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978-0-521-46751-3 - Myth, Truth and Literature: Towards a True Post-Modernism, 2nd Edition

Colin Falck

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MYTH, TRUTH AND LITERATURE

Colin Falck's book has had a widespread influence since it first appeared in 1989. Hailed as a work that alters the way we think about literary theory and its institutionalization in America and Britain, it is a philosophically informed account of the "paradigm-shift" required to replace structuralism and post-structuralism as modes of perceiving literature and related culture. Falck now supplements this second paperback edition with important new material opening up fresh horizons within the subject.

This controversial book provides a challenge to philosophers and theologians, as well as to anyone concerned with the fate of literary studies.

Colin Falck was born in London and educated at Christ's Hospital and Magdalen College, Oxford. He was Lecturer in Modern Literature at the University of London (Chelsea College) from 1964 to 1984, and is currently Associate Professor in English Literature at York College, Pennsylvania. He has taught creative writing in many institutions. Colin Falck was cofounder and associate editor of the poetry magazine *The Review*, 1962–72, and poetry editor of *The New Review*, 1974–78. His publications include two poetry collections *Backwards Into the Smoke* and *Memorabilia*, two editions of *Poems Since 1900* (edited with Ian Hamilton), and centenary *Selected Poems* of Robinson Jeffers (1987) and Edna St. Vincent Millay (1992).

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MYTH, TRUTH AND LITERATURE

TOWARDS A TRUE POST-MODERNISM

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To Isaiah Berlin

belated harvest

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I laboured at a solid foundation, on which permanently
to ground my opinions, in the component faculties of the
human mind itself. *S. T. Coleridge*

Literature is, to my mind, the great teaching power of the
world, the ultimate creator of all values... [It] must take
the responsibility of its power and keep all its freedom.
W. B. Yeats

Artists are the antennae of the race. *Ezra Pound*

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PREFACE TO THE 2ND EDITION

As an academic fashion, the Anglo-American literary post-structuralist movement collapsed with extreme suddenness shortly after the first publication of this book in 1989. No credit is being claimed here for that collapse, which (aside from any question of the operation of a *Zeitgeist*) must be put down at least in part to the greater-than-usual aesthetic sterility of the movement itself and to its inability to appeal to any but the most aesthetically insensitive and theoretically obsessed of readers – a category that recently seems to have included many graduate students in leading American and British universities. In preparing this second edition I have allowed the opening chapter on Saussurian and post-Saussurian literary theory to stand, not because I believe that theory still to have any real life in it, but because it seems to me important that the theory itself should not be allowed to disappear altogether before it has been clearly seen to be dead on philosophical grounds as well as from a merely fashionable point of view. Part of the purpose of this new edition is to make such a state of affairs more likely, and I have added now, as an appendix to the original text, an essay on the poetic theory of Romanticism which I hope may suggest some aesthetically non-sterile critical ways in which we might at last once again begin to move forward.

The theoretical void which has been left by the bankruptcy of post-structuralist theory is necessarily also a spiritual void. The French-based literary-cultural theorizing of post-Saussurianism, with its callow and philosophically incoherent anti-metaphysical posturings, has tried to disengage literature from its troublesome spiritual dimension altogether – by simply denying the existence of that

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dimension. It has thereby threatened to deprive an entire generation of students and intelligent readers of a part of their spiritual birthright. The replacement of this movement, now more or less universal in (especially American) academic circles, by the theories of "multiculturalism" threatens to do the same thing all over again. A situation has developed where, as Paul Valéry (facing a different version of the same problem) once wrote,

[a]s bad luck will have it, there are among those men with no appetite for poetry – who don't understand the need for it and who would never have invented it – quite a number whose job or fate it is to judge it, discourse upon it, stimulate and cultivate the taste for it; in short, to distribute what they don't have. They apply to the task all their intelligence and all their zeal – with alarming consequences.¹

