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978-0-521-27657-3 - Structuralism or Criticism?: Thoughts on how we Read

Geoffrey Strickland

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## PART I

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[More information](#)*Chapter 1*INTRODUCTION  
READING AS DISTINCT FROM  
TALKING OR WRITING ABOUT BOOKS

Understanding is silent, interpretation extremely garrulous.

(E. D. Hirsch)

It is generally assumed that there is what has been called an art – some would say a science – of reading that can be acquired over many years of training in schools and universities and is exemplified in good criticism. Reading, of course, in a restricted sense. It is something more highly developed than the elementary skills of literacy, yet, at the same time, no one would claim that it is a matter of interpreting any piece of writing with expertise. The good critic, it is acknowledged, may be a poor linguist and capable of reading fewer foreign languages and understanding them less well than a professional interpreter, an air hostess or a German politician. Nor will he be expected to understand a manual of electronics or even a piece of ordinary technical philosophy. His skill will be apparent in what he says or writes about poetry, fiction, drama and those works of history or philosophy which call for no specialised knowledge and no other kind of skill for their interpretation. It may be apparent too, according to those who have been influenced by the writings of F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson in England or Roland Barthes in France, in his reading of newspapers, advertisements, politicians' rhetoric and the catch-phrases of popular culture.

It would be absurd to deny that such a skill could exist or that different people might possess it in varying degrees. But what is difficult, on any level of sophistication, is to answer the question: how do you know it is being exercised and that a particular reading of the words on the page is correct, especially if by 'the words on the page' we mean the words understood as the author intended them to be? It is true that disagreements as to how one should read them are often resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned, and one may be grateful to a teacher, a friend or the work of a critic for having opened one's eyes to what one now sees as the true or full meaning of a poem. But it is unlikely that anyone who has enjoyed this

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experience will be able to say what general principle or rule he happened to violate when he misread the poem in the first place, and how he might avoid making such a mistake again. This is probably why, though many attempts have been made to formulate such rules and principles, there is none, apart from simple caveats such as Plutarch's reminder that poets tell deliberate lies, which has commanded for long any general assent.<sup>1</sup>

Something else that is difficult – in fact, practically impossible – is to know whether the academic study of literature has proved, on balance, a blessing or a curse.<sup>2</sup> A blessing of course, it would be said by many of the academics themselves and by those who assume that people in their position must know what they're talking about. Yet is there any way in which this is obvious? At least, it might be said, it has ensured that the great poets and novelists of the past continue to be read, just as the schools of the Greek and Roman *grammatikoi* helped to preserve the reputation of a canon of poets, dramatists, orators and historians. Possibly. But the reputation of Shakespeare in England spread and became established centuries before he became the object of 'commentary' and 'appreciation' in universities and schools. That of Dickens was made by his unschooled readers, and it was not to university or adult education audiences that he delivered his public readings.<sup>3</sup> The idea of a canon of literary classics is, in any case, becoming increasingly unfashionable in schools and universities themselves. Literature is coming more and more to be regarded as a branch of sociology or linguistics. Writings of avowedly ephemeral interest are coming to dominate the syllabus, to the point where in America, according to E. D. Hirsch (*The aims of interpretation*, p. 136), 'little remains that the underground can call its own'. In some universities, it is now possible for a student to take a good degree in French without having read either Racine or Flaubert. Even among those who profess to take the idea of the literary classic seriously, there is an understandable tendency to question established reputations or to want to add to the list, and it would be outrageous to wish that things should be otherwise. As a result, the list of 'major authors' now far exceeds any possible syllabus, and the idea of the 'well-read' man or woman comes to seem increasingly unreal as the years go by. It may be impossible to revive the customs and pieties of antiquity, but there was a purely practical advantage in the creation of a canon which included only ten works in every genre. It ensured, if nothing else, the existence of a common culture

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## INTRODUCTION

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among the literate classes of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds and one extending over many generations.

