments of Thomas Hardy. The belief that Nature is deliberately planning to make human efforts ridiculous seems to be a really nasty backwash of superstition, with no scientific evidence in its favour, bred among Victorian rationalists in their struggles to get away from God. Beerbohm was banking on the false solemnity of Hardy when he tried to palm off the crisis of his story as a profound piece of fun. (p. 468)

The ‘note of falsity’ Eliot sensed in Hardy is also felt by Empson, but where Eliot notes the entry of the ‘diabolic’, Empson instead finds a ‘false solemnity’. Hardy’s view of the supernaturally religious irked him enough that he introduces it again in *The Structure of Complex Words*, again in connection with *King Lear*. His tone is more disparaging on this occasion, when he calls the ‘Spirit Ironical’ in *The Dynasts* a ‘nasty fancy’ of Hardy’s: ‘To believe in a spirit who only jeers at you is superstitious without having any of the advantages of superstition; besides, it has a sort of petty wilfulness, it comes of trying to

²² For Blackmur’s rewrite of ‘The Moth-Signal’, see ‘The Shorter Poems of Thomas Hardy, in *Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954), pp. 51-79 (pp. 68-9).

²³ Even if this has not deterred Barbara Hardy from using something he says in *Some Versions* in order to point out Hardy’s tendency towards using images in his poetry which are of an unintentional ‘sexual appositeness’, for instance in ‘Her Death and After’, and in ‘The Face in the Casement’ (Barbara Hardy, *Thomas Hardy: Imagining Imagination in Hardy’s Poetry and Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2000), p. 173).

think of something nasty to say.’ He goes even further in his quarrel with Hardy’s vision of religion, arguing that it unnecessarily empowers the posited theistic Spirit: ‘What is so disgusting about Hardy’s Spirit Ironical is that nobody has a chance to call it Fool; these gods [in *Lear*] are more intimately involved with mankind’ than Hardy’s, and what is good about Shakespeare’s play by comparison, is that ‘[t]he foolish Lear can compare the storm and the heavens to himself, and the stock metaphor from the clown and the lunatic can be extended to include the cosmos’.²⁴ He shares Eliot’s opinion, then, that Hardy lacked a sense of humour, but whereas Eliot thought humour to be the only possible appropriate context for blasphemy, Empson apparently thinks of it as the only possible appropriate context for atheism.

In ‘The Voice of the Underdog’, Empson disagrees with Booth’s assessment of ‘Hap’ as a poem of ‘stable irony’, but agrees with him that, on the subject of God,

the feelings of Hardy were painfully mixed, so that he would[*sic*] not help continuing to hate God, and to blame God for all cases of bad luck, even after the relief of learning that God did not exist. When told that many readers thought he believed in his “Spirit Ironical”, a devil who arranges to trip us up, he was piteously eager to rebuff the accusation. By giving the characters in his novels such improbably bad luck, he explained, he was only warning the reader to prepare for bad luck, as lawyers and businessmen are expected to do. (p. 181)

Although he does not go into as much of a detailed analysis of ‘God’ in Hardy’s poetry as Miller has done (let alone approximate the latter’s extensive investigations into Hardy’s idea of the ‘Immanent Will’), here it is again evident that such matters much preoccupied him, possibly because of his own continuous thinking on the subject of Christianity, or possibly because, as we saw in Part I of this thesis, he was on occasion intent on building a critical force in opposition to the ‘neo-Christian movement’, which he thought had been ‘harmful to literary criticism’.

His mention of Hardy in ‘Foundations of Despair’ functions more or less as a trope, in that he explains Housman’s ‘view of his church’ in terms of that of ‘Thomas Hardy and most Anglican atheists of that generation’; and he finds a similar use for Hardy in *Milton’s God* (p. 419).²⁵ Empson cannot seem to stay away from Hardy’s

²⁴ *The Structure of Complex Words* (Totowa: Rowman & Littlefield, 1979), pp. 154-5.

²⁵ In *Milton’s God*, Empson described Milton’s ‘picture of God’, which is ‘so very like the God of the Gnostics’, and then quotes from The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics on the Gnostic ‘Demiurgos’,

religious views, but he does produce more of an assessment of Hardy's quality as a writer from a technical point of view, than Eliot has done; even if what he says is mostly restricted to a single three-page review of G. M. Young's edition of the *Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy*. In this promisingly-entitled article, however, Hardy is once again not the principal subject: rather, it is Young's introduction and selection of poems on which Empson has his eye. In it, he largely separates his judgements of Hardy the Poet from his judgements of Hardy the Man, much as we have seen him do it in the case of Milton in *Milton's God*, with one exception, namely, the moment in which he discerns a flaw in Hardy's artistry which he believes to be related to his philosophy. Describing how it is 'the flat contradictions which are the most irritating feature of Hardy's philosophy', he concludes that, because 'some monism like Hardy's seems to me probably true, [...] what irritates me must be in the treatment not the belief'. Just as Hardy is 'complacen[t]' with regard to the 'need to [...] reconcile the contradictions', he is also technically complacent, to the extent that he is 'satisfied with a clumsy piece of padding to make a lyric out of a twaddling reflection. No doubt he needed this quality to win through as he did. Most people who are admired for "unpretentious integrity" have it.' (p. 421) It is curious that he, who in *Ambiguity* is certainly a friend of the unresolved multiplicity of meaning, here demands the opposite from his subject. The only way to explain this is that Hardy's 'treatment' of his 'philosophy' is so strongly opposed to his own views, that he cannot subordinate it to any aesthetic principle. This mention of Hardy's philosophy is only brief, and Empson's critique of Young's edition then segues into a more directly technical treatment of the poems. The bulk of his disagreement with Young is based on what he considers to be his 'views on rhythm in poetry', which are, he assumes, 'at the back of' the selection of poems chosen for inclusion; but '[v]ery likely [Young] has some special way of reading aloud' (pp. 421-2), because the ones whose rhythm he praises are in Empson's view unworthy of perpetuation, while he excludes some of those which are worthy of it. Having quoted the line 'And a pond edged with grayish leaves' (from 'Neutral Tones'), he points out that it 'only gets into Mr Young's introduction, as an example of Hardy as an imitator' of Browning and Swinburne – 'Swinburne my foot,' retorts Empson, the poem is a 'good' one. Specifically, he appreciates the line's 'closeness to the accent of spoken English', which is how he defines Hardy's 'good rhythm'. We 'win' this good rhythm from the poet, he argues, 'through indifference to the poetic

concluding that '[t]he whole position is very like Thomas Hardy, let alone Blake and Shelley; but then, these authors very likely derived it from the Gnostics, too, even if remotely.'

conventions of his time'. Interestingly, Leavis, Eagleton and Miller also point out Hardy's stylistic unconventionality (though they do not agree whether or not this is a good thing); and that Empson joins them in this does not come as much of a surprise when we know that he proposed in *Ambiguity* that poetry is superior to prose in part because of its deviations from 'colloquial language'. Yet he is sparing in his praise: he refers to the 'quality in Hardy easiest called good rhythm, though it might be called a certain clumsiness that fits his grim scenery', and to say it is 'easiest' to call it this suggests to the reader that he did not necessarily feel himself *compelled* to call it this, as he might have done had he been reading the work of a poet whose achievements truly convinced him. Still, it matters enough, and Empson believes that Young fails dismally in his choice of poems because – referring to the criterion of 'good rhythm' – 'it seems to me that Hardy often simply drops his rhythm, as a child drops its rattle and stares before it straight at the skyline, dribbling slightly'. A damning comment indeed,²⁶ and he can only just about rouse himself temporarily from this to acknowledge Hardy's ability to 'beat his music out', as he calls it, in lines such as this one from 'The Rash Bride': 'None answered. That she's done poor John a cruel turn thought we' (p. 422). Straightaway, though, as he moves on to object to the inclusion of *The Dynasts* in Young's selection, he presents us with four lines from it in order to sharply ridicule them. Suggesting that the 'World Will', as he calls it, in *The Dynasts* may be 'described as half-conscious', but is in fact 'wholly unconscious', he pulls this out by way evidence:

'Heaving dumbly
As we deem
Moulding numbly
As in dream.'

²⁶ I strongly disagree with Matthew Campbell on this point, for he interprets this line as 'a rare observation on Hardy from Empson, which sums up something of the stupefaction before both the natural and the literary which can afflict a Hardy poem. Hardy has often been accused of being childlike or naïve, but here Empson makes it a prime virtue, and a mark of the poet's innovations just where he seems to be at his most imitative.' Given what Empson has just been saying about Young's poor selection of poems worthy of inclusion, I think the sentence 'Swinburne my foot' is directed against Young's treatment of 'Neutral Tones' only, and that the immediately following 'In the poems selected [...]' constitutes a swipe at Young, not a defence of Hardy. (Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 58.

How the very hindquarters of the bewildered mammoths loom through the bog!
The words echo in the mind, as we critics say, rumbling humbly in a team or
stumbling tumbly to a gleam. (pp. 422-3)

He ends his review by reasserting that there are good poems in Hardy ‘that you come back to [...] as to a source; you want their honesty and find their beauty’. Yet the problem remains, that ‘a man coming back to Hardy does want to find the good ones’ and, though Young is right to treat ‘Hardy with warmth and without overpraise’, this selection fails to provide for such a demand.

If Empson tried to provide for it, it would be a short anthology indeed – no more than a few pages long, a mere pamphlet. ‘Plodding through the *Collected Poems*’, he writes earlier in the same article, (and the ‘plodding’ no doubt speaks volumes about the effect Hardy has on him), ‘I marked out about ten that really ought to be in any selection.’ The *Selected Poems*, he thinks, contains two of these (he does not tell us which two they are), with the ones that are wrongly ‘left out’ being ‘After a Journey’, ‘The Voice’, ‘Who’s in the Next Room?’, ‘A Broken Appointment’, and ‘The Sleepwalker’ (three of which also coincide with Richards and Leavis’s favourites). These are only five of the remaining eight and we, rather frustratingly, never learn the names of the last three (but we may be sure that ‘Hap’ is not one of them, because he says about it in ‘The Voice of the Underdog’ that [t]his sonnet is very badly written, so badly that it cannot be admired at all, except for a kind of hammered-out sincerity’ (p. 181)). As he lists the titles of ‘After a Journey’ and ‘The Voice’, he adds, in brackets, a line from each, no doubt in order to show what he most likes about them: ‘Hither I come to view a voiceless ghost’ is singled out in the first poem, and ‘last line “and the woman calling”’ in the second;²⁷ ‘the philosophy comes off for once,’ he writes about ‘The Sleepwalker’, but what, exactly, ‘comes off’ remains unsaid; and there is no comment about ‘A Broken Appointment’. It seems to a reader of this article, then, that Empson really does not think enough of Hardy to want to work hard either at scrutiny, or at judgement. He bemoans the inclusion in the volume of ‘several ill-written anecdotes and a good deal from *The Dynasts*’, and when he says that it ‘is a pity, because a working selection from Hardy’s

²⁷ Empson is probably quoting from memory here: ‘After a Journey’ begins with ‘Hither’, not ‘Hereto’, and the last line of ‘The Voice’ has a capital ‘A’ (see *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. by James Gibson (London: Macmillan, 2001), p. 349 and p. 346 respectively).

mass of bad poetry is much needed', it seems as if his emphasis is not so much on the 'much needed', as on the 'a working selection' (p. 421).

As a thing of beauty, therefore, Hardy's work has little value for Empson. If some of his poems do possess enough 'beauty' to motivate him to write three pages of rebuttal of Young's selection, even though he is 'very sorry to have to be rude to Mr Young, one of our few valuable literary critics' (p. 423), they also possess too little of it for him to want to engage more closely with his writings. If one of the values of literature for Empson is, as we know, that it is able to move its readers sufficiently to affect their thought and behaviour (even if sometimes surreptitiously), that poetry 'has powerful means of imposing its own assumptions', then Hardy once again does not make the cut. Empson is, after all, driven to argue against Hardy's thought, not to change his in accordance with it. Why this should be the case, is a matter on which one can only speculate: perhaps Hardy's poetry lacks the wealth of ambiguity it needs for Empson to deem it consistently beautiful, and therefore leaves him unaffected; or perhaps his theory of the imposition of assumptions is flawed, because it ignores the potential stubbornness of the reader's mind. We do know, though, that he believes reading to be 'frivolous unless related to [...] some kind of trying out [of] the different kinds of attitude or world-view so as to decide which are good ones', which both explains why he allowed himself to say as much about Hardy's religion as he did, and provides a test for Hardy's value: if we consider his treatment of him it is clear that, while Hardy's world-view may have been one which Empson tried out, it certainly did not take. For both Eliot and Empson, then, Hardy is there, but he is not there enough to be valuable. Having read their writings on Hardy, it is possible to argue that their various comments on Hardy's stylistic qualities (or lack thereof) are unprovable and disputable, and that their objections to his attitude to the Christian God and religion are so entirely subjective that a student of Hardy could surely not make much use of them as models of scholarship. It is a question worth asking (though quite impossible to answer posthumously on their behalf) whether Hardy, if he had expressed the same views on religion in a different way, would have met with a more positive reception from them.

Chapter Two: The Poet and His Time

Richards and Leavis

Hardy's poem 'George Meredith' features as one of the thirteen poems in Part II of *Practical Criticism*, and Richards deals with the responses to it in much the same way as he does with the responses to the other pieces in the exercise:²⁸ he presents them in a supposedly neutral way, but his manner of presentation does reveal a few things about what he himself thinks of the poem. Of course, it may be that his rebuttal of some of the opinions in the 'protocols' is one made in principle only, and does not mean that he believes these opinions to be wrong in the specific case at hand. Yet when we consider how the bulk of his censure is reserved for negative criticism of the poem, with a substantial part of the positive criticism left uncontested²⁹ – and when we see later (in *Sciences and Poetries*) that he thought rather highly of Hardy – then it is more than reasonable, perhaps, to assume that he is replying with 'George Meredith' in mind. When one of Richards's guinea-pigs, then, complains that the poem did not make him feel any 'personal emotion', he comments that 'poetry which refuses to be so misused is rarely very popular', and as for the 'desire for "rapture"', he wonders: '[I]s there any good reason to require it from all poetry? The confusion between quality and intensity of experience we have noticed before' (contrasting here with Leavis's opinion that 'an 'obviously strong impulse from within' without 'intensity' isn't enough for 'the fusing process of complete creation').³⁰ This not only tells us where that particular writer has gone wrong, but also suggests that the poem's refusal 'to be so misused' may be a good thing, and that its apparent lack of intense emotion does not, for Richards, mean that the 'experience'

²⁸ It may be of interest to know that 'Appendix B' of *PC* shows that, by Richards's calculation, of the hundred 'protocols' there were thirty-one 'favourable', forty-two 'unfavourable' and twenty-seven 'non-committal' reactions to 'George Meredith'. The distribution seems to have been reasonably balanced, though Hardy's is one of only four poems which have a high number (that is, greater than a fifth of the total) of 'non-committal' reactions.

²⁹ He quotes a total of twenty-nine protocols. Of these, seventeen may be deemed negative, and thirteen either positive or neutral – and of these last thirteen, Richards lists five on pp. 152-3, with only these introductory comments: 'Some more favourable opinions will *redress the balance*.' and 'Some of the praise has, *at first sight*, an air of paradox' (my italics in both).

³⁰ 'Hardy the Poet', in *The Southern Review*, 6 (1940), 87-98 (p. 95).

underlying it necessarily lacks in ‘quality’. Another respondent criticises the lack of ‘atmosphere’, prompting Richards to reply that, though ‘[v]ivid presentation, with or without a visual appeal, and “atmosphere” are, of course, rightly required from some poetry’, in other instances ‘to avoid them is [...] precisely the poet’s endeavour. To prescribe what he shall try to do is less reasonable than to hope that he will do something we should not have thought of suggesting.’ It seems that ‘George Meredith’ thereby attains some value as an original poem. Richards mounts other, similar, defences. When he writes of the responses that ‘[c]omplaints of obscurity were, on the whole, not more frequent than might have been expected’, we really cannot be sure that he is not making fun of what he considers to be a largely incompetent readership, rather than claiming an obscurity that is the poem’s own; but when a respondent finds the ‘briskness, almost the skittishness, of the last line [...] intolerable’, Richards is clearly implying a defence of the poem when he claims that ‘[w]e might agree [...] about the effect of the alleged skittishness if it existed’; and when protocol 11.44 accuses Hardy of being ‘pompous’ when he writes ‘All tongues declare’ in line thirteen, he retorts in what is surely meant specifically for this poem: ‘The exercise of imagining a better reason for the “pomposity” may be suggested’ (pp. 149 and 151). Richards’s intention in *Practical Criticism* is, as we know, not to produce any overt literary criticism himself, but to show how it ought to be practiced (that is, with a view to the ‘re-ordering’ of one’s mind into a better one, as part of an endeavour towards ‘self-completion’). Hence we do not learn, here, anything more explicit than this about his view of Hardy, or of ‘George Meredith’; the function of the poem is primarily to provide an example of what readers do with literature – it is thus a mere tool, like a drug administered to a spider, in order to discover its effect on the spider’s web-weaving.

The case of *Poetries and Sciences* is somewhat different,³¹ though here, too, Richards is intent on making more general observations, namely, on the difference between, and nature of, these two discursive genres,³² and about the ‘neutralization of nature’ (‘the transference from the Magical View of the world to the scientific’) which he believes to have taken effect in recent years (pp. 50-1). After having spent six chapters on the explication of his theory, he turns in his final chapter ‘to those poets through study of

³¹ The original version of this book was originally published as *Science and Poetry* in 1926, with a revised edition produced in 1935. One (or both) of these versions will have been the one known by Leavis when he wrote *New Bearings* and ‘Hardy as Poet’ (see the section on Leavis in this chapter).

³² See his 1970 ‘Preface’, pp. 7-11, especially p. 8.

whose work these reflections arose³³ before concluding that humanity is ruled by several ‘myths’, of which science is the lowest but least ‘dispensable’, with ‘the tradition of poetry’ as ‘the guardian’ of ‘the supra-scientific myths’ (pp. 77-8). His declaration, in the preceding chapter, that the ‘business of the poet [...] is to give order and coherence, and so freedom, to a body of experience’ (p. 57), explains what it is he values here in Hardy:

Hardy is for every reason the poet with whom it is most natural to begin. Not only did his work span the whole period in which what I have called the neutralization of nature was finally effected, but it definitely reflected that change throughout. (p. 67)

Hardy thus becomes a poet (and he is only a poet, for Richards does not once mention his prose) who has given most ‘order and coherence’ to the ‘body of experience’ represented by the ‘neutralization of nature’ in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. He is ‘the poet who has most fully and courageously accepted the contemporary background’, and it is this, more than any technical achievement of his, which leads Richards to believe that he ranks very highly in ‘English poetry’ (p. 68), and is in fact one of ‘the greatest tragic poets’:

The comfort of forgetfulness, the comfort of beliefs, he has put both these away. Hence his singular preoccupation with death; because it is in the contemplation of death that the necessity for human attitudes to become self-supporting, in the face of an indifferent universe, is felt most poignantly. Only the greatest tragic poets have achieved an equally self-reliant and immitigable acceptance. (p. 69)

Though he disagrees with Middleton Murry’s view that Hardy’s poems represent a ‘reaction to the universe’, he nevertheless concurs in that critic’s praise in principle: ‘Hardy, at his best, [...] makes no reaction to the universe as an object for contemplation, recognizing it as something to which no reaction is more relevant than another.’ Hardy is, he agrees with Murry, a writer who stands head and shoulders above his contemporaries, because of ‘the deliberate purity of his responsiveness. The contagion of the world’s slow stain has not touched him; from the first he held aloof

³³ ‘Some Modern Poets’, pp. 67-79 (p. 67). Hardy has fifty-six of the chapter’s three hundred and fifty lines (roughly sixteen percent). De la Mare has thirty-six, Yeats has forty-three and Lawrence has forty-one (with another fourteen of generalisations on de la Mare, Yeats and Lawrence, and another twelve commenting on Yeats and Lawrence together).

from the general conspiracy to forget in which not only those who are professional optimists take a part.’ (p. 68) Foregoing any kind of close reading, Richards only touches on ‘the tone, the handling and the rhythm of poems which treat other subjects’ than that of the universe, or, more specifically, the ‘neutralization of nature’. Hardy is worth ‘singling [...] out’ because of his ‘tone’, ‘handling’ and ‘rhythm’ (what precisely they are we are not told), with ‘The Self Unseeing’, ‘The Voice’, ‘A Broken Appointment’, and ‘pre-eminently’ ‘After a Journey’ being the most noteworthy of them all. By comparison with Hardy, de la Mare, Yeats and Lawrence all lose out, because none of them was as consistently able to face the real world: while de la Mare escaped into ‘the dream-world of the child’, Yeats retreated into ‘black velvet curtains and the visions of the Hermetist’, and Lawrence sought refuge in ‘the mentality of the Bushman’ (pp. 69-75). Though all three are also described as ‘great’ (pp. 70 and 74), those aspects of their poetry which are escapist do not allow the kind of ‘self-completion’ which ‘affects a union of the external and the internal’³⁴ – for the external world is left well behind (pp. 70, 71 and 73).