Because of this situation, students and readers are growing up with no real sense of the spiritual significance of literature and with no invitation to develop their own creative sensibilities in truly literary ways. This near-death of intuitive aesthetic sensibility in the academic world, together with the stifling of critical inquiry by journals with names like *Critical Inquiry*, the dismantling of the traditional literary canon for almost entirely non-literary reasons, and the virtually total supplanting of literary discussion and criticism by cultural-political discussion and criticism in books and articles now written about literature, has meant that there are no longer any places in the world of organized literary education where the value of literature as an open and unprejudiced imaginative enhancement of life can be either acknowledged or cultivated. Yet it is hard to see why the rest of us should have to pay such a high price for this revenge of the uncreative sensibility upon the creative – for this dislike or fear of literature by those who have somehow worked their way into the positions where they are able to shape and to control the judgements that can acceptably be made about literature. An academic English-teaching system that no longer fights the mental fight against the all-embracing technologico-Benthamite spiritual corruptions of our modern world is a teaching system that has lost its soul. It may be time to remind ourselves that some of the greatest traditional critics – Johnson, Coleridge, Arnold, Eliot, Lawrence (to name only the better-known Anglo-Americans) – were those who themselves

¹ I am indebted to Frank Kermode for this quotation, which he uses as an epigraph to his *An Appetite for Poetry* (London: Collins, 1989).

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created literature, rather than those “who don’t understand the need for it and who would never have invented it.” Unlike their present-day successors, these traditional critics could occasionally even do philosophy as well. Some of our most important modern ideas about the nature of art, and consequently about the nature of human life itself, were formulated by the poet and playwright Friedrich Schiller in the interstices of his own poetic activity.

Something is now needed which will fill the spiritual vacuum that stands more clearly revealed the more completely the inadequacies of French anti-metaphysical theory are demonstrated. What is needed, for the most part, already exists, and has long been available to us. It is the great tradition of Romantic poetic theory from Vico, through Hamann, Herder, Goethe, and Schiller; from Blake, through Coleridge and Keats, and culminating in the ideas of such literary and aesthetic philosophers of the modern period as Santayana, Collingwood, and Heidegger. The ideas that make up this tradition are unlikely all to be true, since these writers contradict each other quite freely. But there are certain basic contentions that they have in common, which in effect define the theoretical side of Romanticism itself, and which conflict with the ideas of post-Saussurianism – as well as providing the necessary basis for its refutation. These ideas in fact converge with some of the main trends in professional modern philosophy as practiced by professional modern philosophers. My aim in the new Appendix to this edition is to help to re-focus some attention on this rich theoretical realm. The essence of post-Saussurian theory is to reject, or to annihilate, the aesthetic or spiritual dimension of art – and of life – entirely, and thereby to reduce art or literature to something merely cultural or political. The essence of German and English Romantic philosophy is to show why this can never be done. The importance of Friedrich Schiller, to take only one example, is (from this theoretical standpoint) that his ideas are still our best key to understanding the true imaginative and spiritually educational value of art, and therefore its true place within the institutions of human life as such. His ideas are also crucial if we are to hope to rescue the concept of “play” from its present post-structuralist trivialization – with its spin-off effects of further trivializations within the realm of literary production itself. The present book was written out of a conviction that it is time for us to grow up again as critics, and that the increasing hermeticization of literary production, where writers speak mainly (and mainly approvingly) unto other writers,

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might be arrested through a long-overdue revitalization of practical literary criticism.

The new Appendix to this book is an additional essay, rather heavier in tone than the book's main argument, but which is intended to stand behind that argument and to give it support. Some of the material I have dealt with has already been discussed in such excellent surveys of Romanticism as M. H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp* and *Natural Supernaturalism*, but my concern here has not been with the history of ideas as such but with the question of which of these ideas are true. The ones I have selected for discussion in this new Appendix seem to me to be ideas which, suitably re-expressed in a modern idiom, might enable us to find a new and healthier comprehension both of the nature of literature itself and also of the actual particular literary texts that we may find ourselves reading or creating.

Readers' and critics' responses to *Myth, Truth and Literature* are still reaching me from many directions, and it seems to me too early as yet to attempt any substantial revision of the book's main argument. My suspicion that theology is now an entirely sterile subject, on the other hand, has been strengthened by the absence of any sensible responses or reviews from that particular quarter. For the most part it seems to me that more religious sense has come out of New Guinea or the jungles of South America in recent decades than out of the combined lucubrations of the world's churches.

In addition to the thanks expressed in my first edition I would like to record my gratitude to Frank Kermode and to Alexis Lykiard for their professional help and advice. I am also indebted to York College, Pennsylvania, for a slight but perceptible reduction in my teaching duties to enable me to wrestle with these and other world-historical matters.