The question whether the so-called teaching of literature has been of general benefit to humanity is, of course, impossible to answer. There is no conceivable form of investigation that would enable us to weigh the cost against the advantages and only a biased or unquestioning mind will reply unhesitatingly in the negative or – dare I say? – affirmative. Someone may ask, of course, ‘What harm can it do?’ And the question needs to be asked, but if anyone doubts that it can do harm, he ought perhaps to read John Newton’s article in *The Cambridge Quarterly*, ‘Literary criticism, universities, murder’. Newton points out, with copious illustrations, how much better, from any point of view, a first-year undergraduate can write on the poetry of Donne than his or her elders and betters, reputed academic critics for whom the prolonged study of literature seems to have become only a conventional chore. Matthew Arnold says somewhere that one can read too much poetry, and anyone who believes that enforced exposure to literature is, at the worst, harmless should consider how often intelligent young people are dismayed by its apparent effect on the minds of those who have been exposed to it for years; also how often a normally sensitive boy or girl has been made to hate poetry by being made to write or talk about it in words which have then been held up for kindly or unkind ridicule. The love of poetry can be an intensely private affair.<sup>4</sup> Glibness is not the guarantee of either insight or sensitivity.

However, it is not with the possible consequences of the universal and compulsory study of literature during the last hundred years that this book is concerned, valuable though it might be to know more than we do of the history of that particular educational reform. My purpose is rather to suggest what, by the nature of things and at any time, reading and critical discussion is able and unable to achieve.

Among the objects which critical discussion is unable to achieve, we are often told, is the communication to someone else of anything resembling a fact or a precept; that is, an addition to knowledge to be taken on trust. This has been said with some firmness by, for example, Roland Barthes, in his *Leçon inaugurale prononcée au Collège de France*; F. R. Leavis, who happened for this reason to dislike even referring to himself as a ‘teacher’ and John Newton in the article I have already mentioned. Newton writes:

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Poetry can be studied, but the study of it can't be taught. So it had better *not* be taught. Some people would say that in that case it has no place in a university. I'm inclined to say that, on the contrary, it is therefore an ideal study for a university. The idea of a university that is being taken for granted by those people who think the opposite is a widespread one but seems to me barbaric . . . ('Literary criticism, universities, murder', p. 348)

That 'study', one may agree, involves constant discussion and exchange. Otherwise, the university would only be what it often is in reality, a university merely in name. Yet is discussion and exchange of what one has seen and understood *indispensable* to understanding? Newton doesn't assume this, nor can I think of any reason why one should.

Jane Austen or John Clare would not have needed to be told that the ability to read well has nothing necessarily to do with anything one writes or says or anything else one does, apart from reading. If this is not always obvious in our age of compulsory literary appreciation, it is because of the tenacity of the view I am questioning: that the study of literature in schools and universities is, *ipso facto*, worthwhile in that it consists in something more than mere solitary reading. A student of chemistry, it is assumed, can only become proficient by performing experiments, a mathematician by solving mathematical problems and a student of literature by writing critical commentaries and essays.

Yet for the student of literature, the equivalent – if one can talk of an equivalent at all – of solving the problem is the act of reading itself. As E. D. Hirsch has argued (cf. pp. 27–8 below), there is a sense in which the often effortless deciphering of the words on the page entails the solving of problems, even if these are solved instantaneously and unselfconsciously. We hear a great deal, especially in the rubric of examination papers, about something called literary 'analysis'. But analysis here is something very different from analysis in other academic disciplines and the reason seems to lie in what Roland Barthes has spoken of ('Ecrivains, intellectuels, professeurs', p. 9) as a characteristic of the human as distinct from the physical sciences: the impossibility of a 'method' to which one could attribute a 'result'. Barthes slightly over-simplifies the matter and seems to forget that there are such things as statistical surveys and word-counts. These, however, can only be used to answer certain types of question, questions of characteristic usage and authorship notably. Where the analysis of a text does not involve counting,

the answer to any question one asks about it is a matter of simple confirmation or otherwise – yes, there is ambiguity here; no, this reading is syntactically impossible – and this seems to be true of literary analysis even at its most searching and subtle. In F. R. Leavis's commentary on Thomas Hardy's 'After a journey', for example (*The living principle*, pp. 127–34 and pp. 174–5 below), we are shown how all the elements in the poem combine to give reality to an experience of a remarkable kind, the remarkableness lying in the effective presence of the intelligence and character of a man reliving his past. I know of no piece of criticism which shows with such precision the complexity and coherence of effect which characterise the reading of a major poem. When I deny that criticism of this kind resembles in any way the performance of an experiment, I am not trying to say that Leavis merely tells us what he happened, without search or reflection, to notice when he was reading Hardy's poem. He himself reminds us constantly how much discussion and exchange are part of 'what we call analysis' (e.g. *English literature in our time and the university*, p. 48) and those who knew him may agree that his best thoughts seemed to come to him when he was thinking and reading aloud in discussion with a congenial audience. I have sometimes been asked to explain the Leavisian 'method', but Leavis himself never claimed that his way of expounding something, with its constant implicit appeal for confirmation, even if 'deliberate' and sustained by a concern for what he called 'relevance', was either methodical or systematic.