In *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Richards describes how ‘specialist’ poets develop ‘in a manner either consistent or inconsistent with general development, a consideration of extreme importance in judging the value of [their] work’; his footnote to this explains that a ‘weakness’ of Yeats’s and of de la Mare’s poetry ‘may be that its sensibility is a development out of the main track’. This makes it ‘minor poetry’, while Hardy’s ‘best work’ is ‘major poetry’, comparable to Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (p. 183 and n.1). If we assume that the ‘main track’ is the one most suited to humanity in evolutionary terms, this judgement is best explained if we refer to the preceding page in *Principles*. Here, Richards proposes that what we gain from a good artist is a ‘reorganization’ of our minds, and that reading poetry can lead to a ‘finer organization’, which is ‘the most successful way of relieving strain, a fact of relevance in the theory of evolution. The new response will be more advantageous than the old, more successful in satisfying varied appetencies.’ He then concedes that such ‘advantages may be localized or general, minor as well as major’, and so we can estimate that Hardy is ‘major’ not only because he follows the dominant line, but also because the effect of his poetry, at least of his good poetry, on the individual is a general, or ‘major’, one. This effect is, of course, only temporary, as all ‘self-completion’ is, because a change of time requires yet another ‘re-ordering’. When Richards describes in *Practical Criticism* how, after having ‘experienced’ a poem, what the reader needs to ‘settle’ is ‘whether this new experience can or cannot be

³⁴ *PC*, p. 287.

taken into the fabric with advantage' (p. 303) – the fabric, that is, of one's personality – and when he then, in *Poetries and Sciences*, applauds Hardy's ability to face down the universe and 'reflect' the 'neutralization of nature', it is reasonable to deduce from this that Hardy is, for his time and for the time being (of Richards's writing) a poet, if not a novelist, who provides a valuable experience indeed. Hardy may be able to change the 'fabric' of Richards's ideal reader, but we know that he was not able to do that to Empson. Empson, too, believed that poetry has a special power that allows it to 'impos[e] its own assumptions' on the reader; his reaction to Hardy was, however, radically different from Richards's, which suggests again that such a standard is a deeply personal one, no matter how much these analysts might like us to think otherwise (in truth, unless scientists discover the precise effect of poetry on one's neurological make-up, the ability of a poem, or any word, to impose itself onto a reader's character or life is most assuredly not a standard by which its quality may be objectively judged). Knowing that Richards and Empson do not want the same things from their respective readings of poetry (even if what these 'things' are is not always defined by them in the most minute detail) can help us to see once more how important it is not to take the truth of their various judgements of the quality of a piece of writing for granted. Hardy simply cannot be both powerful and powerless, both beneficial and malignant, for all readers at once. As we are beginning to see, however – as any comparison of the critical reception of a single writer's work will show – he can be, and is, all of these things, to different people at different times.

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Hardy fills about twelve percent (a hundred and seventy-five, of a thousand and three hundred and sixty-six lines) of the chapter 'The Situation at the End of World War I' in Leavis's *New Bearings*. As its title suggests, the piece is not primarily about Hardy, but constitutes Leavis's evaluation of a more general current literary 'situation', by way of an introduction to his closer analyses of Eliot, Pound and Hopkins's poetry. Having just discussed Walter de la Mare (describing him as a writer 'capable of a gross badness shocking in so exquisite a poet' (p. 55)), he moves on to Hardy with the statement that '*The Veil*, where Mr de la Mare recognizes the vanity of his poetic evasions, shows curious traces of Hardy's influence. It is as if, in his straits, he had gone for help to the poet most unlike himself, strong where he is weak.' Ever comparative in his method,

Leavis notes that ‘in their characteristic manners, the two poets offer an extreme contrast’ (p. 56). This contrast is for him exemplified by ‘The Voice’, which ‘really does evoke the emptiness of utter loss, exhibiting that purity of recognition which is Hardy’s strength’ – in fact, the poem ‘represent[s] the very summit of its author’s achievement’ (p. 56). Better than de la Mare, Hardy knows not to indulge in ‘incantation’, and his ‘verse [...] does what it says, and presents barely the fact recognized by a mind more than commonly responsible and awake’. The problem, however, according to him, is that Hardy woke up at the wrong time:

Hardy did not begin to publish poetry until the very end of the last century, when some of his best still remained to write[*sic*]; so that, even if he had been a potential influence, he did not impinge until it was too late. By then the stresses incident to the most sensitive and aware had shifted and altered. (p. 57)

(This ‘belatedness’ is also a notion explored by Miller, although he considers it to be less a flaw in Hardy’s ability to represent the thought of his time, and more something that is merely interesting about, and intrinsic to, both Hardy’s nature as a man and Hardy’s poems (‘It is as though Hardy goes through the world always out of phase’).³⁵ The remainder of the section on Hardy is chiefly spent on a slightly closer examination of his poetic technique (since *New Bearings* is about poetry, Hardy’s prose does not come into it), whereupon Leavis concludes that Hardy is, most of the time, really not much good at all. A comparison of ‘After a Journey’ (of which he quotes the last two-and-a-half lines) to any poem by Edward Thomas, he thinks, makes ‘Hardy’s solidity appear archaic’, a ‘solidity’ which he describes thus: ‘He inhabits a solid world, with the earth firm under his feet. He knows what he wants, what he values and what he is’ (p. 57). In what is a somewhat ambivalent statement, he then notes that Hardy is ‘a naïve poet of simple attitudes and outlook’, resulting from a change in contemporary perceptions of nature; but at the same time, his very ‘greatness lies in the integrity with which he accepted the conclusion [...] that nature is indifferent to human values, in the completeness of his recognition, and in the purity and adequacy of his response’ (pp. 57-8, referring to Richards’s *Science and Poetry*). Furthermore, Hardy deserves praise because he ‘felt deeply and consistently, he knew what he felt, and, in his best poems, communicated it perfectly’ – a sentiment which, because it assumes the possibility of perfect

³⁵ ‘Topography and Tropography in Thomas Hardy’s “In Front of the Landscape”, in *TPP*, p. 201.

communication and the possibility of unrestricted and unmediated access to someone's experience – would grate painfully not only on Bhabha's and Miller's ears, but also on Eliot's and Empson's. Once more, however, Leavis objects to his own praise by seeing in Hardy a failure to be relevant to a literary tradition, which was not only caused by his having overslept, but also by his having a 'naïve conservatism' and a simultaneous lack of 'a high degree of critical awareness': his profundity and integrity are laudable, yet his naïvety and conservatism of character (his 'solidity') severely reduce his importance in the greater scheme of poetic 'bearings'. Leavis puts the 'very small proportion' of 'great poems' in Hardy's 'abundant output' down to this 'precritical innocence'. Hardy, in short, was not critical enough of his own work to be more selective – and we know how important the critical sensibility and selectiveness were for Leavis. Disputing Hardy's 'rank as a major poet' in the current public mind, 'rest[ing]', as it does, 'upon a dozen poems', he reduces this 'dozen' by half (four of those that remain are also Richards's favourites), to 'After a Journey', 'The Voice', 'The Self-Unseeing', 'A Broken Appointment', 'Neutral Tones', and 'During Wind and Rain' (p. 61). What is valuable in these six is that, what Leavis believes to be Hardy's 'main impulse' for writing poetry – which is the 'mere impulse to write verse' – does not apply to them. For him, Hardy too often writes his verse to 'the lilt of popular airs, with a gaucherie compounded of the literary, the colloquial, the baldly prosaic, the conventionally poetical, the pedantic and the rustic' (a stylistic aspect of Hardy's which Eagleton, conversely, applauds – as we shall see later), and so 'turns out his despondent anecdotes, his "life's little ironies," and his meditations upon a deterministic universe and the cruel accident of sentience.' At the same time, his 'great poetry is a triumph of character'; it is fuelled by the 'inveterate bent' and his habitual style which, 'when he is deeply moved [...] suddenly appear as a strength', with the consequence that his stylistic 'oddity becomes an intensely personal virtue' (p. 59). 'The Voice' undergoes a half-close reading over twenty-nine lines, in which Leavis follows his characteristic method of statement-then-quotation. The poem transforms itself, he believes, after its first stanza has threatened the reader with 'a crude popular lilt', into a 'subtle movement' which obliterates the usually 'gauche' in 'the prosaic manner of the content'. Having remarked on how the 'jingle' is 'banished' by quoting the second stanza in full, Leavis comments on the occurrence of the word 'existlessness' in the third: it 'is a questionable word, a characteristic eccentricity of invention; and yet here it sounds right'. We know how important language was to Leavis as a criterion for great literature, and so we can understand how the 'rightness' of a single

word can please him. As for the rest of the poem, Hardy's usual 'rustic stiffness' is transformed from a negative quality into 'a kind of guarantee of integrity' – and there is an 'exquisite modulation into the last stanza' (pp. 59-60). The decisive factor in the 'greatness' of the 'great' Hardy poems is that they largely 'start immediately out of his own remembered past, and are particular evocations of utter loss, the blindness of chance, the poignancy of love and its helplessness, and the cruelty of time'.³⁶ So it seems, then, that Leavis dislikes Hardy's 'turn[ing] out' of 'meditations upon a deterministic universe and the cruel accident of sentience' because the writer's 'impulse' was a superficial one; the great poems whose subjects include 'the blindness of chance' and 'the cruelty of time', however, are 'great' because their creation was inspired by the 'particular', the personal, the immediate, Hardy's own life. Despite such praise, Leavis cannot forget the temporal context for Hardy's work. His 'rural' settings, his focus on 'simple pieties, the quiet rhythms and the immemorial ritual of rustic life' all work against him, because it is exactly 'the absence of these, or of any equivalent' which has formed 'the environment of the modern poet'. He implies that it might have been possible for Hardy to have a valuable influence on 'the younger poets' (p. 58), but for the fact that the 'anthologists' are always 'choos[ing] from his insignificant poems and leav[ing] out the great ones'. Hardy is, in the end, 'little read, or, at any rate, little appreciated', and 'a Hardy who can blend with the *Shropshire Lad* is not important' (p. 62).

The Summer 1940 issue of the quarterly *Southern Review* was dedicated to the centennial of Thomas Hardy's birth, counting among its contributors John Crowe Ransom, R. P. Blackmur, W. H. Auden, and Allen Tate. Leavis's 'Hardy the Poet' is the seventh article, and the critic summarises his opinion of Hardy – as both novelist and poet – right at the beginning, over nearly two pages. He recalls that, when asked to contribute by the editor, he had 'replied with the warning that I didn't share the generally accepted estimate of Hardy. I think, in fact, that it greatly overexalts him' (p. 87). He proceeds to explain that his view of Hardy as a novelist is a 'dissident valuation' which he has tried to mutate into something rather less inimical – but 'I used once to say that I shouldn't have known he was a great novelist if I hadn't been told', and even after 'sufficiently dogged attempts' to change his mind, 'I am now convinced that he is not

³⁶ What Leavis praises in the poetry here, he oddly does not find to praise in the prose (as will be seen later, from his comments in the *Southern Review* and in *GT*), although many readers since have found the themes of loss, chance, love and its helplessness, and 'the cruelty of time' to be some of the major themes in Hardy's novels.

one.’ He officially does not close himself off, however, from being persuaded that the opposite is true, and notes that it ‘will be interesting to see what [...] new light will be thrown on the novels in this issue of *The Southern Review*’, and as for the poetry, he ‘should [...] like to see what there is to be said about it by a critic who rates Hardy the poet higher than I do’ – not meaning, of course, that it would be difficult to find such a critic. He was (rather hubristically, perhaps, but ‘I must not pretend to be more modest than I am’) concerned that his article might ‘stand in the way of possible new light’, but clearly not concerned enough, for his article was, after all, written and published; which suggests that he was quite sure of his position at the time, and he wrote nothing afterwards which suggests that this position ever changed substantially. The rest of the two pages is filled with his expression of what amounts to a heavily qualified appreciation of Hardy’s work as a poet. He believes that his article will not be

merely a matter of deprivation: Hardy stands to gain by it – if, that is, I am right in my belief that his acceptance as a poet is almost wholly conventional. For though I shouldn’t think of calling Hardy a great poet, I do believe that he wrote a certain amount of major poetry. And this major poetry is hardly ever represented in the anthologies that bring him in.

As in *New Bearings*, then, (and as in *The Great Tradition*), his concentration is again directed at other people’s opinion of Hardy just as much as at Hardy himself – by performing a critique of the latter, Leavis clearly hopes to correct the former (as we know, the literary critic has, in his opinion, the duty to give ‘due recognition’ to a writer, in order to enable his or her work to affect ‘the contemporary sensibility’, and if this is not done, there cannot be much value in a work of literature, or in literary criticism).

The line he takes in ‘Hardy the Poet’ is exactly the same line he took in *New Bearings*, though he explores Hardy a little more fully in this later work. Once again, and just as Empson also did, he comments on the fact that the ‘major poetry’ consists of only ‘a very small amount’ of the ‘great deal of verse’ he wrote: ‘there are nine hundred and fifty pages in the collected volume, and to go through them again, as I did before writing this note, was to be, if possible, still more convinced of the need for a strictly discriminating justice’. He calls himself a ‘judicious admirer’ of Hardy the poet, who ‘wish[es] to ensure proper attention for Hardy’, and that this is the reason he is forced to be so very selective (the judgement of quality being, we recall, an inextricable part of the

task of criticism for Leavis).³⁷ In what follows, Leavis is forever shifting from the terribly patronising to the openly approving – and the reader of this article is more certain than ever that he liked what he liked very much, but seriously detested what he did not like. The ‘common run’ of Hardy’s poems ‘might have been produced by the “Poet’s Corner” Laureate of a Victorian country newspaper’, he says, and a ‘prolonged exploration’ of *The Complete Poems* ‘is discouraging and blunting’. On no account, then, should one read all of Hardy. What one should read are the same six poems he already listed in *New Bearings* as being his best (p. 92); further, there are eight poems ‘deserving to be handed down’ in their entirety: ‘Friends Beyond’ (which is a ‘success’) and ‘Julie Jane’, both of which are examples of ‘that rustic world of the novelist’s most felicitous preoccupation’ (though this very ‘rusticity’ works also against Hardy in the context of his place in Leavis’s time, and can also result in a ‘rustic stiffness’ of the wrong kind; and it is also, we remember, one of the elements which Eliot would happily have done without); ‘The Darkling Thrush’, ‘Shut Out That Moon’, ‘The Night of the Dance’ are ‘brooding and reminiscent’; and ‘The Division’, ‘Overlooking the River Stour’, ‘On the Doorstep’ are ‘fresh, sharply registered perceptions – direct perceptions of one who lives at first hand in a real world’ (pp. 90-1). Another ten lines in all from three poems obtain a positive mention (two from ‘The Sick God’ and one from ‘To a Motherless Child’ which ‘manifest’ his ‘originality’ in ‘some impressive stylistic inventions’, and seven from ‘A Commonplace Day’ are again ‘successful’ (pp. 95 and 96)). He tells us why he likes them, but, as with some of his other judgements of poetry, it is difficult to be satisfied with his reasons as reasons valid for any reader; they are, rather, reasons personal to him, no matter how much his tone may lead one to expect that he demands our agreement. After all, in what way is Hardy’s ‘rustic world’ his ‘most felicitous preoccupation’? Why is ‘mindsight memory-laden’, in ‘To a Motherless Child’, more stylistically ‘impressive’ than ‘Cheeks that were fair in their flush-time’ in ‘In Front of the Landscape’? As always with him (and as we saw, when we looked more closely at his analytical method in Part I), quotation tends to stand for evidence – and while it is good to know what the text is

³⁷ Peter Widdowson notes that ‘[c]ritics as diverse as [F. R. Leavis,] William Empson, Mark Van Doren, Samuel Hynes, Donald Davie, and J. Hillis Miller have identified the problem: everyone, days Davie, “complains that nearly 1,000 poems are too much, and asks for a more or less agreed-upon select few, a canon on which Hardy’s reputation shall rest.”’ (Peter Widdowson, ‘Hardy and Critical Theory’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, p. 78.) This is a somewhat questionable statement – it may be true of Empson and Leavis, but it will be seen in Chapter Four that Miller does not in fact regret the sheer volume of poems.

which has prompted Leavis's judgements, it is also, as we know he himself supposed, only ever the beginning, not the end, of a critical dialogue. The target of Leavis's disapproval is shared by, among others, 'My Cicely', 'The Inconsistent', 'Reminiscences of a Dancing Man', 'In a Cathedral City', 'In Front of the Landscape' (all of which he presents as examples of 'the gauche unshrinking mismarriages – group-mismarriages – of his diction' (pp. 88-9)), and 'A Singer Asleep'. His harshest words, however, are reserved for *Satires of Circumstance* and – a touch out of place in an article supposedly about Hardy as poet, not prose writer – *Life's Little Ironies*. He calls them 'pessimistic little anecdotes devised to enforce the Hardy *Weltanschauung* and illustrate the malice of Nescience', which are, 'though they again and again carry self-parody to unpalatable lengths and abound in unintended risibilities, too monotonous in their *parti pris* to be read in bulk with anything but boredom'. His main objection to them, then, is (at this point touching on the same kind of reaction to Hardy had by Eliot and Empson) to their philosophy, rather than their form (while Richards's main line of praise was for that same philosophy); and whatever the source of Hardy's 'major status', it is 'decidedly not as a philosophic poet that we grant it him' (p. 95). He has very much the same things to say about 'The Voice' as he did in *New Bearings*, adding, in an uncharacteristically enthusiastic moment, that 'it is an exquisite sureness of touch – hardly suggesting a naïf artist – that is manifested in the changed movement of the last stanza, with its effect as of a subsiding into the recognition of utter loss'. In 'The Voice', as in the other good poems, 'the Hardy characteristics become poetic virtues', argues Leavis, but his attempt at an explanation is again not always very convincing: why is 'existlessness' better than the 'wan wistlessness', which replaces the word in later editions? In what way does its final stanza represent 'the recognition of utter loss' (pp. 92-3)? Perhaps he might have been more persuasive than this, had he gone into more detail, which he does not. Startlingly, he subsequently elevates 'After a Journey' from the item of archaic solidity it was in *New Bearings*, to a poem which can help us answer 'the question, what is meant by saying that in these poems Hardy is a major poet' (p. 94) – even more startlingly, because he quotes, by way of supporting evidence, exactly the last lines he quoted in *New Bearings* to produce a negative effect. Moving on to a discussion of the same paragraph of Middleton Murry's referred to by Richards in *Poetries and Sciences*, Leavis suspects that 'Hardy is notable for limitation rather than breadth', but (in a move which would no doubt startle many of his readers, contemporary and modern) does not think that this is in itself a bad thing. The 'solidity' in *New Bearings* becomes, in this article, translated into Hardy's 'tenacious

simplicity of character’, meaning that ‘[i]n spite of time, the love and the loved object, equally real, are still present to him, and the recognition of loss is correspondingly complete and poignant. So it is that Hardy is able to render with such weight a central element in human experience.’ This very unchangeability,³⁸ then, enables Hardy to deal with a ‘central element in human experience’, and is thus here a valuable quality. ‘A Commonplace Day’ lends itself to the final textual analysis in the article; although it is not entirely ‘satisfactory’, it is, so Leavis argues, a ‘product of a genuinely individual sensibility’ and has ‘a certain obvious impressiveness’, showing ‘a poet’s originality of expression’. There is, however, ‘a certain strength that one feels to be of a wrong kind’, in that Hardy uses words that do not fit with other images in the poem (for instance, the verb ‘scuttles’ in line two is deemed not to suit the later phrases of ‘turning ghost’ and ‘the twilight’s stride extends’). There is an occasional ‘boldness of imagery’, but while the fourth stanza is ‘successful’, the ‘generally-reflective rest of the poem is poor stuff, though the final two lines might have been the close of something better’ (p. 97). Leavis’s critique of this poem can almost be seen as epitomising his treatment of Hardy generally – to apply a cliché, while his one hand gives, the other takes away. On balance, however, more is taken than given, and Hardy remains for him an unimportant poet. He puts the ‘gross overestimate’ of Hardy’s talent down to Middleton Murry’s support of him, which led to Hardy being ‘readily seen by the enlightened and advanced [including Richards] as a solidly massive figure’ (p. 98). Murry’s views were in turn helped along by the ‘prospect in contemporary poetry’, which was ‘mainly vacancy: while no intelligent observer could any longer suppose that the still continuing Georgian movement was a stir and promise of life, Eliot had not yet arrived as a major presence’. This ‘Chekhov period’, as he calls it, was simply unable to identify the truth about Hardy, because its critical faculty was stunted by the absence of good modern writing – in paraphrase, those critics who greatly valued Hardy did so because they were measuring him against too low a standard. We are reminded here of his *Revaluation* and *New Bearings*, and his numerous attempts at a reassessment of popular writers, and it seems that Leavis has here discovered another opportunity to stand apart from conservative opinion.

In *The Great Tradition*, Leavis is, as we know, making the case for the appointment of George Eliot, Jane Austen, Joseph Conrad, and Henry James as ‘[t]he great English novelists’ (p. 1). Hardy not only has no place in this illustrious company, but he is

³⁸ ‘[P]anthea rhei, but not inside Thomas Hardy’. Compare this to Miller’s vision of Hardy as very changeable indeed (see here, Chapter Four).

positioned all the way at the opposite end of the range.³⁹ He crops up here and there in order for Leavis to be able to make a point, either against some other criticism of the writers whom he champions, or in support of his view of those writers by means of a favourable comparison to Hardy (that is, a comparison which favours anyone but Hardy). What he wrote in ‘Hardy the Poet’ – about his having tried, but failed, to be convinced of Hardy’s skill as a novelist – is evidently still true eight years later. Early on in *The Great Tradition*, we learn that Conrad, by virtue of being ‘one of those creative geniuses whose distinction is manifested in their being peculiarly alive in their time [...], sensitive to the stresses of the changing climate as they begin to be registered by the most conscious’, is ‘incomparably closer to us to-day than Hardy and Meredith’. Though he concedes that this is also true of George Eliot, he argues that his particular aim here is to counter those who have ‘offered’ Hardy and Meredith ‘to us among the great novelists’ who are ‘philosophically profound about life’. Not so, says Leavis. Hardy, who ‘owes enormously to George Eliot’, cannot ‘support his reputation’. Once again, he criticises him for being unsuited to the modern day, which is partly Hardy’s own day, and for being anything but ‘pre-eminently the representative of the “modern consciousness” or the modern “sense of the human situation”’. We have seen how Leavis was ever keen to dispute whichever ‘canon’ was promoted by the prevalent line of the day, and it will therefore come as no surprise that he is denigrating not so much Hardy directly, as Hardy-via-the-prevalent-view (it is the fact that ‘Hardy should have been taken’ to be all this ‘in the early nineteen-twenties’ which he finds ‘a little comic’, more than Hardy himself). Yet though he does, admittedly, grant him a modicum of talent, this modicum is so very small that it may almost just as well not have been granted:

On Hardy [...] the appropriately sympathetic note is struck by Henry James: “The good little Thomas Hardy has scored a great success with *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, which is chock-full of faults and falsity, and yet has a singular charm.” This concedes by implication all that properly can be conceded – unless we claim more for *Jude the Obscure*, which, of all Hardy’s works of a major philosophic-tragic ambition, comes nearer to sustaining it, and, in its clumsy way – which hasn’t the

³⁹ In terms of bare numbers, of the nine thousand four hundred and twenty-four lines in the book, Hardy is given a mere forty-two.

rightness with which the great novelists show their profound sureness of their essential purpose – is impressive. (pp. 21-2)⁴⁰

Hardy fails once more, however, when he is compared to George Eliot – he not only ‘owes enormously’ to her, but is presented as if a rather pathetic-looking pupil. One critic’s comment that ‘Hardy and Meredith make George Eliot look deficient’ is an ‘absurdity’: ‘Hardy, decent as he is, [appears] as a provincial manufacturer of gauche and heavy fictions that sometimes have corresponding virtues’ (p. 124). *Under the Greenwood Tree* may prove ‘an illuminating third term for comparison’ to *Silas Marner* and *Hard Times*, but Leavis is in no doubt that Hardy would not come off well in such a context, since he precedes that statement with a half-apology for possibly having ‘done less than justice to *Silas Marner*’ (p. 47, n.1, added to the ‘New’ edition in 1960); and the placing of *Far from the Maddening Crowd* by the side of Eliot’s novel would also be ‘to George Eliot’s advantage (enormously so), and to Hardy’s detriment’ (p. 47).

Just as he did in ‘Hardy as Poet’, Leavis is again clearly working towards his aim of helping to produce an ‘educated public’ by means of identifying what is and what is not good literature. In the 1940 essay, he believed that Hardy had only been so highly valued because there had not been anything better at that time; and one of his concerns in *The Great Tradition* is that the paucity of good modern novels has led critics to ‘have expectations that prevent them from distinguishing [...] the signs of serious art’ (p. 153). Hence his interest in refuting Hardy’s value as one of the ‘great writers’ of the time – and being ‘of the time’ is, as we know, in Leavis’s opinion a crucial criterion for being a good writer.

⁴⁰ On *Jude*, see also his note on p. 23 (n.1): ‘Arthur Mizener’s essay, “*Jude the Obscure* as a Tragedy”, in the Thomas Hardy Centennial Issue of *The Southern Review* [...], puts interestingly the case for a serious estimate of the book.’

Chapter Three: The Novelist, Sex and Class Politics

Eagleton and Showalter

From thoughts on the value of Hardy's attitude towards religion and his place in a particular time of the world, we now encounter the thoughts of two analysts whose studies of his work are vastly different from what we have read so far. While the Practical Critics have focused on the philosophical content of Hardy's work, they have also engaged with his style, with his poetics – albeit some of them to a greater extent than others – Eagleton and Showalter will, however, be seen to be more interested in his politics than in anything else. Eagleton has written in the main about the ideological dimensions of Hardy's works, as far as they relate to the wider social and economic questions, and also briefly, in an early book, about the ideological constructedness of Hardy himself. Showalter moves from the discussion of Hardy's gender-politics, both inside and outside his work, to a point at which he ceases to have any value for her at all. Both of them, crucially, engage almost exclusively with Hardy's prose (the reason for which might be that it is arguably somewhat harder to isolate, in his poetry, material elements which indicate a political, social, or economic engagement). The key difference between what these two (and Bhabha, in his silence) have done with, or to, Hardy, and what the Practical Critics have done, is not so much one of degrees of close reading, as one of intention. Superficially, it seems that neither Eagleton and Showalter read the texts any less, or more, closely than the Practical Critics did, but they introduce such a wealth of context that it becomes difficult to disentangle that which they have found in the text from that which they have discovered outside it, about Hardy the man and about Hardy's time. Both of them associate the novels so tightly with certain social and economic circumstances, that their readings cease to be readings of the texts, and become analyses of the world in which Hardy wrote, and hence analyses designed to give the reader an impression, even an assumed knowledge, of what was and is wrong with certain aspects of humanity, in particular the 'reification of man', the oppression of certain social groups, and the oppression of women.

In *Walter Benjamin, or: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, Eagleton presents to the reader 'ways in which Benjamin's work might be used to illuminate some key problems

now confronting a “revolutionary criticism”.⁴¹ Hardy functions here as a tool by means of which Eagleton attempts to ‘contest’ the ‘productions of the artefact that are the work of bourgeois ideology’ (p. 126). The ‘critical treatment of Thomas Hardy’, he argues, is one such instance of ‘ideological production’, and the ‘name “Thomas Hardy”, like that of any other literary producer, signifies a particular ideological and biographical formation; but it also signifies the process whereby a certain set of texts are grouped, constructed, and endowed with the “coherency” of a “readable” *oeuvre*.’ Hardy is only one of many such ‘literary producers’, any of whom might have been used by Eagleton for this purpose, and the inclusion of his name in inverted commas turns him from a human being into a concept, a

set of ideological practices through which certain texts, by virtue of their changing, contradictory modes of insertion into the dominant “cultural” and pedagogical apparatuses, are processed, “corrected” and reconstituted so that a home may be found for them within a literary “tradition” that is always an “imaginary” unit of the present.

Eagleton is working from a specifically Marxist standpoint, which differentiates what he does in what follows from Miller’s notion of the artificiality of a coherent ‘Thomas Hardy’ in *The Linguistic Moment*.⁴² Eagleton believes that a characteristic which distinguishes Hardy from some of the other writers who might have been taken as an example, is that he is a paradox: ‘He is a major realist, the creator of “memorable” scenes and characters; yet he can be scandalously nonchalant about the “purity” of orthodox verisimilitude, risking “coincidence” and “improbability”.’ (p. 126) As we saw earlier, Leavis thought very little of the multitude of different literary styles in Hardy’s poetry. For Eagleton, this becomes a point of praise, when we recall how he considers literature, and in particular the realist novel, to be capable of working for oppression by means of a pretence of naturalness: ‘With blunt disregard for formal consistency, he is ready to articulate form upon form – to mingle realist narration, classical tragedy, folk-fable, melodrama, “philosophical” discourse, social commentary, and by doing so to betray the laborious constructedness of literary production.’ Hardy, that is, highlights the artificiality of literature, rather than ‘naturalizing’ it with the help of ‘fictional device’; and he does so

⁴¹ From the first page of his ‘Preface’ (London: NLB, 1981) n.p.

⁴² See here, Part III, Chapter Four.

not only in its more formal aspects (p. 127), but also by means of the philosophy which he presents in his work; and ‘the supposedly dour, fatalistic bent of his art, its refusal to repress the tragic, has had a profoundly unnerving effect upon the dominant critical ideologies, which must be rationalized as “temperamental gloom” or a home-spun *fin-de-siècle* pessimism’ (pp. 126-7).⁴³ In his opinion, this is why a ‘predominant critical strategy has therefore been simply to write him out’, making reference to Henry James’s ‘good little Thomas Hardy’ comment, and to Leavis and *Scrutiny*, who ‘expel Hardy from the “great tradition” of nineteenth-century realism’. The first problem with this is that Eagleton disregards evidence which shows that Hardy was not written out at that time (we only need to turn back a few pages of this thesis to read Leavis, Richards, and through them also Murry). The second problem is, that by calling it a ‘critical strategy’, he suggests that James and Leavis were working towards a particular end, the end of nullifying Hardy because of a moral or artistic incorrectness, which is highly disputable: for is disliking the majority of his work the same as actively wanting to be rid of him? If any of the Practical Critics deserve such a charge, then Eliot is the only reasonable suspect, for he would surely, at least in the 1930s, have liked to have Hardy excommunicated from the circle of published authors because of the damage that his heretical views and aesthetics could have caused to the reading public. The third problem with this is, that Eagleton ignores the truth that Leavis did, after all, praise some of Hardy’s poetry – very little of it, admittedly, but the mere fact that Leavis wrote an article for the *Southern Review*’s special issue on Hardy, and declared in it that at least fourteen of the poems ‘deserv[ed] to be handed down’, testifies against a desire to ‘write him out’.

Eagleton then gives us an account of the ‘four distinct stages’ through which ‘Hardy criticism’ has gone since Hardy was first published, arguing that ‘all of [them] may be permuted in the work of any particular critic’, and apparently rejecting them all – visions which range from that of Hardy as ‘anthropologist of Wessex’ (during Hardy’s own lifetime) and as ‘the melancholic purveyor of late nineteenth-century nihilism’ (between the publication of *The Dynasts* in 1908 and the 1940s), to the period of the 1940s and 1950s, in which ‘no accommodation’ could be made for Hardy among critics who followed ‘formalist, organicist and anti-theoretical assumptions (“New Criticism” in the United States, *Scrutiny* in England) and the subsequent period of a ‘more “sociological” reading of Hardy’. All of these are, he argues, mere ‘mythologies’. Once Hardy was ‘[s]afely defused’ by them, however, it was only in order for him to ‘merit the

⁴³ See also pp. 129-30, and his discussion of the subject in *EN*, pp. 207-9.

attention of critics more preoccupied with colour imagery than with the Corn Laws or the Immanent Will; and the sixties and seventies witnessed a stealthy recuperation of his texts by formalist criticism' (pp. 127-8). How right is he, given our readings of Eliot, Empson, Leavis, and Richards, who – by virtue of their timing – presumably fall into the second category, that which saw in Hardy 'the melancholic purveyor of late nineteenth-century nihilism'? The fact is, that Eagleton is rather simplifying the situation. Leavis and Empson did criticise Hardy's pessimism, but they also formulated critiques of his work which included the positive, and commented on his stylistics as much as on his philosophy; Eliot criticised not Hardy's pessimism, but specifically what he perceives to be his absence from the Christian tradition; and Hardy's view of life and the universe very much appealed to Richards, who did not consider them to be pessimistic or nihilistic at all – rather, he believed that they were realistic. Leavis's opposition to the prevailing opinion of Hardy during the 'Chekhov period', furthermore, also shows how opinions were divided. That single sentence of Eagleton's, then, is found to be insufficient as a true summary of the critical situation, and it will become clear from later discussions of Showalter and Miller's analyses, that he is also wrong in his assessment of 'the sixties and seventies'. Regardless of whether or not one agrees with Eagleton on the subject of the usefulness or otherwise of formalism and of a concern with colour imagery, neither of the two analysts is very much concerned with either of these.

In short, Eagleton believes that 'Hardy has been phenomenologized, Freudianized, biographized, and claimed as the true guardian of "English" liberal-democratic decencies against the primitive extremism of émigré modernists' (p. 128). Having explained how in particular the recurrent negative judgements made about Hardy's style are based on certain ideological expectations, he declares that it is precisely this unexpectedness which is so valuable in Hardy: 'What is repressed [...] is the fact that the significance of Hardy's writing lies precisely in the *contradictory* constitution of his linguistic practice,' and that the 'ideological effectivity of his fiction inheres neither in "rustic" nor in "educated" writing, but in the ceaseless play and tension between the two modes' (pp. 128-9). The 'oddity' which Empson, Leavis and Miller have noted about Hardy's language becomes in Eagleton's hands almost a revolutionary tool – or at least, a resistance to ideology. In his opinion, it 'is not a question of whether Hardy wrote "well" or "badly"', but 'a question of the ideological disarray that his fictions, consciously or not, are bound to produce within a criticism implacably committed to the "literary" as a yardstick of maturely civilized consciousness'. Finally, drawing on Benjamin's idea of

history and Messianic time, Eagleton concludes that it is impossible to say '[w]hether [he] can be wrested from history and inserted into tradition', or indeed 'whether it is *worth* doing so' (p. 130), until the time of 'the final political combat', which 'will produce the conditions for his significant reception'. By the time he has written *The English Novel*, of course, he has clearly come to reject this idea, and judged Hardy worth inserting into tradition. That he has himself already been judging Hardy throughout these five pages, by presenting him as someone who runs against the grain of conservative principles, does not seem to occur to Eagleton; given that he is opposed to criticism which elevates 'literariness', surely the idea that Hardy's 'fictions' bring such criticism into 'ideological disarray', suggests that Hardy, in his opinion, wrote well? Furthermore, although he is perceptive about the effect which expectations can have on the manner in which a writer is read and evaluated, he does not seem to think that his own doings in that regard may be subject to as much misguidance as those of the critics whose approaches to Hardy he rejects.

In *Criticism and Ideology* (which he describes in *Walter Benjamin* as a work 'less political in timbre and more conventionally academic in style and form'), Hardy's novels are employed at one point to support a theory of conflict between a text's official and actual ideologies.⁴⁴ Having proposed that the 'differential relations between text and ideology' are 'historically mutable', and 'therefore demand specific historical definition', he attempts to explain how 'such variability can be traced in the career of a single author', namely, Thomas Hardy, whose 'fiction demonstrates a series of alternative relations between text and ideology'. Listing *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *The Woodlanders*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure* (in that order), he identifies them as a series which increasingly transcends the 'pastoral' ideology lying at the root of their form, which 'transcendence' is finally 'consummat[ed] [...] in *The Woodlanders* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* [...] in a fully elaborated idealism', and then immediately subjected to the 'dramatic internal dislocations and contradictions' of *Jude the Obscure*, with the result that this novel 'highlight[s] the limits of realism itself'.⁴⁵ This is an interesting supposition, but

⁴⁴ In the chapter 'Towards a Science of the Text', extracted from *CI*, in *Marxist Literary Theory*, pp. 296-327 (p. 321).

⁴⁵ Eagleton's perception of *Jude* as a novel which somehow forms an apex, or a natural end, to Hardy's novel-writing, is noticeable also in *EN* and in his 'Introduction' to *Jude the Obscure* (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 13-23 (p. 13), and in 'Thomas Hardy', in *EN*, p. 212.

it is marked by the absence of a more detailed study of these novels here; and it is perhaps asking a little more from the reader than he or she can give, to make such a sweeping statement without providing the kind of evidence from the novels with whose help a reader might follow his argument. This is not to say that what Eagleton proposes here is unjustified, or that it would not make an excellent starting-point for further research; but it places Hardy once again into the less than satisfying position of illustration of a wider theory which was not apparently itself born of a reading of Hardy's work. It can only really have the kind of reasonableness of statements such as Eliot's 'at times [Hardy's] style touches sublimity' or Empson's praise of his 'good rhythm', Richards's comment on 'the deliberate purity of his responsiveness' or Leavis's criticism of his 'gaucherie'. That is, it can only ever be a statement to induce discussion, and cannot be the last word on the matter. In twenty-two lines, Eagleton covers seven of Hardy's novels, none of which is an entirely straightforward creation, and if what he says may illustrate the wider point he is making in the chapter and book, it neither really tell us enough about the texts, nor constitutes enough of an exposition of their internal ideological conflicts. In what way does *Under the Greenwood Tree* produce a "pastoral" ideology', and simultaneously display its 'limits'? In what way does *Far from the Maddening Crowd* throw this ideology into 'radical self-question' while 'endors[ing] it in its final refusal of tragedy' (this 'refusal of tragedy' itself being something with which one could argue)? In what way can *The Woodlanders* and *Tess* be called 'fully elaborated realism'? And can *Jude* be considered the logical culmination of a chain displaying a mutation in Hardy as a writer and philosophizer, given that the second version of *The Well-Beloved* was written after it, and arguably changes the original version so drastically that it may well be called Hardy's actual final novel? There is not much, here, between Eagleton and the Practical Critics, in this tendency to make general comments about one or more of Hardy's works without further clarification; and whatever lengths he goes to, in the later *Walter Benjamin*, to 'write out' previous Hardy criticism, Eagleton is here himself repeating the very ideological construction of 'Thomas Hardy' which he rejects there.

In *How to Read a Poem*, he produces a somewhat superficial analysis of the first stanza of 'The Darkling Thrush', in which he says that its 'sound texture' is 'close-packed or densely woven', with 'every syllable in this lean verse being encouraged to work overtime' (p 121). It is an 'utterly lucid' stanza, with its alliterations, assonances, and the 'unmelodious "tangled bine-stems" is chock-full of muscular syllables rammed haphazardly against each other'; it is a 'remarkable' piece, 'tight[ly] interweaving [...]

abstract allegory and keenly observed naturalistic detail'. As in *Criticism and Ideology*, Hardy is not the primary subject of this book, or even of the particular chapter in which he turns up (on 'Texture'), and there are only three other brief comments on him in a chapter on 'Four Nature Poems', none of them by Hardy himself (see pp. 145, 148 and 160). The text in which Eagleton deals most thoroughly with Hardy (apart from his 'Introduction' to *Jude the Obscure*),⁴⁶ is his chapter on him in *The English Novel*, which is filled with a wealth of interpretation of Hardy's novels from a Marxist point of view. Somewhat unconvincing, if not flawed, in its arguments, and representing much less of a close reading of the novels than, for instance, Showalter's article on *The Mayor of Casterbridge* or Miller's chapters on *Tess* and *The Well-Beloved*, it covers a multitude of themes which are in the main related to questions of class, capitalism, social relations, and the objectification of humanity. He starts off with the statement that '[n]ot all that long ago, a standard account of Thomas Hardy might have run rather like this', and then produces this 'account' (p. 187). He does not make specific reference to one or another critic, but when we compare this to *Walter Benjamin*, it is clear that he is essentially producing a summary of the 'four stages' of criticism through which Hardy has travelled up to this point. 'Not a word of that account is in fact true', he adds, and his intention in this chapter is revealed as an 'inquiry' into 'why not', which 'might lead us to a more accurate understanding of the man and his fiction'. His negation of the 'standard account' already tells us who he thinks Hardy is: he is not 'a self-educated author', he did not 'struggle his way up from the ranks of the common people', he did not write novels that were 'gloomily fatalistic' or 'about an English peasant society whose traditional way of life was being undermined by external urban forces' – and these terms are what he discusses in the following twenty-five or so pages. His discussion includes elements such as Hardy's biography (he was the 'son of a rural builder', he attended 'a reputable high school', he 'qualified as a professional architect', and so on), and the rebuttal of certain misapprehensions about education at the time. More prominently than these, however, he makes use of Hardy's social context, including that he did not 'write of peasants, for the excellent reason that hardly any of them existed in rural England' (which precedes a definition of 'peasant' – and this, even though he himself calls the shearers in *Far from the Madding Crowd* 'harmonious peasants' on p. 191); the effect of the 'land enclosures of the late eighteenth century'; 'farming in England' at Hardy's time; a list of the occupations of

⁴⁶ This text is very similar to his analysis of the novel in *EN*, pp. 304-12, and has therefore not been dealt with separately here.

the 'rural lower middle class' from which Hardy came and which was in 'steep social decline in his own day'; and a history of Egdon Heath and its handling by the Forestry Commission (pp. 187-9). He then explains Hardy's class 'allegiances', which he places 'neither with the governing classes nor with the plebeian masses', but with the 'mobile, unstable lower middle class [...] trapped between aspiration and anxiety, and therefore typical of some of the central contradictions of the age'. This, he says, is the case also 'with most of the classic English nineteenth-century novelists', and Hardy therefore 'could attend to the plight of this obscure social grouping without losing a grip on broader issues' (he does not show us how this was, in fact, Hardy's aim in his writing). By way of textual evidence, Eagleton cites Gabriel Oak, Tess Durbeyfield, Alec d'Urberville, Jude Fawley, Giles Winterborne, Michael Henchard as characters who 'are not unskilled, illiterate rural labourers, though the threat of being forced down into that semi-destitute mass haunts several of them'.⁴⁷

Moving on from establishing the class to which some of Hardy's protagonists belong, Eagleton turns his attention to the gap between desire and reality which, he believes, plays a significant role in the narrative development of many of Hardy's novels: 'If Hardy's protagonists are so often tragic figures, or only narrowly avoid that fate, it is partly because they are caught between a vision of fulfilment and a frustrating reality.' The reason for their failure to escape is that they 'are enterprising enough to aspire beyond the parochial communities in which they live, but lack the resources or good fortune to transcend those limits altogether' (p. 189). He notices in Hardy's novels, too, the sense that 'the drive to emancipation is too often deadlocked, betrayed, beaten back, turned against itself, stoically abandoned [...] [and] turns out often enough to be internally flawed, not just externally thwarted'. By contrast, 'those too lowly to nurture such aspirations are usually immune to tragedy, as are most of those who have already achieved power and status.' *Jude the Obscure*, in its entirety, provides an example of this in the closing pages of his chapter: the university at Christminster, argues Eagleton, 'exists among other reasons to keep people like Jude in their place', and 'the culture which represents a worthy aspiration for Jude is also one source of the deathly ideology which hounds him and his lover' (p. 204). This statement would have a place in a study of the

⁴⁷ He describes Gabriel Oak as having 'start[ed] off as a hired labourer before graduating to become an independent farmer and then a bailiff', but this appears to be a mistake. Gabriel Oak does not graduate from farmer to bailiff, but is a sheep-farmer when we first encounter him, loses his sheep, is then hired as a shepherd (a move downwards), and only late in the novel becomes bailiff and farm manager.

role played by academia as a 'source' of 'deathly ideology', assuming that he is really referring not to Christminster, but to Oxford, its supposed model in the real world. As a statement forming part of a textual analysis of the novel, however, it is surely an exaggeration of the case: as it exists in the pages of *Jude*, there really does not seem to be enough textual material to justify the assumption that all that which antagonises Jude and Sue is, firstly, external to them, and can, secondly, be traced back to Christminster.