There are, of course, other kinds of literary 'analysis'. It may be a matter of pedagogic drill, a way of ensuring that no one in the classroom is left behind, as in the reading of a passage in a Greek or Roman school, calling for the establishment and correction of a common written text; the recitation of the passage; the *exegesis* or explanation of etymologies, learned and technical allusions and the genealogies of gods and heroes; the *krisis* or drawing of a moral from the tale. Something similar has survived into our own lifetimes in the French *explication de texte*, again a schoolroom exercise whose continued practice in the university can be partly explained by the fact that the conclusion of a student's university career is the oral examination of the *agrégation*, in which his examiners include school inspectors and he is judged for his pedagogic as well as intellectual gifts. Analysis here too is (explicitly) a matter of explanation rather than discovery and the rules of the exercise a matter of convention.

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It would be absurd to pretend that they are any more than conventions and as absurd to object to them as such as to quarrel with the conventions of polite behaviour that enable strangers to know where they are with one another, to feel at ease and communicate freely.

It is, however, with reading that may or may not give rise to critical discussion that the reflections which follow are concerned. I prefer to leave open the question whether or how the ability to read can be taught and I do not presume to offer any method of criticism. I hope simply that what I am saying will help to clear away some of the current misconceptions surrounding the uniquely human gift for communicating over space and time.

It may be noticed that I have avoided using the word 'literature' in the title of this book, though the reading of novels, poetry and drama is what I mainly discuss and though it will interest mainly those who like myself are students of literature. The word is indispensable. We all know, broadly speaking, what it means in its various contexts, including that of the last lines of Verlaine's *Art poétique*. And misunderstanding only arises when we try to define it more precisely than anyone else: when we try to discover some necessary and sufficient condition which is met by, say, Shelley's 'Masque of Anarchy' or Gorki's autobiography and not by the national anthem or the memoirs of Sir Harold Wilson.

It is debatable whether, strictly speaking – that is from the point of view of philosophy – literature exists. It certainly has not existed for some of the greatest philosophers. This is why attempts to delimit rigorously a realm of what has been described as 'literary understanding' or 'literary communication' have generally failed to carry conviction, command general assent or achieve anything comparable to a breakthrough in molecular biology. How we understand what we read is the concern of philosophy but it is a matter here of what we understand in general. I shall not be arguing therefore as if I thought that the study of literature gave rise to philosophical problems not encountered when considering other, non-literary, kinds of writing or utterance; just as I shall not be assuming that the study of literature is a specialised study calling for specialised skills. The belief that it is such a study and that the ability to understand and appreciate one author – say Racine – necessarily implies an ability to read others – say Shakespeare – has been, as we know, in the past, one of the main causes of blindness and pedantry. This can be seen

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## INTRODUCTION

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from the way Shakespeare was criticised by Voltaire or Lawrence's *Rainbow* by Arnold Bennett. 'Tell Arnold Bennett', Lawrence wrote to an acquaintance (16 December 1915), 'that all rules of construction hold good only for novels which are copies of other novels. A book which is not a copy of other books has its own construction, and what he calls faults . . . I call characteristics.'

Today the various misconceptions that have arisen concerning the act of reading arise partly from the sheer diversity and number of the theories of criticism that are being canvassed. The expansion of literary studies in Britain, North America and France in the last few decades has certainly not been accompanied by any commonly accepted notion of what the discipline entails. It is as if a corresponding expansion had taken place in physics and chemistry (significantly, it has not; in England especially, literary studies have, unfortunately, acquired the reputation of one of the 'soft options') before any agreement had been reached about what was meant by an experiment and at a time when the molecular theory was in conflict, or co-existing comfortably, with the claims of alchemy.

Perhaps the main source of confusion, however, lies in the prevalence of one particular view among those who have added to the welter of theory and the confusion here extends well beyond departments of literature. In Germany, certainly, it has its origins in existentialist philosophy and modern sceptical theology. This is the view that when we read writers of the past – for example, the authors of the Gospels – we read a text whose meaning is the reflection of our own presumptions and values and has no ascertainable bearing on what they actually wanted to say. The view that the intentions of the writer are a will-o'-the-wisp which it is foolish to pursue, even if the writer is a contemporary, has become commonplace among academic critics of literature. It has also tended to justify the assumption that the reading of literature is only a serious intellectual activity if it gives rise to the interpretation or theorising which is its only possible *raison d'être*.