In his comments on *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Woodlanders*, Eagleton presents his version of the social and economic characteristics of their time in the real world, and what he believes to have been the 'uncompromising class judgements' which Hardy makes in them. One aspect of Hardy's novels in general which arrests his attention is the complex relation between nature and culture which they apparently present. He asserts that 'Hardy is conscious that Nature, far from being the polar opposite of society, is always at some level socially defined' (p. 191; see also p. 199), and suggests, by the phrase 'Hardy is conscious', that both the truth of the statement and Hardy's consciousness of it are externally verifiable facts, rather than something he has come to realise from reading the novels. Another theme he discusses in this context is 'self-alienation', and he describes how '[s]everal of Hardy's characters live out a conflict between the way they experience themselves as living subjects, and the way they appear in the objectifying gaze of others', a self-alienation which Hardy himself shares (pp. 194-5 and p. 209)). The most striking examples of this are *Tess of d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, for which he conjures up Foucault:

Like most successfully repressive regimes, this is a society which [...] relies on its citizens scourging and dismembering themselves. [...] In the end, patriarchal England does not need to destroy Sue Bridehead: it can trust her to do it all by herself, through a guilty, self-lacerating submission to its law. (p. 197)

Neither the fact that nature is 'socially defined', nor the 'self-alienation' are very convincingly argued, and it is at these moments that we could have most done with some close textual analysis. Another rather unconvincing contention by Eagleton is that Hardy envisages 'the world as structurally ironic', which 'is to see conflict as built into it, since human perspectives are bound to collide' (p. 201). From this idea, he supposes that Hardy's 'way of looking tends to be piecemeal and provisional', and that he is far 'from pinning his faith in metaphysical absolutes like the Immanent Will or the President of the Immortals'. A study of Hardy's poetry and novels, however, suggests that he himself

does not (as poetic speaker and novelistic narrator) look at things in a manner ‘piecemeal and provisional’, but with the theistic narrator’s detachment from time and place akin to that of the thrush in ‘The Darkling Thrush’, which Eagleton refers to immediately afterwards as sitting ‘high on its branch’ and able to ‘see something which you cannot’ – what it sees is not partial, however, it is everything; it is the human being whose perspective is narrowed by virtue of his being immediately involved in the events;⁴⁸ and the ‘Immanent Will’ who turns up in much of Hardy’s poetry (for instance, in ‘The Convergence of the Twain’ and in *The Dynasts*) and the ‘President of the Immortals’ of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* can both certainly be seen as most concrete, and even as key, elements of Hardy’s philosophy.

Eagleton’s extensive analysis of *Jude the Obscure* (which seems to be his favourite of all Hardy’s work) in the chapter’s final section is a very similar work to his ‘Introduction’ to the novel’s 1974 Macmillan edition. He regards it as a novel which in part represents ‘literature protesting against literature’ (p. 210), which is a ‘dilemma’ it deals with ‘not only by its spare, functional, uncivil style, but by pressing as far as it can against the boundaries of literary realism’. It is laudable because it is ‘a novel which implicitly challenges novelistic representation, contrasting the mere imitation or reproduction of things with the creative energies of the act of production’, with ‘[r]eproduction in the literary sense’ being ‘now uncomfortably close to conformism in the social one’. With *Jude*, he says, Hardy brings ‘something new into the world’. The novel, too, ‘explores the limits of liberalism. It exposes the lie of freedom of choice in an oppressive society, without abandoning what is precious in that creed. It also sees what is false about Jude’s priggish scholarly dreams, while sympathizing with what is authentic in them.’ It is a shame that Eagleton makes what can only be described as a monumental error in his analysis. ‘Jude has the rare ability to see himself historically,’ he writes, ‘as most characters in fiction do not. “When people of a later age look back upon the barbarous customs and superstitions of the times that we have the unhappiness to live in,” he observes, “what *will* they say?”’ (p. 205) The only problem with this, as Eagleton might have said, is that it is not true: Jude does not speak these words – Sue does.⁴⁹ The fact that he produces the piece of dialogue by way of support for Jude’s ‘ability to see himself historically’ makes it worse, because without it, what evidence would he have

⁴⁸ Miller makes a rather good case for this line of thought in *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), and in his essay ‘History as Repetition’, in *Tropes*.

⁴⁹ See for example the Penguin Classics edition, p. 215.

provided? Does the fact, too, that Sue says this not have significant implications for his characterisation of her as a somehow less positive force than Jude? That he makes the mistake here could, of course, be put down to simple human fallibility, and would as such be entirely forgivable. That he makes it here for a second time⁵⁰ forces one to conclude one of two things: that he is intentionally stating an untruth, in order to support a notion he has and does not want to let go, or that he is careless in his reading. Whichever it is, taken together, this error, his lack of close textual analysis, and his tendency to produce generalised statements without satisfactory evidence from Hardy's writings, all testify to a critic who is not very interested in Hardy as such, but does exactly what he has himself accused other critics of having done, and continues to shape 'Thomas Hardy' as an ideological production whose relation to Eagleton's own ideology is more important than the words on the page.

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In 1979, Showalter wrote an article on Hardy which has remained her sole venture into a sustained critique of his work: 'The Unmanning of the Mayor of Casterbridge' consists of her analysis of gender roles in Hardy's novel, and she concludes that Hardy has 'dare[d] so fully [...] to pursue the feminine spirit in his man of character' in this novel, that its protagonist represents a 'hero [...] more Shakespearean than Victorian'.⁵¹ Her particular approach to Hardy becomes apparent immediately we have read the first sentence: 'To the feminist critic, Hardy presents an irresistible paradox' (p. 175). Clearly, she is not asking the question which someone like Miller has asked throughout his work, namely, 'Who is Thomas Hardy?', or – with Leavis, Richards and also, to an extent,

⁵⁰ The first time comes in his Macmillan 'Introduction', p. 22, and is not a simple case of his having copied out the same lines for *EN*. In the Macmillan, the occasion is worsened by the fact that Eagleton thereby attempts to show the contrast between Jude and Sue. While Sue 'attempt[s] to absolutise a particular tragedy as an act of Providence', which is 'the most dangerous form of false consciousness', that particular piece of dialogue is held up as 'a mark of Jude's resilience and rationality that he refuses to make this error: absolute as the tragedy is for him, he sees it nonetheless as historically relative'. If we follow his reference to 'p. 232', we can see that there, as in the Penguin Classics, Oxford and Wordsworth editions, it is in fact Sue who says this.

⁵¹ *Modern Critical Views: Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Harold Bloom, pp. 175-89 (p. 189). The essay was first published in *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Dale Kramer (London: Macmillan, 1979).

Empson, and Eagleton: 'What good is Thomas Hardy?'. Rather, she is wondering what Hardy 'presents' to a specifically 'feminist' critic like her (just as Eliot, in 'Personality and Demonic Possession', asked what Hardy might present to a religious critic like him; and just as Richards and Leavis asked what Hardy could do for their time, for the ordering of the mind, for future generations of poets). First the feminist criticism, then, and Hardy only afterwards – at least, that is how it appears, and the essay does little to suggest otherwise.

It is a full ninety-five lines (almost a fifth of the way) into the essay before there is a mention of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Up to that point, Showalter produces some contextual background – which she, evidently considers useful for the reader, just as Eagleton did with his – in the shape of a comparison of Hardy to some female writers of his period and an examination of his political stance on the topic of women and their emancipation. Thus we learn that 'Hardy is one of the few Victorian male novelists who wrote in what may be called a female tradition', that there was some initial uncertainty about whether or not *Far from the Madding Crowd* was really written by a man (it was apparently 'widely attributed to George Eliot'), that some female readers of his later novels frequently responded favourably to his heroines while 'others were shocked and indignant', that Hardy 'knew and respected many of the minor women novelists of his day and even 'collaborated on a short story with the novelist Florence Henniker, and possibly revised the work of other female protégées', and that 'his knowledge of the themes of feminist writing in the 1880s and 1890s was extensive'. Focussing on Hardy's gender politics, if one might call them this, both as private human and as a writer, she believes to have discerned in his work a 'distanced and divided attitude towards women, a sense of an irreconcilable split between male and female values and possibilities'. There were, she argues, 'indeed real and important ideological differences between Hardy and even advanced women of the 1890s'; for instance, 'Hardy's emphasis on the biological determinism of childbearing, rather than on the economic determinants of female dependency, put him more in the camp of Grant All[e]n than in the women's party.' Worse still, in 1892 he apparently 'declined membership in the Women's Progressive Society because he had not "as yet been converted to a belief in the desirability of the Society's first object" – women's suffrage.' His having seemingly supported the 'suffrage campaign' from 1906 or so onwards is described as a 'conversion', but one which was anything but pure – for it was

based on his hope [...] that ‘the tendency of the women’s vote will be to break up the present pernicious conventions in respect of manners, customs, religion, illegitimacy, the stereotyped household (that it must be the unit of society), the father of a woman’s child (that it is anybody’s business but the woman’s own except in cases of disease or insanity).’

Showalter does not elaborate on why this ‘hope’ warrants a ‘but’; we may take an educated guess, however, and suggest that her problem with it is that his support was not granted because he believed women to have equal rights to men, but that his eye was on the resolution of what he considered to be more general social problems. ‘Manners’ and ‘customs’ are terms which are perhaps too vague to be directly applicable only to women’s rights, and ‘religion’ is hardly a specifically feminist issue (pp. 175-7).

Just before she begins to talk about *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Showalter spends some time on explaining her intention. Twentieth-century criticism, she believes, has ‘often focused on the heroines of the novels’. Although ‘this perennial favourite of dissertation topics has received new incentive from the women’s movement’, and although essays like ‘the distinguished’ ones by Mary Jacobus ‘on Tess and Sue’ have ‘done much to unfold the complexities of Hardy’s imaginative response to the “woman question” of the 1990s’, this has meant a passing over of ‘other themes of equal significance to feminist critique’. Again, the perspective of the critique is put above the text: Showalter is asking what it is that one can pull out of Hardy in order to serve the particular aims of feminism. She concedes that it is ‘vain’ to try to ‘turn Hardy into a feminist’ (in itself surely a questionable wish), simply because – according to her – he ‘accords “the natural disabilities” more power than “bad tradition and false theories”’, which feminism does not. That is, Hardy makes the mistake of assuming that there are ‘natural disabilities’ which have had a larger role to play than culture in the assignation of a secondary social position to women (pp. 176-7). Approaching his work somewhat more closely, Showalter proposes that he ‘investigated the Victorian code of manliness, the man’s experience of marriage, the problem of paternity’ through ‘the heroes of his novels and short stories’, citing Henchard, Jude and Angel as examples of ‘heroes’ for whom ‘maturity involves a kind of assimilation of female suffering, an identification with a woman which is also an effort to come to terms with their own deepest selves’. She links this element in some of his male characters to what she considers to be an element in Hardy’s authorial life: ‘In Hardy’s career too there is a consistent element of self-expression through women; he uses them as narrators, as secretaries, as collaborators,

and finally, in the (auto)biography he wrote in the persona of his second wife, as screens or ghosts of himself. In short, Hardy is revealing in his male characters what is also true of him: that the best indication of ‘maturity’ is to express oneself with the help of female terms. ‘Hardy,’ she concludes, ‘not only commented upon, and in a sense, infiltrated, feminine fictions; he also understood the feminine self as the estranged and essential component of the male self’ (p. 177).⁵²

Turning to *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Showalter goes through the novel and picks out certain episodes of interest with regard to what she considers to be Henchard’s ‘unmanning’. In the process, she analyses a number of passages from which she quotes extensively,⁵³ and identifies the overall narrative structure as one which may be divided exactly into two halves at the point of Chapter XXVIII and the ‘furnity woman’s’ revelation to the Casterbridge magistrates’ court that Henchard had once sold his wife and daughter. She rejects Miller’s notion that this novel is ‘a nightmare of frustrated desire’ as too sexual; this statement of Miller’s turns up both in *Distance and Desire* and in his review of Irwing Howe’s *Thomas Hardy*⁵⁴ – but a reading of neither suggests that Showalter is correct in her interpretation. In fact, Miller argues that it is a matter of desiring ‘full possession’ of another person in more than a mere sexual sense (and he also includes Donald Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane as two of the characters to whom Henchard turns, which seems to extend the metaphor to both platonic and fatherly love). Showalter’s basic premise is that Henchard’s sale of wife and daughter and his ensuing self-imposed ‘chaste’ period (p. 181) constitute his initial attempt ‘to deny and divorce his passionate self; and that this, and his subsequent endeavour ‘to accept and educate’ it, ‘involve him in a pilgrimage of “unmanning” which is a movement towards both self-discovery and tragic vulnerability.’⁵⁵ The importance to a feminist criticism of doing this

⁵² We can only speculate whether Showalter’s use of ‘understood’ in the last clause of this sentence signals her belief that ‘the feminine self’ is in fact ‘the estranged and essential component of the male self’, or whether she merely means that Hardy thought this. If the latter is the case, it would have helped to be shown some sort of evidence for this; if the former, she is seemingly subjecting Hardy to her own assumptions, rather than trying to find out what it was he actually thought.

⁵³ There are quoted sections of six lines from Chapter XV on p. 182, seven lines from Chapter XIV on p. 184, six lines from Chapter XXXV on p. 185 and eight lines from Chapter XXXVIII on p. 187, in addition to many quoted words, phrases and lines throughout.

⁵⁴ ‘Howe on Hardy’s Art’, in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 2 (1969), 272-77 (p. 177).

⁵⁵ It curiously seems here as if she was thereby indicating that ‘tragic vulnerability’ is a female quality. Note a similarly odd occasion on p. 189, on which Showalter describes the ‘skills which Henchard struggles

is implied by her statement that '[i]t is in the analysis of this New Man, rather than in the evaluation of Hardy's New Women, that the case of Hardy's feminist sympathies may be argued' (pp. 177-8). Showalter finds much to applaud in the novel. She believes that it 'gives the fullest nineteenth-century portrait of a man's inner life – his rebellion and his suffering, his loneliness and jealousy, his paranoia and despair, his uncontrollable unconscious', and that the 'fantasy that women hold men back, drag them down, drain their energy, divert their strength, is nowhere so bleakly rebuked as in Hardy's tale of the "man of character"', in that the return of his wife and assumed daughter 'forces Henchard gradually to confront the tragic inadequacy of his codes, the arid limits of patriarchal power' (p. 179). Furthermore, in the novel's protagonist 'the forces of male rebellion and female suffering ultimately conjoin; and in this unmaning Hardy achieves a tragic power unequalled in Victorian fiction', and 'the feminist critic' can here 'see Hardy's swerving from the bluff virility of the Rabelais Club, and the misogyny of Gosse, towards his own insistent and original exploration of human motivation' (p. 189). Again, the opinions which Hardy expresses – or rather, which Showalter believes to have found in this novel – are treated as valuable material for a particularly feminist theory, and the compliments which she pays this, and others of his novels, tell us to what extent they might be sympathetic to feminism as a political movement. Thus she praises his 'remarkable heroines, even in the earlier novels' (p. 175), and 'the great heroines he would create in the 1890s' (p. 189). (Only in an aside does she take a different approach to his work: 'the aching melancholy of Hardy's poem "He Abjures Love"', contrasting it with its absence 'in Henchard's consciousness' (p. 181). A hint of an alternative interest in Hardy which she does not explore, here or elsewhere.)

Though she does indeed work hard at her analysis of Henchard's unmaning, Showalter cannot resist a few diversions into discussions which are not related to Hardy's work itself. One instance in which her feminist politics encroaches on her analysis and impels her to reach beyond the material of the novel itself, is her reading of Irving Howe's comment on the wife-auction, in particular his passing over the sale of the child. She proposes that '[p]erhaps one reason why the sale of the child has been so consistently ignored by generations of Hardy critics is that the child is female' (p. 179): if it had been a son, she writes, his sale 'would be so drastic a violation of patriarchal culture that it would wrench the entire novel out of shape', while the fact that it is a

finally to learn', that is, 'skills of observation, attention, sensitivity, and compassion, are also those of the novelist, and they are feminine perhaps, if one contrasts them to the skills of the architect or statesman'.

daughter makes the sale '[seem] almost natural'. There is no evidence, however, of any intentional passing over of the factor of the child's sale by 'generations of Hardy critics' because it is a girl, and it is therefore hard to see how this can be anything more than conjecture on her part. Even if she was right, and the sale of the daughter has been ignored (and it is true that little attention has been paid to the child's sex in other analyses of the novel), on what does she base her suspicion that this is down to the 'patriarchal culture'? Could it not, rather, be the case that the sale of the daughter is only a corollary of the sale of the wife – the auction is, after all, focused on the wife, not the girl? The text of the scene itself also suggests that it is not so much an active intention of Henchard's to sell the daughter, as a reaction to his wife's own demands, made on a previous occasion:

[...] But she is willing, provided she can have the child. She said so only the other day when I talked o't!' [said her husband.]
 'That you swear?' said the sailor to her.
 'I do,' said she [...].⁵⁶

Moreover, though it is possible that the sale of a son might have been more controversial than the sale of a daughter at the time in which the novel was published, it is not clear how exactly this would have 'wrench[ed]' the novel 'out of shape' – more likely, it would have wrenched Showalter's analysis out of shape, which focuses in the main on Henchard's specific rejection of women (she ignores the fact that Hardy's manuscript for the novel featured two girls, one of whom Henchard keeps).⁵⁷ In any case, she is here formulating a critique of analyses of the novel by other critics, which does not inform our reading of the novel in the process, and places the novel entirely outside its focus. Moving on to 'the mythology of Victorian manliness', she argues that, on its terms, '[f]inancial success [...] requires the subjugation of competing passions', which requirement is illustrated also in Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King* (p. 181). In both these instances, Showalter is discussing a more generally socio-historical topic, and drawing conclusions about *The Mayor of Casterbridge* based on contextual notions and material which may not necessarily be applicable in this case. Elsewhere she declares, in relation to Lucetta's death during her pregnancy, that '[w]hile the Victorian belief in the

⁵⁶ *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (London: Penguin Classics, 1997), p. 13.

⁵⁷ See *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, n. 14 to Chapter I, p. 326.

delicacy of pregnant women, and also the statistical realities of the maternal death rate, are behind this incident [...], Hardy obviously intends it symbolically as a demonstration of female vulnerability' (p. 186). The 'obviously' is unsupported by any other textual evidence, and it has little real contributory value for her textual analysis. These examples are some of the symptoms which point us again to feminist politics as something which is more important to Showalter in the course of this essay than Hardy's novel itself. This is not to suggest that what she tells us about the prevailing social attitudes of Hardy's time is not true, or not interesting – but it moves too far away from Hardy's texts to be able to constitute literary analysis as such, as opposed to a less limited social commentary.

In all, Showalter's theory of 'unmanning' seems built on a foundation which does not strike one as solid enough to support it. The term 'unmanning' occurs only twice in the novel,⁵⁸ and Henchard's loss of manliness is only once explicitly described by Hardy, also fairly late in the novel, in the moment which follows his fight with Farfrae ('So thoroughly subdued was he that he remained on the sacks in a crouching attitude, unusual for a man, and for such a man. Its womanliness sat tragically on the figure of so stern a piece of virility' (p. 271)), yet she makes much more of it than that. For example, Henchard's association with Lucetta and his giving in to Elizabeth-Jane are both caused, she thinks, by illnesses which 'symbolically unman' him, but the text itself does not quite justify such a symbolic reading – Henchard is weakened, yes, but is he particularly 'unmanned'? Another example is her reading of a 'series of incidents in the second half of the novel', which 'reverses and negates the pattern of manly power and self-possession' and 'become inexorable stages in Henchard's unmanning, forcing him to acknowledge his own human dependency and to discover his own suppressed or estranged capacity to love' (p. 184); it is by no means clear in what way the qualities which she lists after 'unmanning' are particularly female, even if her understanding of 'the mythology of Victorian manliness' is correct. She is analysing his text, here, not under its own conditions, but from its possible context, without ever making a fast connection between the outside and the inside. A final example is her belief, when Henchard sees his effigy in the river, that it is 'in fact the symbolic shell of a discarded male self [...]. It is the completion of his unmanning – a casting-off of the attitudes, the empty garments, the façades of dominance and authority' (p. 187); yet there is nothing in the scene which

⁵⁸ The first instance is the one cited by Showalter on p. 185, in the scene in Chapter XXXV; the second occurs in a scene towards the end of the novel (see p. 374, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*).

suggests that it is specifically the male part of his self (as opposed to his past self in general) which Henchard finds in the river. Such interpretations of many of the novel's principal events in terms of an 'unmanning' alone could thus be considered overdone; Henchard's metamorphosis might equally well, and perhaps much more reasonably, be seen as an illustration, indicated by the novel's subtitle ('The Life and Death of a Man of Character'), of the way in which Hardy believes one's character to be largely a determinant of one's fate, and that humans, rather than 'God', or 'Providence', shape their own lives – which is what Miller, for example, suggests in *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*.⁵⁹ Or we might, as Eagleton does, suggest that it is not so much an 'unmanning' which Henchard undergoes in the novel, but a process of self-alienation and objectification, in that the protagonist 'becomes the victim of his own free actions, which take on an alien life of their own and begin to determine his destiny'.⁶⁰ When Showalter concludes her general argument with the words that, '[i]n a sense which Hardy fully allows, the moral as well as the temporal victory of the novel is Elizabeth-Jane's', her evidence for this is the fact that the 'concluding paragraphs' contain a 'message of domestic serenity, and a reference to 'Victorian feminine wisdom of "making limited opportunities enduring," albeit in "a general drama of pain"'. (p. 188) The ending is, however, open to different interpretations, such as that by Miller, for example, who argues the opposite in *Distance and Desire*: that the 'irony here is that Elizabeth-Jane's stoic detachment [...] renders her unwilling or unable to take full advantage of the opportunities for happiness which she now has. Henchard in such circumstances, the reader feels, would have embraced his happiness fervently' (p. 154). By claiming the novel as something within the 'female tradition', Showalter seems to be attempting a kind of 'unmanning' of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as a novel (assuming that it is 'manned' in the first place), as well as of 'the Mayor of Casterbridge' as a character.

None of her other work analyses Hardy this closely. In *A Literature of Their Own* and in *Sexual Anarchy*, Showalter brings him in merely in order to present that which has been unsympathetic to the feminist cause. Contrasting the feminist novelists of the 1880s and 1890s with their 'male contemporaries' in the former work, she lists Hardy as one of those male writers (like Gissing and Moore) who 'imagined a New Woman who fulfilled

⁵⁹ See especially pp. 100-101 and p. 149. Also Dale Kramer's n. 107 on the text, p. 328 in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Keith Wilson, in n. 4 on Chapter XVII, pp. 341-2 in the Penguin Classics edition of the novel.

⁶⁰ EN, p. 197.

their own fantasies of sexual freedom' (pp. 184-5). Of course, her intention in that book is to trace a female literary history, and so it is to be expected that Hardy should not get a more extensive entry – what is surprising, however, is that she does not include any comment on the positive aspects of his writing (if not its themes, then at least his collaboration with female writers) she believes to have uncovered in the 'Unmanning' essay. In *Sexual Anarchy*, she similarly offers us a Hardy strongly marked by sexism. Although she credits him with having been one of the novelists who took 'women's oppression' as the 'theme' in some of their work,⁶¹ she criticises him for 'confidently' describing Sue Bridehead in his preface to *Jude the Obscure* as 'the woman of the feminist movement – the slight, pale "bachelor" girl – the intellectualized, emancipated bundle of nerves that modern conditions were producing, mainly in cities', in order to show how the 'New Woman' suffered at the hands of medical scientists. The source of Hardy's 'bundle of nerves' was the contemporary notion that the

New Woman was also the nervous woman. Doctors linked what they saw as an epidemic of nervous disorders including anorexia, neurasthenia, and hysteria with the changes in women's aspirations. Women's conflicts over using their gifts, moreover, would doom them to lives of nervous illness. (p. 40)

She argues that *Jude the Obscure*, 'with its hints that the New Woman Sue Bridehead was in some way perverse, began [a fresh] scandal that marked the labelling of feminists and odd women as deviant' (p. 171 – which indicates that she no longer thinks of Sue Brideshead as one of 'the great heroines he would create in the 1890s') – is she proposing that Hardy was responsible for this labelling? It would seem so, unless she means it as a rebuke of his readers, who took this notion from the novel and ran with it, which is not the impression she gives in these, or the surrounding, lines. Whatever good she had to say in 'Unmanning' about Hardy and his 'swerving from the bluff virility of the Rabelais Club, and the misogyny of Gosse, towards his own insistent and original exploration of human motivation', she no longer has to say in *Sexual Anarchy*: 'Clubland provided a way to exclude those who had never been boys', she argues; 'Male writers' clubs included [...] the Rabelais Club, which [...] included [...] Thomas Hardy [...] among its members. In these sanctuaries, male writers were safe from the schoolgirl, the Iron Maiden, and most

⁶¹ (New York: Viking, 1990), p. 3.

important, the female literary rival' (p. 81). There is no longer any mitigation for Hardy's membership.

Her seminal 1986 article 'Toward a Feminist Poetics' goes some way to explaining how and why this hardening and increasing selectiveness of her stance may have occurred. In what amounts to a massive rejection of her own 'Unmanning' essay, Showalter begins here with the words: 'Let us take briefly as an example of the way a feminist critique might proceed, Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*'. Citing the same lines from Irwing Howe's *Thomas Hardy* she cited in her 1979 essay, she follows it with three paragraphs which present, in summary, some of her argument in the earlier essay, including the notion that Henchard is 'humbled and "unmanned" by the collapse of his own virile façade'. She continues by revealing both her theoretical framework and the reason for her rejection of Hardy as a suitable subject for it:

As we see in this analysis, one of the problems of the feminist critique is that it is male-oriented. If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be. In some fields of specialisation, this may require a long apprenticeship to the male theoretician [...]. The temporal and intellectual investment one makes in such a process increases resistance to questioning it, and to seeing its historical and logical boundaries. The critique also has a tendency to naturalise women's victimisation, by making it the inevitable and obsessive topic of discussion. (pp. 254-6)

For whatever reason, Showalter does not reveal that this example of a 'feminist critique' is actually her own earlier work; though this omission may not be much relevance here, the whole article shows the extent to which she has distanced herself from 'Unmanning', and how Hardy's value for her in her own efforts of literary criticism depends entirely on whatever she thinks is most useful for her political intentions. She thus displays, in her handling of the subject of Thomas Hardy, something which we are also witnessing as we compare its handling by several critics: namely, in what direction an analyst's intention lies, there lies the way in which Hardy figures in his or her writings; which means that Hardy – even literature – is not always in focus.

Chapter Four: The Writer and His Consciousness

Miller

Before turning to Miller, it is worth considering here briefly the conclusions drawn by the previous six analysts concerning the value of Hardy's work. There is no general agreement as to which of his writings are valuable; rather, we find that, while Eagleton and Showalter (in 1979) approve of *Tess*, *Jude*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*,⁶² Empson has coupled *Tess* with *The Dynasts*, as one of his less 'religiously correct' works, and Leavis can only just bring himself not to reject *Jude* and *Tess* entirely, though he is very far indeed from praising them outright, and Eliot finds only heresy worth mentioning in *Far from the Madding Crowd*; though Eliot agrees with Eagleton and Showalter on *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Empson, Leavis, and Richards are of one opinion on 'After a Journey', 'The Voice', and 'A Broken Appointment' but, while Leavis and Richards also approve of 'The Self-Unseeing', Empson does not mention it, and instead joins Leavis (but not Richards) in applauding 'Neutral Tones'.⁶³ So we can see how these analysts move in constellations through Hardy's work, and not even within the Practical Critics is there enough consensus to suggest that they can indeed be taken as a single group, when it comes to their approach to, and reception of, this writer's work. Miller, now, does not slot into one or the other configuration of dancing analysts, but establishes one of his own: that which values Hardy's work in its entirety, even if this does not necessarily entail a continuous gushing of laudations. His interest in Hardy encompasses his poetry and prose, as well as his notebooks, letters, diaries, and autobiography. Nothing is unimportant, everything is worth preserving, and he is the only one of the seven analysts for whom Hardy has a serious and continuing value. If one wanted to pick one of them as the one who knows most about his work (not, of course, the one who analyses him best, or knows most about what his work means, which quality perhaps cannot be judged in the first place), Miller is most likely it: he has

⁶² Showalter's valuation of *Jude*, *Tess*, and *Far from the Madding Crowd* is inferred from her description, quoted above, of 'the great heroines' of Hardy's novels of 'the 1890s'.

⁶³ Appendix C to this thesis provides an overview, in table-form, of what part of Hardy's body of work is explicitly valued or not valued (though not necessarily therefore liked or disliked) by which of the eight analysts.

read him more closely than the others have done, and pays attention to so many more of his works. His approach is deconstructionist as much as consciousness-driven, but he usually pulls himself back into the text, even when he has strayed so far into philosophy that one wonders if he is ever going to return. There are exceptions to this, however: the heavily Derridean “Thomas Hardy, Jacques Derrida, and the “Dislocation of Souls”” (on Derrida’s notion of the ‘dislocation of souls’ and its applicability to Hardy’s ‘The Torn Letter’) (pp. 171-80), in which the ratio of philosophy to textual analysis is great enough to explain why Derrida’s name accompanies Hardy’s in the title; and he is prone to the sort of thinking which results in the declaration that the poem ‘The Pedigree’ depends ‘on the inherent tendency in man [...] to take any configuration of lines, natural or artificial, as a hieroglyph, as some kind of signifying token [...] [and] also on the inherent tendency of such hieroglyphs to be multiple, to multiply metaphors’, so that, in the end, ‘the figure of prosopopoeia [...] dissolves into a receding series of faces that is ultimately devastatingly destructive of the poet’s sense of himself.’⁶⁴ Still, even in the essay from which this last quote has been taken, Miller is reading Hardy enough at least to give his own reader a sense of closeness to the text.

Miller writes, in *The Linguistic Moment*, that it ‘is generally agreed today that Thomas Hardy is one of the greatest of modern poets writing in English’. Rather than argue with this opinion, as Leavis – with his inherent suspicion of ‘generally accepted opinion’ – would have done, he shows his concurrence with it by adding that Hardy is ‘worthy to rank with Yeats or Stevens’ (p. 269 – interestingly, Eliot and Richards would not have considered a comparison with Yeats to be favourable to Hardy). The only difficulty, he says, is ‘how to identify that greatness’, as if the ‘greatness’ was a matter of implicit trust. Miller’s published writings on Hardy begin with ‘Thomas Hardy: A Sketch for a Portrait’ in 1967, and no doubt have not ended with *On Literature* in 2002. His persistent interest in Hardy is perhaps best illustrated by the aforementioned first essay, which has led a varied life. Written initially in 1967 for *De Ronsard à Breton: Hommages à Marcel Raymond* (1967), it was ‘elaborated’ for the opening chapter of *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*, ‘The Refusal of Involvement’ (pp. 1-28); this second version was reproduced in *Modern Critical Views: Thomas Hardy* in 1987 (pp. 37-53), but the first version was reproduced for *Tropes, Parables, Performatives: Essays on Twentieth Century Literature* in 1990. Miller has evidently kept reworking and rethinking Hardy throughout his academic life and, it seems, more so than he has done with any other writer (in *Tropes*,

⁶⁴ ‘Prosopopoeia in Hardy and Stevens’, in *Tropes*, pp. 145-159 (p. 254).

Miller lists ‘especially Hardy’ as one of his most frequently visited authors, the others being Kafka, Stevens, Williams and Conrad. (pp. vii-viii). With the exception of a few scattered asides on Hardy and his work (in ‘The Critic as Host’,⁶⁵ *On Literature* (see pp. 19, 29-32, and 119), *The Ethics of Reading* (p. 127), and *Theory Now and Then* (pp. 9, 67 and 166)) and a slightly more substantial, but still otherwise engaged, comparative discussion in *The Form of Victorian Fiction* of Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (in order to ‘add to the understanding of Victorian England by interpretation of the literary form used by many of its greatest writers’),⁶⁶ Hardy has been the subject of several substantial pieces of criticism by Miller. Widdowson is surely wrong when he suggests that Miller is one of the critics who have bemoaned the size of Hardy’s poetic output: ‘The poems should be read in all the ostentatious disorder of *The Complete Poems*’, Miller proposes in *The Linguistic Moment* (p. 273), which instantly sets him at odds with Eliot, Empson and Leavis’s rather less enthusiastic view of the collected works; and writing about ‘The Pedigree’ in *Tropes*, Miller calls it ‘an example of the many extraordinary poems the reader may find more or less buried in the splendid abundance of Hardy’s poetry’ (p. 248) – ‘splendid abundance’ hardly indicating a view that there is a ‘problem’ with the numbers, that ‘nearly 1,000 poems are too much’.⁶⁷

Of the fifteen essays reproduced in *Tropes*, four and a half are about Hardy (the ‘half’ is an essay in which Miller discusses prosopopoeia in both Hardy and Wallace Stevens, who comes in second place in the collection, with two essays). The four of which Hardy is the primary subject, as well as the one he shares with Stevens, are pieces of typically Millerian criticism. ‘Thomas Hardy: A Sketch for a Portrait’ does not make its intention explicit at the outset, but it becomes clear, not least already from the title, that Miller is keen to find out more about Hardy’s philosophy – the very philosophy of which we know that Eliot, Empson and Leavis thought so little. In the process, he scrutinises an immense wealth of fiction, poetry, autobiography, letters, and notebooks (the texts he analyses include Hardy’s *Life*; his novels *Jude the Obscure*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Hand of Ethelberta*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *The Woodlanders*, *The Dynasts*, *Desperate Remedies*, *The Well-Beloved*, and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*; his short story ‘The

⁶⁵ In Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, pp. 254-62.

⁶⁶ *The Form of Victorian Fiction: Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, Meredith, and Hardy* (Cleveland: Arete Press, 1979), p. xi. In a book of almost four thousand lines, Hardy is granted five hundred and forty-five, which compares roughly to those granted to Thackeray, Trollope, Dickens and Eliot.

⁶⁷ *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, p. 78.

Waiting Supper'; the poems 'End of the Episode', 'The Going', 'Quid Hic Agis', 'The Minute Before Meeting', 'At Waking', 'I Was the Midmost', 'Wessex Heights', 'Childhood Among the Ferns', 'The Dead Man Walking', 'In Tenebris (II)' and 'In Tenebris (III)', 'I Am the One'; and a notebook entry which he quotes from *Dearest Emmie: Thomas Hardy's Letters to His First Wife* (edited by Carl Weber); the 'Refusal of Involvement' version of this essay adds the novel *Two on a Tower*, the short story 'The Fiddler of the Reels', and the poems 'I Travel as a Phantom Now', 'To an Unborn Pauper Child', 'The Blow', 'Fragment', 'The Sleep-Worker', 'God's Funeral', 'A Plaint to Man', 'he Wonders about Himself', 'Thoughts of Phena, at News of Her Death', 'To Lizbie Browne', the *Poems of 1912-13*, his 'Apology' to *Late Lyrics and Earlier*, and a letter of 1904 to Edward Clodd.) He then arrives at the conclusion that 'Hardy's writing, to give it a final definition, is a resurrection and a safeguarding of the dead'. In his 'function as artist-presenter', he argues, Hardy is 'the closest thing to a deity his universe has' – a universe which contains the 'patterns' of all human life, which can only be 'uncovered', however, 'through art'. This revelation of the patterns of life represents a 'victory of consciousness over suffering', a 'version of the will to power which is the creation of a work of art, transforming events into a verbal form which brings their secret significance into the open'. In the end, if Hardy had not written down what he saw, 'events would [have] happen[ed] and then pass[ed] away forever' (pp. 75-6).⁶⁸ This reminds one of Miller's statement in *On Literature* that literature 'raises ghosts', and how it produces 'virtual worlds' for the reader which are, he suspects, almost real; this becomes – in the way in which he analyses Hardy here and (in far greater depth) in the closing chapter of *Distance and Desire* – an almost ethical accomplishment. Those who are dead do not remain dead, and Hardy 'is the man who sees ghosts and remembers what everyone else has forgotten' (p. 75).

'History as Repetition in Thomas Hardy's Poetry: The Example of Wessex Heights' (pp. 107-34) is a reading of 'Wessex Heights' aimed at illustrating a topic which Miller believes to have identified in Hardy's poetry in general.⁶⁹ Hardy's work is treated throughout as if it provided a window onto his mind, and Miller's case is a reasonably

⁶⁸ The *Distance and Desire* version of 'The Refusal of Involvement', however, ends with the proposition that what Miller has done by way of identifying the 'fundamental structure of Hardy's relation to the world' might go some way towards explaining 'why he became a writer and what relation to the world his writing expresses' (p. 28, or see *Modern Critical Views: Thomas Hardy*, p. 53).

⁶⁹ Note a number of generalising phrases *passim*, for instance on pp. 108, 109, 111, 113, 114, 115, 118, 120, 123, 125, 126, and 127.

convincing one, mostly because he performs such close textual analysis; it is difficult to argue with many of his findings when one witnesses the sheer richness of considered reference, both to ‘Wessex Heights’ and to other pieces of poetry and prose.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, one might disagree with his opinion that the ‘repetitions’ in Hardy’s works ‘may be seen as evidence of Hardy’s conscious or unconscious insight into the coercions of the Freudian “compulsion to repeat”’ (p. 131), or with the validity of his introduction of Derrida’s concept of ‘*différance*’ at the close (‘the place of repetition which the speaker of “Wessex Heights” enters [...] is the place of spacing, a place not of organic unity or of satisfaction, but of gaps and fissures, of discontinuities and dissymmetries, of perpetually unsatisfied desire. In this place of differing or deferring, any presence or continuity is permanently disrupted by the crises engraving the “traces” of human experience’ (p. 132)), and in this respect nothing much sets him apart from Eagleton and Showalter’s introductions of contextual material into their analyses. His one – important – saving grace is the fact that his eye always returns to the text at hand. Aside from his tracing of the real names and heights of the protuberances mentioned by Hardy in ‘Wessex Heights’ (pp. 109-10), a brief diversion into the ‘tension between the illicit use of physical language to describe human existence and the use of language more appropriate to the actual nature of experience’ as characterised by ‘so many nineteenth-century works of literature’ (citing Eliot and Meredith as examples – Leavis would no doubt have shuddered at the comparison) (pp. 119-20), Miller confines himself to paying attention to what he believes to be the demands of the text, which we know to be one of the key principles of his critical method. He has divided his essay into seven parts, each dedicated to a close reading of one or more of the poem’s stanzas, which includes a thorough examination of some of the ‘rhythm, diction and syntax’ of the poem,⁷¹ ventures into the realm of etymology (pp. 110-2), and a multitude of quotation in addition to the entire poem’s being reprinted at the beginning of the essay. The selection of works by Hardy which Miller includes is largely driven by their relevance to the subject, or their ability to illustrate one point or another. Still, we also learn that some of

⁷⁰ Reference is made to the following: *Life*, pp. 109, 113, 115, 128; ‘In Front of the Landscape’ and ‘The Phantom Horsewoman’, p. 122, *The Return of the Native*, ‘At Waking’, ‘He Abjures Love’, ‘I Was the Midmost’ (p. 123), ‘To an Impersonator of Rosalind’, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Jude the Obscure*, ‘Tess’s Lament’, ‘Friends Beyond’ (p. 125), ‘After a Journey’, *Poems 1912-13*, ‘Old Furniture’, ‘Haunting Fingers’ (pp. 126-7), ‘The Absolute Explains’, ‘So, Time’, ‘A Kiss’ (p. 127), ‘In a Museum’ (pp. 127-8), ‘The House of Silence’, p. 128.

⁷¹ See, for example, pp. 108-9 and p. 122.

the poems are independently valuable. There is, he argues, a ‘meditative toughness’ in Hardy’s ‘best’; ‘In Front of the Landscape’ is ‘one of his most beautiful poems’ (interestingly, Leavis held it up as an example of Hardy’s ability to be anything but beautiful) (p. 117), as are ‘Old Furniture’ and ‘Haunting Fingers’, and ‘Friends Beyond’ and the *Poems of 1912-13* are ‘admirable’ (this being one of the words which Miller most often uses to describe Hardy, just as ‘gauche’ is probably the one which Hardy most often inspired in Leavis)⁷² (p. 126); ‘A Kiss’ and ‘In a Museum’ may be two of his ‘slighter’ poems (he describes the former as ‘charmingly whimsical’), but ‘The Absolute Explains’ and ‘So, Time’ are more praiseworthy (pp. 127-8).⁷³ ‘Wessex Heights’ itself, also, may be notable for the phrase ‘long vision’, which is ‘splendid’, and for the manner in which its fifth and sixth stanzas end with ‘a fine reversal’, but in the main one senses that it is an interesting, even fascinating, poem for Miller primarily for philosophical reasons – or at least, that it is Hardy’s handling of ‘time’, ‘history’ and such here and in his other work, which have motivated Miller to write about him. He is trying to get to grips with Hardy’s world, and – as he describes it in *Distance and Desire* – a curiosity about the ‘relation to the world his writing expresses’. In the remaining *Tropes* essays, he does much the same thing. In ‘Topography and Tropography in Thomas Hardy’s “In Front of the Landscape”’, for instance, he asks questions about the poem’s ‘identity as a text’. Once again, we have moments of extremely close reading⁷⁴ and, though he indulges also in a reasonable amount of philosophising, his usual frequent and illuminating references to ‘Landscape’ ensure that he never strays far from the text. There is a hint, in this essay, that he does not think equally well of all of Hardy’s poetry, and in fact can find something to criticise rather severely: when he praises ‘Landscape’ as ‘one of Hardy’s most grandly rhythmical poems’ and ‘unusually open in its expression of emotion’, he cannot resist adding that ‘[f]or once the meter does not seem an arbitrary framework into which certain material is pushed, trimmed to shape’ – the ‘for once’ speaks volumes (p. 197).⁷⁵ A few pages later, we have occasion to remember how Miller assigns to literature

⁷² For further occurrences of the word ‘admirable’, see for instance *Linguistic Moment*, pp. 270, 304, 309; *Tropes*, p. 171; and *Distance and Desire*, pp. 81, 123, 127, 176, 238.