Two writers on the theory of criticism have helped me to see what is wrong with this view. One is E. D. Hirsch, to whom I am indebted for, among many other things, the notion (developed on pages 36–55 below) of the inescapability of the attribution (whether mistaken or otherwise) of an intention to the author of any text one reads and how this is intrinsic to meaning. Hirsch also avoids the pitfalls of nineteenth-century German hermeneutics (of Schleier-



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macher and Dilthey notably) by distinguishing deliberately between an author's meaning and the significance it holds for us (*Validity in interpretation*, pp. 57–61 and pp. 212–29; *The aims of interpretation*, pp. 74–92). He thus enables us to avoid the error that understanding a writer's meaning is, to the extent that one succeeds at all, a matter of sharing some past experience. Those who have treated with scorn the notion that a writer's intention can in any way be known (and known to be known) have usually assumed that the implied knowledge entailed some impossible spiritual adventure of this kind.

My debt to Paul Ricœur's *La métaphore vive* is perhaps less obvious, since I have chosen neither to summarise nor to adapt his systematic account of the creative use of language. Ricœur's work here, as in his long study of Freud, is, in the best sense, tentative and ambitious, whereas my own book is intended as far as possible to be philosophically unexceptionable. I may be more indebted, none the less, to Ricœur's arguments than I realise; though I have no illusions as to how much I owe to his erudition. To read Ricœur is, apart from anything else, to receive an education in the history of ideas, and, specifically, those which bear on the problems of hermeneutics and the theory of language. If it had not been for *La métaphore vive*, I might easily, for example, have missed reading or noticing the writings of Emile Benveniste on semiology and semantics, writings which, as I argue in the following chapter, offer one of the most telling possible accounts of the scope and limitations of what is known as 'structuralism'.

Structuralism, though it can mean a great many different things, and in spite of the disavowals of many of its former adherents, is still invested with a prestige which justifies one's questioning publicly its own claims for itself. And someone who, as I do, remains unconvinced by their claims owes his readers an alternative account of how we read. This is what I have attempted in the second part of this book; though the thoughts I offer here are neither a complete nor a systematic account of what reading entails. A complete account (one that anticipates all that reading could possibly entail) and a systematic account (i.e. that meets every conceivable objection) may be ideally possible. It is an ideal I have not attempted to fulfil and I have confined myself strictly to problems and preoccupations which seem to me of special concern today. It is the hope of being able to say something timely as well (or in the Nietzschean sense untimely,

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*Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*) which has led me to discuss also the work of two of the most influential writers on literature of our time, writers who, the question of nationality apart, are dissimilar in the extreme: Roland Barthes and F. R. Leavis.

The public for which this book is intended is primarily an academic one and, within the university, the very large public comprising students of literature of various ages and degrees of seniority. This does not mean that I have any reason to think of the academic study of literature as indispensable or that I am writing for students of literature alone. My subject, inevitably, raises philosophical issues, that is, issues of justified perennial debate; though it seeks, as far as possible, to remain within the realm of what is self-evident. I say self-evident, not indisputable or unquestionable. Little or nothing that we say is unquestionable and I am assuming that my own claims (including the claim that there are things which are self-evident) will be questioned and tested at every point. Problems of epistemology arise at every stage of reflection on or discussion of what we read. 'How do you know that you have understood?' 'How do you know this book is good? Do you mean you just like it?' Such questions are asked with genuine puzzlement by people of all degrees of learning and sophistication. And far from helping us to answer them, the welter of competing contemporary theory tends to serve, within the university itself, to confuse and discourage the honest student and provide the dishonest one with a pretext for glibness and sophistry. What I hope to show is that there are false problems, or to put it another way, problems which can be solved and forgotten; and genuine ones, which, because they are genuine, belong, properly speaking, to philosophy. Neither the ordinary reader nor the student of literature needs to be a philosopher in order to know what he is doing. He does, however, need to know which of the many doubts he may have about the nature of what he is doing can be resolved and which remain a matter of speculation and wonder. I hope that this book will contribute towards making the distinction clear.