⁷³ It is not entirely clear whether or not the fact that these last two are ‘the fullest and most conceptual expression of th[e] spatialization of time in Hardy’ contributes to their status. That Miller values them more highly than others is, however, certain from the way in which he adds ‘but it occurs in many slighter poems too’ (p. 127).

⁷⁴ See pp. 197-9 and 204-5.

⁷⁵ See also *LM*, p. 299.

an irresistible power, which results in his high estimation of four lines from the fifth stanza: '[t]he power of the lines is the way they vibrate, affirming both possibilities, and neither unequivocally' (p. 204). We also know that one of his reasons for moving from physics to literature was 'the radical strangeness of literary works', and when he writes in this essay that 'many' of Hardy's 'words and phrases' seem 'slightly odd, unexpected, or out of place', we can conclude that this may indeed be one of Hardy's principal attractions for him. Empson and Leavis also wrote about how Hardy could somehow include words in his poems which are both wrong and yet, somehow, right, but Miller takes this further and singles it out as one of Hardy's most valuable features, just as Eagleton commended Hardy for his polyglot prose style in *Walter Benjamin* (albeit for a different reason). Coming across an apparently eccentric phrase, Miller says, '[t]he reader, if he is a teacher, may have a subliminal desire to write "dic." in the margin, until he has thought more about the lines and comes to see how right the word or phrase is' (p. 199).⁷⁶ It is, moreover, 'a feature of Hardy's poetry that he gets away with or even admirably exploits words which hardly any other poet would dare use at all'.⁷⁷

The two chapters on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *The Well-Beloved* in *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* are pieces in which Miller does for these novels what he has done for Hardy's poetry in 'History as Repetition'. His goal is to show how a novel may be interpreted 'in part through the identification of recurrences and of meanings generated through recurrences', focussing on 'the contribution to meaning of the various forms of recurrence in novels'.⁷⁸ Though he has dedicated a separate chapter to each of the novels, he believes that *Tess* and *The Well-Beloved* also 'echo each other thematically and formally' (p. 2),⁷⁹ which is his reason for including both of them in that book. His chapter on *Tess* represents a closer reading of the novel (an extremely interesting one, on the passage concerning Tess's seduction/rape) than the one on *The Well-Beloved*, which is far more philosophical in nature, even though they both deal with Hardy's philosophy. In the latter chapter, praise for Hardy comes most explicitly in the conclusion: "The distinction of Hardy's "full look at the Worst" is to have seen so clearly, perhaps most clearly of all in *The Well-Beloved*, the connections among the three strata of human life:

⁷⁶ See also 'and yet somehow the word [feel] seems right for the coercive intimacy', p. 203.

⁷⁷ See also 'Hardy's striking use here of one of his odd words' (i.e. 'fuglemen), in 'Prosopopoeia in Hardy and Stevens', p. 253.

⁷⁸ (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), p.1.

⁷⁹ He has also, as we have seen, suggested such a link between different works by Hardy, of prose and poetry, in 'History as Repetition'.

erotic experience, unfulfilled religious longing, and the making or reading of works of literature.’ That this particular work is one of the most valuable of his novels, may be concluded from his assessment of it as representing ‘an irreplaceable part of Hardy’s work’ (p. 149), a compliment which he has not paid any of the others. His admiration for it is also already evident in his 1976 introduction to the novel’s Macmillan edition, which may be considered as a prototype for this later essay in *Fiction and Repetition*. He describes it there as ‘one of the most important nineteenth-century novels about art’, ‘an important novel’ (p. 12); ‘it has great interest’ as an ‘exploration of the association of love, repetition and artistic creativity’ (pp. 12-3); it is important ‘for understanding all Hardy’s work in fiction and in poetry’, and it provides ‘something so close to a definitive answer’ to the questions with which Hardy’s writings concern themselves, ‘that the tension of the question dissolves, and novel-writing becomes impossible’ (p. 14). This vision of the novel as the apex, or at least, the natural end of Hardy’s novel-writing career, contrasts firmly with Eagleton’s opinion that it is *Jude the Obscure* which rightly holds that position. Its value, however, in *Fiction and Repetition*, reaches beyond the illumination of Hardy’s work, towards its effect on Miller’s own vision of the world:

If the transcendent shape named by the various incarnations of the well-beloved is an illusion, a projection, then both human life and works of literature will take the form of a virtually endless series of similar episodes which can be stopped neither by knowing the illusion is an illusion nor by not knowing it. *The Well-Beloved* brilliantly exemplifies a form of repetition growing out of this situation and out of the futile attempt to stop repeating. (p. 175)

This is a circular argument, and it is hard to see its logic. Although one can learn from it something of the novel’s value for Miller, and also see how his philosophy and his reading of it are interwoven to such an extent that the line between Hardy’s and his philosophies becomes blurred, it is difficult for anyone who does not follow his particular philosophical bent to experience the novel and its value in quite this way. In effect, this passage highlights a point at which Miller most resembles Eagleton and Showalter, in his introduction of external material whose actual connection to Hardy’s text strikes one as rather porous and fragile.

In *The Linguistic Moment*, Miller argues that Hardy has written ‘great lyric poetry’ (p. 269) (he lists ‘The Wind’s Prophecy’ (p. 282), ‘Old Furniture’ (p. 285), ‘Beyond the Last Lamp’ (p. 294), and *The Dynasts* (p. 309) as examples), a phrase which is redolent of

the kind of general and unprovable opinion we have found in the writings of the other six analysts. His particular intention in *The Linguistic Moment*, however, is to discuss ‘the question of the relation of a sign to the material base on which it is written, carved, or projected’ (p. 269) (concluding that ‘[i]n one sense’ the ‘writing seems to have no necessary relation to the material ground on which it was originally carved. In another sense the two seem indivisibly connected. Each is dependent on the other for its existence, however absurd this may seem’ (p. 294)), and in the event he makes much of ‘discord’ in Hardy’s poetry, the thematic discord between nature and consciousness (pp. 267-9) as much as the one between Hardy’s poems.⁸⁰ Because he is trying to work out a theory he has about poetry in general, he does not go into much detail about Hardy’s work until about twenty-three into the thirty-eight pages of the chapter (p. 290). Up to that point, he is still concerned with the finer elements of the processes of literary analysis, but now he finally begins to tell us about Hardy’s ‘linguistic moment’:

Why is it that for Hardy no unit of life can be either wholly detached or wholly assimilated? The incoherence derives from certain properties of language or of signs generally. [...] For Hardy, between the intention and the deed, between moment and moment, between the self and itself, between mind and landscape, falls the word. This descent of the word is the linguistic moment in Hardy.

It is this which explains why his writing can be taken to stand for a ‘raising of ghosts’ or a ‘safeguarding of the dead’, because ‘[f]or Hardy nothing dies or can die that has had the good or ill luck to inscribe itself in some way on matter, on someone’s heart and brain, on paper or stone, on walls or utensils, on the landscape, or on the mere circumambient air’ (p. 314). Once again, Miller has combined a (deconstructive) theory with textual evidence, so that when we reach the end of the chapter, what we seem to have obtained from all this is not merely a clearer view of the ‘linguistic moment’, but also what may be a clearer view of Hardy as a poet.

⁸⁰ pp. 271-5. Miller picks up, it seems, the word ‘discordant’ from Hardy’s 1922 ‘Apology’ to the *Late Lyrics and Earlier* and runs with it across the next three or four pages: p. 273 has ‘disorder’ twice, ‘discord’ thrice; p. 274 has ‘discord’ four times, ‘discordant’ and ‘discords’ once each; p. 275 has ‘discord’ and ‘discords’ once each (there are also many occurrences of close synonyms: ‘disorder’, twice, on p. 273; ‘irrelation’ – which is also found in Hardy’s ‘Apology’ – and ‘discontinuity’ on p. 274; ‘discrepancy’ and ‘difference’ on p. 275; ‘paradox’ on pp. 295, 296, 300 and 310; ‘incommensurability’ on pp. 283 and 299; and ‘not quite in harmony’, p. 301).

Peter Widdowson believes that Miller's earlier forays into Hardy (citing *Distance and Desire* as a case in point) constitute a 'phenomenological criticism' which is at odds with, and superseded by, his later deconstructive phase (for example, in *The Linguistic Moment*).⁸¹ Miller does retract something of the validity of the method he employed in *Distance and Desire* in 1970 in *The Linguistic Moment* of 1985, but he does not thereby invalidate everything he has done, or declare that he has substantially changed his approach. In a discussion (in which he is being characteristically self-conscious regarding the nature of and obstacles to literary criticism) of two possible ways in which one might try to form Hardy's work into a logical and coherent entity – the biographical and the 'single consciousness' (or 'Geneva') approaches – he rejects both. Taking Hardy's poems to be 'expressions of a single consciousness or sensibility, or as manifesting a thematic coherence', of which his 'own earlier work on Hardy provides good examples', he concludes that 'Hardy is right. His poems are fugitive glimpses, transient readings of life.' Yet he immediately adds: 'Nevertheless, the reader goes on trying. This nightmare of a failure to comprehend or to be comprehensive, while nevertheless being compelled to go on attempting to do it, is the *malconfort* of interpretation in the case of Hardy's poems', and his 'effort remains an attempt to encompass Hardy's poems in a unified interpretation' (pp. 287-90). We may well have witnessed the sowing of the seed from which this near-retraction grew, when he quotes Hardy's preface to *Winter Words* in *Distance and Desire*. Hardy's avowal that 'no harmonious philosophy is attempted in these pages – or in any bygone pages of mine, for that matter', prompts him to speculate that the poems are 'not the direct expression of Hardy himself, but are dramatic monologues', finishing that section with the words that this is 'no less true of the novels. They too are the expression of an assumed voice and attitude [...]. He has no permanent character [...]. Any point of view is only one moment of vision among many' (pp. 44-5).⁸²

In *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire*, in which Miller analyses the two eponymous themes in Hardy's novels and poetry, we discover that one of the highest values Hardy has for him is that of the 'virtual world' he writes about so enthusiastically in *On Literature* and elsewhere. A scene, a line, a word of Hardy's appears to throw him into a reverie on the text and its world, with all the attendant philosophies that are either Hardy's, or his own (it is again, confusingly, sometimes hard to tell which), all of which becomes a

⁸¹ 'Hardy and Critical Theory', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, p. 86.

⁸² See also *The Linguistic Moment*, pp. 279-81, where he essentially picks up where he left off in the earlier book.

source joy for him. The form this joy takes, the form it takes also in most of his other writings on Hardy, is that simple one of quotation—exposition, which may not be as firmly linguistic as Empson's in *Ambiguity*, but is for that none the less intense. Take, for instance, the chapter 'Falling in Love': having at one point quoted a longish passage from *The Return of the Native*, Miller is prompted to dive in and reflect on the transformation which occurs in Hardy's work when love enters upon a scene. This is an example in miniature of what Miller does in the entire book: the event of falling in love in Hardy's novels is a virtual reality into which Miller admits himself, and which holds as much fascination for him as the object of their love does, according to him, for Hardy's protagonists. The evidence for this may not be explicit – but it is there, for example, in his embrace of all that Hardy has written as valuable, and his reflection on the transformational power of love in Hardy in *Distance and Desire* may stand as an apt description of what it is that happens to Miller when he reads and writes about him (p. 132):

From vacuity to the plenitude of a myriad tumultuous emotions – this is the magical change love effects in the inner life of the lover.

Epilogue

Thus our case-study concludes, and has shown how a single writer can have very different effects on different readers, effects which are dependent on how they value literature, as well as on the philosophies and politics which shape that valuation. Side-by-side, the seven approaches (or eight, if we count, as we should, Bhabha's silence as an 'approach') show us what Hardy – in fact, what any writer – can do, what literature can do. The 'Thomas Hardy' who transpires from it turns out not to be a simple and homogenous writer. What he becomes when people start to write about him is something like an extrapolation of his biological self, which makes the possibility of an ascertainable, single 'Thomas Hardy' impossible. One could see the accumulation of analyses of Hardy and his work as pseudo-Benjaminian fragments which, when taken together, form some sort of an object more or less containing Hardies, but never a single Hardy. It is an object which will, for the time being, remain incomplete – until the day on which the last critic puts the last full-stop to the last thing anyone is ever going to say about him. Every one, therefore, of the seven or eight approaches to Hardy covered in this case-study is insufficient on its own, but every one of them also matters deeply. For none of the eight analysts is alone right about Hardy: not Bhabha, for whom Hardy is a nonentity, by virtue of his very presence in the 'archive of "English" literature'; not Eliot, whose Hardy is a heretic without a place in morally desirable literature, though he does have some literary virtue; not Empson, who sketches a Hardy who does not go far enough in making his reader laugh at the gods, even if he sometimes does so in good rhythm; not Richards, who thinks Hardy suitably represents the mind of his (Hardy's own and Richards's) time, and is a model for other writers; not Leavis, who narrows the 'good' Hardy down to a handful or so of poems and lines, whose credit lies in their 'genuinely individual sensibility' and such; not Eagleton, whose Hardy is a socio-economic and ideological product of his and later times, whose going against the grain of prevailing opinion is his most pleasing feature; not Showalter, for whose writings Hardy is at one time a half-positive force working towards the emancipation of women, at other times merely a paradigm of Victorian sexism; not Miller, who presents us with the philosopher-Hardy whose conceptual lines sit well with, even reinforce, a deconstructionist approach to the world. None of them can tell every reader in the world why they should or should not read this or that poem, or prose piece, and none of them

can tell one reader with anything approaching scientific accuracy what it is that Hardy's works mean; but each one of them has produced one possible version of Hardy, one possible argument for or against this or that poem, or prose piece. Their analyses all have their flaws: there are sweeping statements about the quality of his style, which are so subjective that they can never be proved beyond doubt; judgments of his moral correctness, and interpretations of his world-view, which are dependent on one's subscription to one religion or philosophy or another, or none at all; the assumption that particular social, economic, or political-ideological conditions and factors of his time have directly effected, as well as affected, his writings, and that these writings can tell us exactly what he thought of them; a lack of attention to the text in favour of attention to contextual elements; and more. But all their analyses are also in some ways interesting and, if we take from them that which is reasonable and potentially fruitful, nothing need be lost; rather, we can thereby learn more ways of reading. Eliot, Empson, Leavis, and Richards give us the facts of Hardy's poetics, his atheism and his literary context; Eagleton, the 1979 Showalter and Miller indicate the applicability of ideological, social, economic, sexual, and philosophical dimensions to his work; while the later Showalter and Bhabha's passive-aggressive wordlessness show us that there are times and places in which Hardy simply does not feature, even should not feature, in order to foreground those voices which a consideration of his work perforce pushes aside. To say, with Miller, that '[n]ew perspectives may sometimes [...] reveal aspects of works of literature which have so far remained hidden'⁸³ is to state the obvious, but it is useful to remember that sometimes old perspectives can also be new, in particular when they have for a long time been rejected outright by the ones which succeeded them.

That Eagleton and Showalter focus on Hardy's novels, and scarcely mention his poetry, comes as no surprise. Given their fundamental assumptions about the value of literature and literary analysis, it is evidently the novel which is best suited to the kind of critical treatment that allows for the kind of social commentary which desires social transformation. This is also the reason for their tendency to move outside the text of Hardy's work, and into that which they believe to be its context; and the reason for their drawing of conclusions about his nature and significance which are based on biographical information about the author and on historical information about the social and economic situations of the time in which Hardy wrote. Because Eliot, Empson, Leavis, and Richards have no such immediate need, but are rather more interested in

⁸³ *TN*, p. 12.

'literature' as the text in itself – because any socio-cultural transformation they may wish to induce is based on literature as art, rather than on literature as the vehicle for the revelation of social injustices – they remain close to the texts, even when they engage with Hardy's philosophy, and even though they fail to prove their various cases. Miller, though he is always philosophising about Hardy's philosophy, is even more conscientious than they, in the attention which he pays to the words in the novels and poems; whether or not one thinks that Hardy is a 'great' writer, a 'genius', a writer worth reading in perpetuity, it can hardly be doubted that Miller sets the good example of an analyst of literature who actually does the hard work of studying it closely. Is this not, after all, what literary analysis entails, in the very name of its discipline?⁸⁴ Where Bhabha, Eagleton and Showalter differ most strongly from the other four analysts, then, is their placement of something that is not Hardy above Hardy – which is not so much the wrong thing to do, as the wrong thing to do while maintaining the title of a literary scholar. Eliot does absolutely the same thing in his 1933 Virginia lectures, but he says from the start that what he is embarking on is precisely not literary criticism. As has been suggested throughout this thesis, there is much that one may learn from a Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, and deconstructive reading of literature that cannot be learned from the kind of criticism practiced by Eliot, Empson, Leavis, and Richards; but it is all too easy, in those cases, to forget all about the text, which is surely, after all, what the study of literary works in the context of Literary Studies ought to be about.

⁸⁴ The method of 'distant reading' conceived of by Franco Moretti, and which is apparently gaining academic ground, is not literary analysis in the context of 'Literary Studies': as Moretti himself suggests, it falls into the discipline of historiography (see Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', in the *New Left Review*, No. 1 (2000), <<http://www.newleftreview.org/A2094>> [accessed 13 August 2008]).

CONCLUSIONS

I

The four Practical Critics in this thesis are distinguishable from the Aesthetes in the main by their consciousness of a social dimension to their work – a social consciousness focused on culture as an integral and immensely valuable part of the life of a society, with ‘good’, or ‘great’, or ‘beautiful’ literature as its paragon. In their critical writings they therefore placed a far greater emphasis on the content and internal operations of literary texts, than on an attempt to establish a connection between what is written in these texts and what occurs in the outside world, or on training their readership in theories of literature or culture. They did not, therefore, extensively question the concept of ‘culture’, what it is or where it begins and ends; they did not condemn social injustice and the oppression and suppression of colonial subjects, the working classes, and women; they did not play significantly with the philosophical impossibilities of the reading of literature. These are things which Bhabha, Eagleton, Showalter, and Miller have done. In particular in the case of the first three of these, it is as if they had taken the Practical Critics’ social consciousness to an extreme, with the result that they have made of literature almost an abstraction of itself and only one element in a greater process of social transformation. They have hereby shown us the kind of analysis which appears to be, or is supposed to be, ‘literary’, but turns out to be much more concerned with something other than literature. The fundamental difference between them and the Practical Critics may be summed up in terms of their opening-up of the literary work which, though valid and instructive, makes it problematic as the centre of an academic discipline. The nature of our current academic institutions, with their divisions into faculties and departments, requires that anything which is studied within their walls can be defined not only as something, but also as something which is unlike another thing. Dissolving the boundaries between text and world might mean the disqualification of Literary Studies as an academic subject: that it should remain as a subject is arguable, but if it is to remain, limits have to be set. What distinguishes Miller from the other three modern literary theorists here is, that, although he equally destabilises the integrity of the

literary work, it is its internal, rather than external, integrity which is at stake; thus, while the literary text shifts and reshapes itself under the influence of his critique, it is nevertheless still there, with all its words largely remaining distinct from the world's social, political and economic forces, and all of them counting towards his final analysis.

The question whether a given literary work is aesthetically 'good' or 'bad', too, has metamorphosed, in the hands of Bhabha, Eagleton and Showalter, into the question whether a given literary work is ethically 'good' or 'bad'. While aesthetic verdicts are entirely open to debate, so are such ethical ones, and these analysts have not resolved the problem of how one can justify, defend or prove any judgements of any literary work once and for all. Every one of them is, in the end, left standing upon the self-imposed authority of the analytical master's voice. Given the criticisms which have been levelled at the 'authoritarian' presumptuousness of the Practical Critics,¹ it is therefore interesting to discover that in particular Eliot, Empson and Leavis display a much more personal approach to literature than Bhabha, Eagleton and Showalter. The former three may not have interjected qualifying or conditional clauses into every one of their various analytical pronouncements, but neither have the latter, whose reliance on contextual material, conversely, suggests that they carry an authority which is somehow greater than that of those who forego context in favour of text. Richards – unlike Eliot, Empson and Leavis – already displayed such a tendency, when he sought to reconcile a supposedly objective non-literary body of knowledge (that is, psychoanalysis) with literature, and thus attempted to shift the interpretation of literature from the publication of private reaction towards a direct attempt at instruction. The involvement of apparently reliable historical, psychological, social, economic, sexual, and political data by Bhabha, Eagleton and Showalter has much the same effect; furthermore, they show themselves to be even less inclined than Eliot and Leavis (let alone Empson and Miller) to test their theories, or even to allow for the possibility that these may not be watertight. It seems that they do not believe that the hypothesis that literature is a political weapon of sorts – just like the hypothesis that, say, the preservation of Dryden's writings will make British culture a better place in which to live – cannot be proven in quite the same way that gravity can.

¹ See Appendix A.

II

This is not the end of the story. What has been done in this thesis – the questions asked of the eight analysts and the method of reading employed in order to attempt to answer these – may easily be used as a model for investigations into other fields and phenomena relating to literature. For instance, if one was interested in finding out more about one particular literary theory, one could do something similar with, say, a group of feminist critics, in order to understand the way in which their writings diverge from each other, and why; comparing a number of critics from this one theoretical camp can no doubt tell one as much about the individuals as it can tell one about the camp as a whole. If one was, alternatively, interested in the – currently very popular – field of ‘world literature’, one could also very well do what has been done here for a number of analysts from any variety of cultures, which might contribute to an understanding of whatever differences there are between these cultures, with regard to the role which literature has played in them. The same would, of course, also apply to literary history, for example with regard to how the reception of particular literary works may have changed over time because of evolving (though not necessarily progressing) opinions on the value of literature – among not only authors, but also academic and non-academic critics and theorists. Professional literary analysts are, however, not the only possible point of application: those who would like to understand variations in the reading-habits of members of different contemporary social groups, different cultures, different populations in one culture over time, and so on, may also use this method in order to observe these, in what would amount to a semi-sociological exercise. By such means, one could gain an extremely valuable insight into the characteristics of various temporally or spatially separated reading cultures, which can in turn have significant implications for evolutionary theories of culture.

In addition to all this, the findings of this thesis – or, perhaps better, the questions asked – could also serve a pedagogic purpose. We understand how very important it is, for those who work with literature in an academic context, to know precisely what they are doing when they are reading and analysing it; and equally important for them to be direct about their motives and intentions, especially if what they say and do is published and taught. Scientists have to set out their hypotheses, criteria and methods at the start of whatever it is they are working on, or reporting;

Literature may be classed as one of the Humanities, but this does not mean that literary works should therefore be treated any less scrupulously. It would be very useful to teach such a critical reading of secondary literature (of any kind), as well as a critical disposition towards one's own conceptual foundations, as soon as possible at schools, and at the latest when pupils embark on their 'A' Levels. 'A' Level History students already tend to learn that one cannot necessarily take what a source or a historian has written to be wholly correct. They are taught that, when faced with, for example, accounts of a monarch's reign, they first always need to try to work out what it is the authors may be trying to do, which includes not only considerations of their backgrounds (for example their nationalities, political affiliations and religious beliefs), but also a consideration of their other writings. The most that 'A' Level students of English Literature usually learn, however, about literary critics or theorists whom they quote in an essay, is merely that they are well-known and well-respected;² and such an implicit respect for the opinions of someone whose writings have been published and cited by others is often carried on even through to the end of an undergraduate degree.³ I hope that this thesis has shown how important it is for students of literature – at 'A' Level if not earlier, and university undergraduates at the very latest – to know whom it is they are reading. The effect of this could be twofold. Firstly, the student will perhaps be more inclined to read the work of literary analysts carefully and critically, and not take it to be automatically true, or even automatically sound (this would also render certain critical styles which are considered 'authoritarian' by some almost powerless to influence students by mere tone of voice). Secondly, the student will be able to distinguish between that which is relevant to what they are working on, and that which is not; this will be a personal choice, of course, and one that depends in turn on a student's own valuation of literature and literary analysis, and of the task at hand.

*

² This was the case at my own school, and an informal survey of friends and acquaintances has shown this to be the case elsewhere.

³ I recall a 'Research Skills' session for M.A. students at UCL, in which it was suggested that a published critic is more likely than a student to be right about a text; a number of students also said that their tutors at undergraduate level had encouraged them not to read the writings of literary analysts with a critical eye, but rather to accept what they have written as authoritative. Studying literature, then, seems for them to have been an exercise in reading secondary literature more than an intimate study of primary literature. Of course, this is not always the case, and will vary between individual institutions, departments and tutors.

Literature is art, literature is culture, literature is politics, literature is an ideological product, literature is consciousness; literature can save us, literature cannot save us; literature can organise our minds, literature can disrupt ideologies; literature can be beautiful, beauty is something not relevant to literature; literature communicates experience, literature communicates only itself; poetry is better than prose, poetry and prose are equals; literature is better than science, literature is a complement to science; literary analysis should look at the object as it really is, literary analysis should look at the object as it really is not; literary analysis serves the text, literary analysis serves culture, literary analysis serves the oppression and liberation of human beings; analysing literature should consist of the reading the words on the page, analysing literature should consist of reading between the lines on the page: not all of these statements can be true at the same time for the same person, but they are nevertheless all true, and 'literature' is certainly rich enough to carry all these definitions and values, and be an Art of War as much as an Art of Leisure. It is arguably the acceptance of this fact, together with the continuous reminder that one is, after all, studying literature, which can best serve the future of Literary Studies at both school and university.

'Not things, but opinions about things, trouble men.' – Epictetus.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Some Oppositions to the Practical Critics

Carol Atherton insists that Eliot, Leavis and Richards appear ‘as a commanding triumvirate who it is impossible to omit’,¹ and if we add Empson, the picture is quite complete. Paul de Man praises Eliot’s ‘intellectual gentility’;² for Wellek, it is he who is ‘by far the most important critic of the twentieth century in the English-speaking world’;³ Kenner’s comment that he was ‘the undisputed literary dictator of London’ from around 1938 onwards⁴ is double-edged, but whatever his reservations about Eliot’s authority, it is evident that he nevertheless admires him, calling him ‘the most gifted & most influential literary critic in English in the twentieth century’.⁵ John Lechte sees in Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* one of ‘the great creative moments of literary modernism’;⁶ for Kermode, he is ‘the chief English literary critic of the century’;⁷ David Fuller approvingly calls him ‘a theoretical anarchist’ whose ‘humane and world-minded example is salutary’ in the context of current literary criticism⁸. Roger Sale finds in Empson a hero for the modern age and a ‘genius’,⁹ and in Eliot a writer known for ‘dazzling, irresponsible ideas’;¹⁰ and Jameson believes that Empson was, with Barthes, Benjamin, Frye and Shklovsky, one ‘of the greatest contemporary critics and virtuoso readers’, and Leavis

¹ Carol Atherton, *Defining Literary Criticism*, p. 123.

² ‘The Resistance to Theory’, in Lodge, *Modern Criticism and Theory*, pp. 332-47 (p. 335).

³ *A History of Modern Criticism*, p. 176.

⁴ Introduction to Hugh Kenner, ed., *T. S. Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays* (London: Prentice Hall international, 1986), pp. 1-14 (p. 1).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

⁶ In *Julia Kristeva* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. viii.

⁷ Quoted in René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950, Volume 5: English Criticism, 1900-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 291.

⁸ ‘William Empson: From Verbal Analysis to Cultural Criticism’, in *Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 152-65 (p. 152).

⁹ *Modern Heroism: Essays on D. H. Lawrence, William Empson, & J. R. R. Tolkien* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 113.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

one of ‘the very greatest critics of our time’¹¹. Michael Bell argues that Leavis ‘still comes closest [of literary analysts] to expressing the impulse that leads so many people seriously to read, study, and teach literature’;¹² Steiner credits him with having done ‘so much to re-shape the tenor of spirit in his time’;¹³ Gary Day claims he ‘changed the perception of English Literature and professionalized its study’.¹⁴ Christopher Isherwood describes Richards as a ‘prophet’ and ‘our guide, our evangelist’;¹⁵ and John M. Ellis thinks he was a ‘pioneer’ of a ‘more systematic attitude to theory’ that he saw develop in the early twentieth century;¹⁶ E. M. W. Tillyard, Richards’s contemporary at Cambridge, appears to have heavily resented his departure for the United States, including, in that very short *The Muse Unchained* of one hundred and forty-two pages, no fewer than three rather critical references to his decision to leave.¹⁷

This inability to conceive of twentieth-century letters on letters without these analysts is accompanied, sometimes in the same, often in other texts, by an equal unwillingness to attribute any kind of permanent value to their writings. The tendency of much current opinion is to concede that they were influential, once, but nevertheless to assert that they have now become figures of mere historical significance whose influence has not been an entirely good one and whose works are, for that reason as well as others, not much worth reading now – whatever modern theorists may argue about human progress being an illusion, many of them tend to assume the reality of progression, and implied improvement, in the field of literary analysis; this is how it is possible for them to argue that the Practical Critics are outdated, and that their work has been superseded by something much more valuable. All four have been charged with being (more or less liberal) humanists, and associated with related élitist, authoritarian, empiricist, universalist and centric fallacies.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, ‘Symbolic Inference; or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis’, in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986, Vol. 1: Situation of Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 137-52 (pp. 138 and 152).

¹² ‘F. R. Leavis’, in A. Walton Litz et al., *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, pp. 389-422 (p. 422).

¹³ ‘F. R. Leavis’, in David Lodge, ed., *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism: A Reader* (Harlow: Longman, 1972), pp. 622-35 (p. 622).

¹⁴ ‘F. R. Leavis: Criticism and Culture’, in Waugh, *Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 130-9 (p. 130).

¹⁵ Quoted from *Lions and Shadows: An Education in the Twenties* (1938), by John Haffenden in *Among the Mandarins*, p. 179.

¹⁶ ‘Is Theory to Blame?’, in *Theory’s Empire*, pp. 92-109, p. 94.

¹⁷ E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Muse Unchained*, pp. 124, 130 and 133.

Liberal humanism: what was once a compliment has in recent times increasingly become a negative term, and moreover one referring to a philosophy that is now redundant, even ‘dead’.¹⁸ Andrew Michael Roberts clearly positions humanism as something negative and by-gone, when he declares that Keith Tuma, the editor of the 2001 *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry*, ‘is [...] forced back at certain points upon some of the traditional humanist place-markers for pure literary value (such as Leavisite metaphors which equate literary value with vitality)’.¹⁹ He voices, in the same book, the opinion that there is ‘a strong tendency in humanist criticism to associate value itself, in an ultimate or transcendent sense, with singular value [of poetry]. This association probably results from the Christian, monotheistic, essentialist roots of humanist values’, and goes on to criticise this attitude as one inimical to the dissolution of ‘boundaries between poetry and other things’, of unwarranted defensiveness.²⁰ The direction in which the value of literature lay for the four analysts here was not as restrictive as Roberts implies: the margins between it and what might lie outside it are there, but they are porous. Eliot saw a blurred boundary, at best, between poetry and prose (‘I have never yet come across a final, comprehensive, and satisfactory account of the difference between poetry and prose’),²¹ and art in general as only one part of culture;²² and Paul H. Fry points out that what is ‘never resolved in Richards [...] is the question whether there is a boundary between “poetry” and other discourses’, and that this question became increasingly immaterial to Richards, as he moved ‘from “literary” to “rhetorical” criticism’;²³ and Richards was most keen on combining different academic disciplines, in particular science with art. Leavis, indeed, saw the whole of literary study as something that ought to culminate in an ideal English department that could effect the

¹⁸ Rosi Braidotti used this term ‘dead’ in relation to liberal humanism in her talk ‘Towards an Ethics of Affirmation’, speaking at the 2008 UCL Centre for Intercultural Studies Seminar (*Extreme History*) on 12 May 2006.

¹⁹ ‘The Rhetoric of Value in Recent British Poetry Anthologies’, in Andrew Michael Roberts and Jonathan Allison, eds, *Poetry and Contemporary Culture: The Question of Value* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), pp. 101-22 (p. 120).

²⁰ ‘Introduction I: Contemporary Poetry and the Question of Value’, *ibid.*, pp. 1-10.

²¹ Introduction to *The Art of Poetry*, pp. vii-xxiv (pp. xv-i).

²² See *NDC*, p. 24.

²³ Paul H. Fry, ‘I. A. Richards’, in A. Walton Litz et al., *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, pp. 181-99 (p. 197).

‘fostered transcending of departmental boundaries’.²⁴ The tendency to categorise was certainly there – but it did not dominate all their ideas, and it was not inflexible.

Toril Moi sums up the current view of liberal humanism and its literary proponents most neatly:

The humanist believes in literature as an excellent instrument of education: by reading ‘great works’ the student will become a finer human being. The great author is great because he (occasionally even she) has managed to convey an authentic vision of life; and the role of the reader or critic is to listen respectfully to the voice of the author as it is expressed in the text. The literary canon of ‘great literature’ ensures that it is this ‘representative experience’ (one selected by male bourgeois critics) that is transmitted to future generations, rather than those deviant, unrepresentative experiences discoverable in much female, ethnic and working-class writing.²⁵

As we have seen in Part I, they may have been respectful in the sense that they read attentively, but not (as is, it appears, Toril Moi’s view here) that they thoughtlessly accepted everything the author wrote. Rather, any authority which an author they deemed to be ‘great’ had, was established by them before they asserted his ‘greatness’, rather than being the result of their assumption that he was ‘great’. The crux of their respective methodologies was always the idea that a close reading is inextricably linked to a critical reading. That humanist critics equated authorial greatness with the production of an ‘authentic vision of life’ declared by Moi can be similarly dismissed as far too indiscriminate: it is, rather, specifically the criticism of life that Leavis, in particular, praised, which is not quite the same thing as an ‘authentic vision’ – and in the other three cases the representation of life in any manner is not indispensable to the quality of a work.

²⁴ “‘English’, Unrest and Continuity’, in *Nor Shall My Sword: Discourses on Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1972), pp. 103-133 (p. 125).

²⁵ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 77.

Elitism

The first of the secondary charges levelled at the Practical Critics, the one which is heard probably most frequently, is that of élitism. If one considers what it is that motivated their reading of literature, one discovers both that this accusation is not accurate for all four of the critics discussed Part I of this thesis, and that where it is accurate, it is not simply the case that one of them was advocating the oppression or suppression of the masses for the pure benefit of a social or economic upper class. The fact is, that Eliot, Empson, Leavis, and Richards were all concerned by an assumed crisis in their time, a perceived cultural crisis that was not only marked by a decline in the quality of artistic production, but also by a decline in the quality of thought itself. The problem that they were trying to solve may have been the same, but their views on how to approach the solution differed: on the one hand, we have Richards and Empson's apparently neutral scientific utilitarianism – on the other, Leavis and Eliot's evaluative criticism of literature. All four were intent on repairing what they thought was damaged in contemporary (British/European/Western) humanity, and were convinced that literature could, one way or another, play an essential role in the process; it is in this sense that their critical principles can rightly be called 'practical', indicating that these analysts had all moved to an extent away from Arnold's, and Aestheticism's, attempts to separate the two²⁶ (which did not, however, prevent Leavis from distancing himself from Richards's methods, calling them 'pseudo-scientific, and, generally, Neo-Benthamite'²⁷). Leavis has been condemned as an élitist in particular with regard to his view of the university: Gary Day, for instance, explains that, although he 'was in favour of extending higher education to the utmost', Leavis thought 'only people of university quality and with a positive bent for literature should be admitted to study English',²⁸ and believes that the two halves of the argument are contradictory. This is not necessarily so: surely nobody without an aptitude for university study and a bent for literature would apply in the first place, and if they did apply and are accepted, then surely university study would cease to have a point? The burning question is, rather, how this aptitude and bent are to be ascertained, and especially by whom. Leavis was indeed in favour of élites, but he considered the term

²⁶ See, for example, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', in *Lectures and Essays in Criticism*, pp. 258-85, *passim*.

²⁷ 'The Responsible Critic: Or the Function of Criticism at Any Time', in *VC*, pp. 184-206 (p. 205).

²⁸ 'F. R. Leavis: Criticism and Culture', in Waugh, *Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 130-9 (p. 131).

‘élitism’ to be ‘a product of ignorance, prejudice and unintelligence. It is a stupid word [...]’.²⁹ For him, an élite was not to be conceived of as something to be attained for its own sake, at the expense of the rest of humanity. On the contrary, his idea of the élite was as a group that exists for the very benefit of others: ‘I am avowedly concerned with the training of an élite [...] when standards are let down, everyone suffers and the whole community pays the penalty’³⁰. Eliot’s discussion of the importance of the élite in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, shows that he agreed with Leavis: it matters not merely that there is some sort of a benefit for the greatest number, but that the quality of that benefit is high.³¹ Both Eliot and Leavis thought that the quality of life mattered more than the standard of living, quality more than quantity for its own sake, and both do have the interests of the community at heart. In their view, however, the community can gain most if a small section of their number is able to perpetuate a high state of culture (and thereby also of civilization) and lead by example; the assumption being that only a small section is capable of doing this to start with – presumably, in Leavis’s thinking, university graduates, and in Eliot’s, an élite of cultured families³² – rather than by Richards and Empson’s vision of a simultaneous collective ordering. Empson belonged firmly in Richards’s camp here, remarking that ‘the whole of “Eng. Lit.” [...] badly needs to return to the Benthamite position [...]’. The idea of making a calculation to secure the greatest happiness for the greatest number [...] seems the only picture we can offer.³³ The problem with non-Benthamite society, he thinks, is that everyone will either act for himself alone, or at least justify things according to his own principles (‘transcendental modes of judgement’): ‘The same line of talk sounds harmless about our preferences in literature and the arts [...] but to put a premium on being capricious encourages bluff, and we have had plenty of that.’³⁴ For Richards as for Empson, quality mattered only if it could benefit the greatest number, and if in doubt, the number counted for more. Thus, whereas Leavis was keen on the idea of concentrating on educating the best students in order to improve everyone else, Richards apparently takes up a contradictory position,

²⁹ ‘Pluralism, Compassion and Social Hope’, pp. 163-198 (p. 169), in *Nor Shall My Sword*.

³⁰ ‘I am avowedly concerned with the training of an élite [...] when standards are let down, everyone suffers and the whole community pays the penalty’; ‘The Literary Discipline and Liberal Education’, in *VC*, pp. 167-83 (p. 169). See also ‘Literary Studies: A Reply’, *ibid.*, p. 213, §2.

³¹ (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), *passim*; see in particular pp. 21-49.

³² See *NDC*, Chapter II.

³³ ‘The Hammer’s Ring’, in *ARG*, pp. 216-24 (p. 217).

³⁴ ‘The Cult of Unnaturalism’, in *ARG*, pp. 627-31 (p. 628).

when he expresses, in *Practical Criticism*, his desire to find a method with which to equip the individual in a democratic society with ‘a means of exercising [his] power of choice’.³⁵ If we are all fitted out, through our attainment by means of proper reading of the ability to value anything correctly, we can all help our communities to ‘protect themselves’ from people who ‘are not well organized’. A ‘different organisation’ of mind can consist of either an enhanced mind or a disordered one, but without the power of correct assessment, we cannot possibly decide who is in possession of which.³⁶ While Eliot and Leavis aimed at the establishment of utilitarian élites, Richards and Empson wanted utilitarian equality. Their approaches differed, but all four were just as intent as each other on improving the world around them, for themselves as much as for their fellow-humans.

Authoritarianism

According to many, authoritarianism is another error these critics have committed. Alison Light, for instance, claims that it was the ‘universalizing values of literary criticism’ that once prevented her from engaging with her ‘cultural heritage’ in a critical way, even as a feminist, because she was ‘trapped’ in them,³⁷ implying that their authority weighed heavily on her (although she fails to explain how it did this). We also have Valentine Cunningham talking about a ‘powerful Cambridge (England) Raymond Williams-F. R. Leavis axis’³⁸ – though it is quite evident that Leavis was nowhere near a Cambridge axis, even if there was one: ‘Leavis did not and does not’, so Wellek, ‘represent English teaching at Cambridge. Rather, he always struggled on the fringe of the university in opposition to the ruling group.’³⁹ There is a widely-held opinion that these early professional critics were authoritarians, in judgement as well as style, and Eliot and Leavis appear as the main targets (curiously, since Richards is arguably the most authoritarian of the four); thus Herrnstein Smith describes Leavis’s style as modelled on ‘the magisterial mode of literary evaluation’ which ‘characteristically reproduced itself

³⁵ *PC*, p. 350.

³⁶ *PLC*, pp. 48-9.

³⁷ Alison Light, ‘Feminism and the Literary Critic’, in Mary Eagleton, ed., *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, 2nd edn, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 242-5 (p. 245).

³⁸ ‘Theory, What Theory?’, in *Theory’s Empire*, pp. 24-41 (p. 31).

³⁹ *A History of Modern Criticism*, p. 239.

after the image – and in the voice – of [...] such latter-day “master-critics” as Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot’.⁴⁰ Writing on Leavis’s treatment of Lawrence in *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist*, Christopher Butler asks ‘what independent evidence is or could be cited for so whole-hearted an endorsement of the writings of a novelist [...]. Such critics rely upon their own authority and some form of recognitional assent on our part’;⁴¹ similarly, Bell, otherwise well-disposed towards his subject, concludes that ‘the necessary condition of reading [Leavis] is that the reader be drawn into the Leavisian world view’.⁴² Steiner describes how Leavis ‘has come to demand, perhaps unconsciously, complete loyalty to his creed. The merest doubt or deviation is heresy, and is soon followed by excommunication from the kirk’.⁴³ Yet what for one person is authoritarian, for another is ‘robust’.⁴⁴ J. Hillis Miller sees Eliot’s apparent impersonality in his critical writings as an illusion, and that ‘this impersonal rhetoric is an important factor in maintaining Eliot’s critical authority [... and] gives his criticism a sense of objectivity that seems to expect no dissent’⁴⁵ – and Stanley Fish agrees that ‘the weight of Eliot’s judgment is a *political* fact rather than a fact that reflects the “truth” (independently determined) of his opinions. Anyone who would advance another judgment, therefore, must make his case in the context of Eliot’s authority.’⁴⁶ It is entirely true that there are frequent moments in their criticism in which they produce evidence in support of their argument which, whatever its character, is certainly not scientific; there can also be no question that all four of the analysts are on these occasions, as on others, eager to assert their authority, and that a tone of apparent authority will have allowed their less substantiated opinions to flourish when otherwise they might not have. It is debatable, however, to what extent they differ in this from their professional successors and, even if that extent was great, whether that fact should cause their entire work to be summarily dismissed. The same goes for the proposition of canons. It is true that Leavis argues for his preferred poets in *Revaluation*

⁴⁰ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 19.

⁴¹ *Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology: An Introduction to Some Current Issues in Literary Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 57-8.

⁴² ‘F. R. Leavis’, in *The Cambridge History*, p. 422.

⁴³ ‘F. R. Leavis’, in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, p. 629.

⁴⁴ Gary Day, ‘F. R. Leavis’, in *Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 130.

⁴⁵ Quoted by Carol Atherton in *Defining Literary Criticism*, p. 133.

⁴⁶ Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989) pp. 252-3.

and *New Bearings*, and his preferred novelists in *The Great Tradition*; Eliot and Empson have their favourite authors on display in their various books, essays and articles; and Richards makes categorical statements on ‘bad’ and ‘defective’ art. It is also true that Leavis and Eliot, in particular, managed to have significant parts of their collections accepted by educational institutions in Britain and elsewhere⁴⁷ – ideas of continuity and tradition do pervade their critical writings, but neither Eliot, nor Leavis supported the concept of a universally valid canon. None of the four analysts, in fact, came close to doing such a thing. Anyone familiar with their opinions on the value of criticism should be hard-pressed to argue otherwise; and given that they spent much of their criticism of literature on re-evaluating the reputations of numerous writers, they can hardly be said to have believed in the sanctity of canons. They built their own, and expected us to do the same.⁴⁸

Empiricism

Just as has happened with the term ‘humanism’, ‘empiricism’ has become a bad word – not surprising, in a time when theorising about literature is perhaps more popular – or, at least, gains more attention – in the academic world than criticising it. It was the advent of poststructuralism, in particular, which arguably occasioned this shift from empirical approaches to literature towards more theoretical ones. As Morris Dickstein points out, this ‘was a deliberate affront to the empirical Anglo-Saxon tradition of [...] what Leavis liked to call “the common pursuit of true judgment”, since it put the ‘emphasis on the subjectivity of interpretation, indeed, the impossibility of interpretation’.⁴⁹ In the eyes of

⁴⁷ Though the case-study of Thomas Hardy in Part III of this thesis shows how their opinion on the writer differed substantially from that seemingly held by those who define the British national curriculum today.

⁴⁸ See *The Cambridge History*, p. 421, for how Leavis was misunderstood; for an example of such a misunderstanding, see Lars Ole Sauerberg, *Versions of the Past – Visions of the Future: The Canonical in the Criticism of T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 66 (on Leavis’s perception of culture, which was ‘conservative because it preserves values proven by time and hence not subject to questioning’); and see Gareth Reeves, ‘T. S. Eliot and the Idea of Tradition’, in *Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 107-18, for an account of his idea of tradition, which assumes that ‘everyone is free to create their private pantheon of precursors according to their own literary tastes and obsessions’ (p. 113).

⁴⁹ Morris Dickstein, ‘The Rise and Fall of “Practical” Criticism: From I. A. Richards to Barthes and Derrida’, in *Theory’s Empire*, pp. 60-77 (p. 76).

poststructuralism, then, texts can hardly ever (if ever) be accurately interpreted, and so it represents the necessity to conceive of a theory which will allow us to discover things about literature, instead of venturing to discover things in it. One of the best-known literary theorists of the past hundred years, Wellek, is most vocal on this point: the only one of the four Practical Critics to receive a favourable treatment from him in *A History of Modern Criticism* is Eliot, of whose theory he says that it is ‘coherent and systematic’⁵⁰ – and even though he credits Richards with the possession of a theory, he maintains that ‘British empiricism’ had a significant influence on him (p. 229). ‘There is not much theory in Empson,’ he argues, and at this hurdle, Empson fails Wellek. Leavis is treated similarly: no doubt basing what follows on his disagreements with him in the pages of *Scrutiny*, ‘Leavis himself constantly emphasizes his lack of interest in philosophical theory, in systematic defense and argument about principles, and recommends always a purely empirical textual approach to literary criticism’ (p. 244), and this is ‘his gravest failing’: he is too concrete in his analysis, which ‘has a paralyzing effect on Leavis’s practice; it makes him reject the tools and concepts of technical analysis and be content with impressions or dogmatically stated feelings’ (p. 253). When Wellek, in *Scrutiny*, 5 (1937), expressed pity at the fact that Leavis had not backed up his principles with a systematic theoretical framework, Leavis countered: ‘That, I suggest, is because [he] is a philosopher; and [...] I am not’, and that literary criticism and philosophy are ‘quite distinct and different kinds of discipline’.⁵¹

Wellek is not alone – thus Ian Watt claims that ‘Practical Criticism [...] continues the tradition of the British Empiricists. [...] It [excludes] linguistic and historical considerations, so as to derive [...] all the literary values of a work empirically from the words on the page.’ He criticises its ‘air of objectivity’, which confers a ‘spurious authority’ on criticism.⁵² A similar argument is put forward by Herrnstein Smith, when she writes of ‘the traditional empiricist doctrine of a fundamental split or discontinuity between fact and value’, and that the ‘invocation of an “actual” universality coupled with such question-begging hedges as “fairly” and “qualified” is [...] characteristic of traditional empiricist-normative accounts’.⁵³ In response to Watt, while it is true that

⁵⁰ *A History of Modern Criticism*, p. 176.

⁵¹ ‘Literary Criticism and Philosophy’, in *The Common Pursuit* (London: Penguin and Chatto & Windus, 1962), pp. 211-222 (first published in *Scrutiny*, 6 (1937), 59-70).

⁵² ‘The First Paragraph of “The Ambassadors”’, in Lodge, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, pp. 528-44 (pp. 528-9).

⁵³ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value*, pp. 18-21.

there is much less consideration of historical factors in so-called Practical Criticism, one can hardly claim of Empson or Richards that language has no place in their work. Then, also, when it comes to the literary values which Watt thinks it is the mission of these critics to find, we have Richards claiming that literary value is something that is created when the text and the reader's mind meet, and not inherent in the 'words on the page', and Leavis being 'dismissive of mere "literary" values', insisting that literary analysis is 'deeply bound up with deeper judgements about the nature of history and society as a whole'.⁵⁴ As far as Herrnstein Smith is concerned, she appears to disregard the fact that, although each of the four had his strong opinions, with the exception of Richards they all repeatedly noted that they were aware of the possibility that they could be wrong – hence, that what they saw as facts (for instance, the beauty of a passage in a poem) could be disproved, or at least disagreed with, by someone else. Her comment that their tendency was 'empiricist-normative' is to an extent justified: they did rely, on the whole, more on textual evidence than on theory even in those cases pointed out by Wellek (that is, Eliot and Richards) in which there was at least some sort of theory hovering in the background; and they had certain standards against which they measured literary output (in the guise of an epitomatory author, sincerity, the sensation of beauty and so on); but for her to state that they were all hypocritical universalists (that is, asserting a universal truth with qualifications) is too sweeping to be entirely accurate.

Universalism and Centrism

Universalism,⁵⁵ that is, a lack of differentiation between different types of people, in the claim that one set of standards or criteria can be employed for all humans, is another characteristic of liberal humanism as seen by modern eyes. Kate Soper, for one, heavily criticises the humanists' 'claimed knowledge [...] of others', which presents so much of a problem for those who attempt to exercise anti-humanist critique in the name of feminism; for they are fighting against the 'enforced collectivizations of interests and

⁵⁴ Terry Eagleton, 'The Rise of English', in *LT*, pp. 15-46 (p. 28).

⁵⁵ For a discussion of the universalism and centrism/provincialism of the Practical Critics in the context of 'world literature', please see my chapter 'The Practical Critics in World Literature', in Karen-Margrethe Simonsen and Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, eds, *World Literature and World Culture* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008), pp. 215-217.

needs which have been given theoretical legitimation in the past'.⁵⁶ True: the values contemplated by Eliot, Empson, Leavis and Richards are indeed in one way universalising; one thinks of beauty, poetic emotion, sensibility, a healthy and ordered mind, sincerity, and that there is no suggestion to be found anywhere in these analysts' writings that they thought these matters differed from men to women, country to country, race to race, or from any kind of background to another, except, that is, as far as two variables were concerned – education and personality. They seem to say: We all sense beauty, internalise a poetic emotion, entertain sensibility or achieve a healthy and ordered mind and so on, but what it is that makes us do these things can vary widely. The personality of man, made up, as it is in their view, of a blend of experienced and empirical knowledge, cannot allow that we share every one of each other's opinions (and one or two of them thought we did not need to). It does not, however, prevent us from sharing the same quality of opinion. As we shall learn, Leavis and Richards in particular thought that what prevented all people in all the world from understanding and appreciating literature – good literature, that is, though the finer points were open for discussion – was a lack of good education. They disagreed with regard to what such a good education should consist of, but hoped that it could achieve a levelling that was not a levelling-down, and a levelling that did not result in universal uniformity.⁵⁷

Accompanying this indictment for universalism is one for centrism, and its negative implication for anti-imperialist critiques of Practical Criticism. 'I was astounded,' writes Arun P. Mukherjee on her experiences teaching literature,

by my students' ability to close themselves off to the disturbing implications of my interpretation and devote their attention to expatiating upon 'the anxiety and hope of humanity,' and other such generalizations as change, people, values, reality, etc. I realized that these generalizations were ideological. They enabled my students to efface the differences between British bureaucrats and British traders, between colonizing whites and colonized blacks, and between rich blacks and poor blacks.

⁵⁶ 'Feminism, Humanism and Postmodernism', in *Feminist Literary Theory*, pp. 364-6 (p. 365) – how they were enforced is unclear from her account. Soper's critique of humanism includes not only non-Marxists, but also the notion prevalent among some Marxists of the proletariat as the 'universal subject' of humanity, without differentiation, for example between the subjection of men and of women.

⁵⁷ See also Richard Shusterman, who writes that Eliot was in fact led by his historicist attitude 'to elevate the status of contextual thinking and practical wisdom over scientific method with its rigid, universalizable character'; in *T. S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism* (London: Duckworth, 1988), p. 111.

They enabled them to believe that all human beings faced dilemmas similar to the ones faced by the two main characters in the story.⁵⁸

It is plainly the case that these four analysts fail to recognise that not all customs, let alone beliefs, fears and aspirations, are shared by all of humanity, and that using their writings in the teaching of literature can prevent students from recognising this. They are clearly Anglocentric, Eurocentric or Occident-centric (depending on the individual); but can centrism alone stand for imperialism or racism? It should also be noted that they were not entirely enamoured of English, British, or any kind of so-called Western, Christian society, as it was then. Leavis and Eliot seriously question the supposed superiority of their society over others, even while they acknowledge that it is desirable to create a superior kind of society, in Leavis's case in England, in Eliot's in Europe.⁵⁹ Leavis believes that there is a potential greatness in English culture, that had existed before, but did not exist at his time. His entire output of literary and more generally sociocultural criticism is testament to the fact: he saw something was wrong in his world, and worked to find a remedy. Leavis proudly declares that 'the work of the great English novelists constitutes one of the very greatest creative achievements of human history' (though he does go on to specify that 'it should be studied by undergraduates reading English', not literature in general),⁶⁰ praises the 'subtlety and complexity' of the English language⁶¹ and hubristically calls for the establishment of his version of the ideal university and English School, 'if humanity is not to suffer disastrous impoverishment'.⁶² English culture is certainly central to his view of, and concern with, the world; he nowhere, however, expressly declares any sort of a political agenda for his criticism. He may have thought it, and it may be there indirectly in some of his writings, but one can try to read too much between the lines. Eliot, too, does nothing much to publicise the qualities of non-European cultures, but it is obvious from the third chapter in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* that he thought different regions should, and can, enrich

⁵⁸ 'Ideology in the Classroom: A Case Study in the Teaching of English Literature in Canadian Universities', in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 447-51 (first publ. in *Dalhousie Review*, 66 (1986), 22-30) (p. 449).

⁵⁹ See, for example, Louis Menand's 'T. S. Eliot' in *The Cambridge History*, p. 51, for a description of his vision of a 'pan-European culture'.

⁶⁰ 'The Radical Wing of Cambridge English', in *Letters in Criticism*, p. 77.

⁶¹ 'William Empson: Intelligence and Sensibility', in *VC*, pp. 26-8 (p. 27).

⁶² 'Standards of Criticism', in *VC*, p. 249.

and be enriched by others, no matter what economic or political differences there are between them (p. 54). Empson and Richards, both well-travelled in particular in the Far East, are also keen to look elsewhere – not in order to distil (as Valéry and others would have had it in 1925)⁶³ or to import other cultures, but in order to see and understand them. Empson writes, in ‘The Hammer’s Ring’, that ‘the main purpose of reading imaginative literature is to grasp a wide variety of experience, imagining people with codes and customs very unlike our own’.⁶⁴ Quoting Richards from *Mencius on the Mind* – ‘to us the Western world is still the World (or the part of the World that counts); but an impartial observer would perhaps say that such provincialism is dangerous’ – Said finds it ‘heartening [...] that such illiberality [as was common at the time] has occasionally been challenged’.⁶⁵ Paul H. Fry disagrees: in *Mencius*, Richards may conduct an initial ‘attack on Occidental provincialism’ but he ‘soon enough strongly suggests that the “fixity, in unquestioned security, of a system of social observances” constitutes a “*terminus*” to Chinese thinking’, adding that his promotion of Basic English (as opposed to Basic Another Language) also attests to his orientalism. The first part may provide evidence that Richards’s theory was well in advance of his practice, but without knowing whether Richards restricted such statements to the orient or made similar negative generalisations about, say, the Spanish or the English, we cannot know to what extent this is really a case of orientalism, or racism of any kind. As far as the second part is concerned, Richards was, after all, an English-speaker (though a Welshman), and it is therefore only natural that he and Ogden should have chosen their own language for their scheme. It can hardly be denied that orientalism, and racism in general, was a fact in the early twentieth century, and it may also well be that some or all four of these analysts played a part in these ’isms. We cannot, though, tell this from their critical writings alone; at worst one can call them unreasonably proud of their culture, or at least, of its potential.

⁶³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 250-252.

⁶⁴ In *ARG*, pp. 216-24 (p. 218).

⁶⁵ *Orientalism*, p. 254.

Appendix B: The Aesthetic Background

For Aesthetes such as Bell, Poe, Pater and Wilde, the value of art lay in its beauty alone and neither art, nor, crucially, criticism had for them a social function. ‘All art is quite useless’, wrote Wilde in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*¹ – suggesting that it is not a means to an end, but an end in itself. This supposed in-itselfness of art is not straightforward, however, because the work of art does have a function, even for Wilde: that is, to allow its reader, listener or viewer to attain a special state of mind or spirit, or of the soul, brought into being by the work’s beauty. It is an effect not of action, but of *‘being, and not being merely, but becoming’*.² For the Practical Critics, it was the act of criticism (rather than art alone) which could improve one’s mind one way or another, and the improvement was desirable because it could have positive consequences for the whole of society. For Wilde, art may have a point, but it is simultaneously socially useless because it is unrelated to practical matters, which in particular becomes clear when he criticises England for not having enough unpractical people (p. 177) – recalling Arnold’s similar argument in his ‘Function’-essay.³ The elevated state of mind which art produces can be described as one of ambition, or perhaps escape, representing the supposed striving of the human being for something beyond itself. It is analogous to the Christian yearning for Heaven, though the Aesthetes do not assert a direct relationship between what the beholder of the work of art experiences and a specifically Christian exaltation: the aim of art is not to bring one closer to God, but to bring one closer to an ideal of oneself, or at least to an ideal world. Thus art is governed by nothing outside itself, but alone rules its self. In ‘The Critic as Artist’, Wilde declares that

it is the function of Literature to create, from the rough material of actual existence, a new world that will be more marvellous, more enduring, and more true than the world that common eyes look upon, and through which common natures seek to realise their perfection.⁴

¹ ‘The Preface’, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 4.

² ‘The Critic as Artist’, in *Intentions*, pp. 93-217 (pp. 175-6).

³ See, for example, p. 70, in *Lectures*.

⁴ ‘Sandro Botticelli’, pp. 33-40 (p. 136).

Bell echoes this sentiment when he calls art a ‘means to a state of exaltation’, and though he does admit that both religion and art are products of the ‘religious spirit’,⁵ he does not therefore conclude that the aim of art is religious. Thus, also, Pater believes that reflection on an object of art creates an experience of an impression, which experience has no ‘fruit’ but is ‘the end’ of such observation. It ‘startles’ the ‘human spirit [...] to a life of constant and eager observation’; and this will permit one to ‘burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, [which] is success in life’.⁶ In ‘The Poetic Principle’, Poe agrees that the ‘vital requisite in all works of Art [is] its totality of effect or impression’,⁷ and that the state of mind that results from the beauty of a work of art is driven by the inherent ‘desire of the moth for the star’ (p. 77). The one ‘Poetic Principle’ consists, for him, of ‘the Human Aspiration for Supernal Beauty’ (p. 92).

All this is firmly grounded in the secular, however, and the Aesthetes similarly keep their principles at a distance from concepts such as ‘morality’ and ‘truth’. While Pater writes in *The Renaissance* that art does its ‘most sincere and surest work’ when it is ‘undisturbed by any moral ambition’ (p. 36), Bell writes in *Art* that art is inherently moral simply because it is ‘good’, and that the appropriate answer to the question of the ‘moral justification’ for art, or whether it is ‘good in itself or a means to good’, is that art ‘exalts to a state of ecstasy better far than anything a benumbed moralist can even guess at; so shut up’.⁸ This is as far as morality goes for Bell: to pronounce something ‘a work of art is [...] to make a momentous moral judgment’ (p. 115), but ethics can only be discussed in the context of art if it is restricted to specific works and does not refer to these works as art but ‘as members of some other class’ (p. 116). Social responsibility does not enter into the matter. When it comes to the question of truth, also, he rejects the idea that scientific truth is superior to emotional truth: scientists, ‘having got us into the habit of attempting to justify all our feelings and states of mind by reference to the physical universe, have almost bullied some of us into believing that what cannot be so justified does not exist’.⁹ Poe also believes that beauty alone is ‘the province of the poem’,¹⁰ and that ‘he must be theory-mad beyond redemption who [...] persist[s] in attempting to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth’ (p. 76). The only truth in

⁵ ‘Art and Religion’, in *Art*, pp. 76 and 82.

⁶ ‘Conclusion’, in *The Renaissance*, pp. 151-2.

⁷ ‘The Poetic Principle’, in *Essays and Reviews*, pp. 71-94 (p. 71).

⁸ ‘Art and Ethics’, in *Art*, p. 106.

⁹ ‘Art and Religion’, in *Art*, p. 90.

¹⁰ *Essays and Reviews*, p. 78.

poetry is the truth of a poem's beauty (p. 93). Wilde sums it up most provocatively in *Dorian Gray*: 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all', runs the familiar epigram, and therefore 'the morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium. [...] An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.' (p. 3).

Appendix C: Table for Part III

Bhabha		Eagleton		Eliot		Empson	
<i>Valuable</i>	<i>Not Valuable</i>	<i>Valuable</i>	<i>Not Valuable</i>	<i>Valuable</i>	<i>Not Valuable</i>	<i>Valuable</i>	<i>Not Valuable</i>
None	All	‘The Darkling Thrush’, <i>Jude the Obscure</i> , <i>The Return of the Native</i> , <i>Tess of the d’Urbervilles</i> , <i>The Woodlanders</i> , <i>Far from the Madding Crowd</i> , <i>Under the Greenwood Tree</i> , <i>The Mayor of Casterbridge</i>	None	<i>The Mayor of Casterbridge</i> and <i>A Group of Noble Dames</i> (up to a point)	<i>Far from the Madding Crowd</i> , and the rest of his work	‘After a Journey’, ‘The Voice’, ‘Who’s in the next room?’, ‘A Broken Appointment’, ‘The Sleepwalker’, ‘Neutral Tones’, and five others, unnamed	<i>The Dynasts</i> , ‘several long ill-written anecdotes’, ‘Hap’, <i>Tess of the d’Urbervilles</i>

Leavis		Miller		Richards		Showalter	
<i>Valuable</i>	<i>Not Valuable</i>	<i>Valuable</i>	<i>Not Valuable</i>	<i>Valuable</i>	<i>Not Valuable</i>	<i>Valuable</i>	<i>Not Valuable</i>
‘The Voice’, ‘After a Journey’, ‘The Self-Unseeing’, ‘A Broken Appointment’, ‘Neutral Tones’, ‘During Wind and Rain’, ‘Friends Beyond’, ‘Julie Jane’, ‘The Darkling Thrush’, ‘Shut Out That Moon’, ‘The Night of the Dance’, ‘The Division’, ‘Overlooking the River Stour’, ‘On the Doorstep’, ‘The Sick God’ (two lines), ‘To a Motherless Child’ (one phrase), ‘A Commonplace Day’ (stanza 4 & ll. 34-5), <i>Jude</i> and <i>Tess</i> (up to a point)	Most of the rest of his poetic work, including ‘Any Little Old Song’, ‘My Cicely’, ‘The Inconsistent’, ‘Reminiscences of a Dancing Man’, ‘In a Cathedral City’, ‘A Singer Asleep’, ‘In Front of the Landscape’, <i>Satires of Circumstance</i> , and the rest of his prose, in particular <i>Life’s Little Ironies</i>	All	None	‘The Voice’, ‘After a Journey’, ‘The Self-Unseeing’, ‘A Broken Appointment’	None	(in 1979) ‘He Abjures Love’, <i>The Mayor of Casterbridge</i> , his heroines, in particular those of the 1890s, and his ‘feminine heroes’ in <i>Jude</i> and <i>Tess</i>	(1978 and post-1979) All

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