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In trying to write a philosophical book about “what poetry is” I have perhaps been more likely to fall into the kinds of intellectual pretension and vacuousness which are sometimes thought to be the defects of continental-European thinking than into the opposite and rather anti-intellectual kinds of defect which are more commonly found in English-speaking literary discussions. My worst fear is that I may somehow have managed to fall into both these kinds of defect at once. It was Coleridge who, before settling into another of his long bouts of philosophical laboring, said “I hope philosophy and poetry will not neutralise each other, and leave me an inert mass.” Yet it was Coleridge also who led the way in these matters within the English tradition, and it is from him that we must find a way of going forward if these matters are to be further pursued. Apart from his famous – but soon abandoned – efforts in *Biographia Literaria* and elsewhere to provide a “deduction of the imagination, and with it the principles of production and of genial criticism in the fine arts,” there have been few attempts in English to explore the place which poetry or literature occupies in human life or to integrate into one argument the sometimes competing claims of literature, theology, and positive knowledge. Literary critics and reviewers, often incomparably good at their own jobs, tend to rest aggressively on their prejudices when asked to pronounce on what it is that they spend the better part of their working lives doing. Philosophers, when they have concerned themselves with literature at all, have – with certain exceptions to whom I am overwhelmingly indebted – usually concerned themselves only with very specific and rather spiritually undemanding aspects of it.

This situation seems to me not to have been helped by the recent

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incursions of continental-European – in effect mainly French – varieties of linguistic theory into the English (and particularly into the American) literary tradition. The linguistic theories of Saussure and his successors are undeniably based on a correct recognition that “correspondence,” or “thing-and-name,” theories of linguistic meaning are philosophically indefensible. But these structuralist and post-structuralist theories seem themselves no less undeniably to be false in so far as they claim that linguistic meanings are a matter only of the relationships which hold between linguistic terms themselves, and that there is therefore, in some (admittedly rather special or arcane) philosophical sense, “nothing outside of the text.” The structuralist or post-structuralist tradition of linguistic – and therefore also of literary – meaning in effect *abolishes reality*. To try to talk about literature in the language of structuralist or post-structuralist theory can seem rather like trying to talk about a game of soccer or baseball without ever actually being allowed to mention the ball.

Our most urgent current need in literary theory seems to me to be for a “paradigm-shift” which will enable us to restore the concepts of truth or of vision to our discussions of literature. The aim of the present book is to suggest something of the philosophical basis on which such a kind of paradigm-shift might begin to be made. Literature, the book’s argument proposes, in fact gives us our purest and most essential way of grasping reality or truth. Since this is also what religion has traditionally claimed to do, it follows that literature and literary criticism may need to be prepared to embrace, and to subsume, religion and theology if they are to discover or to re-discover their own spiritual meanings. In so far as religions themselves – and in particular Christianity – have increasingly tended to “internalize” or to “de-mythologize” themselves and to abandon their claims to be descriptive forms of truth about the world, a way is in fact conveniently open whereby our spiritual awareness can begin to be “re-mythologized” through the imaginative insights of poetry or literature. The only religious “scriptures” that can now be authentic for us may be the poetry or literature to which our own culture gives us access. Ideas such as these have long been at the edge of the consciousness of poets or critics, as with Matthew Arnold, or even quite central to it, as with Wallace Stevens, but they have only rarely been seriously argued for, and then not for a discouragingly long time. It must follow from these considerations that a truly modern or “post-modernist” literature will be one which takes these

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existential or spiritual obligations seriously – perhaps alongside, but perhaps also partly displacing, the kind of ludic charm which is the hallmark of most of what currently passes for literary “post-modernism.” Through its quintessential activity of finding new ways of inscribing reality for us, poetry or literature is in the business of soul-making, and its method, as John Keats saw, is negative capability.

The argument of the book is in two main stages. The first aims to develop a certain philosophical view of the human situation, and in particular of the nature of human language. The second tries to suggest some of the implications of these general conclusions for the nature of literature and of religion. Throughout both of these stages there is a need for the arguments to be developed with a great deal more rigor and detail, but my present aim has been only to assemble into a single discussion certain important issues which seem to me to belong in a single discussion. I hope very much that others will be able to strengthen some of the argument’s links and to provide more rigor than I have been philosophically equipped (or have perhaps in any case had the space) to provide myself. These factors may also help to explain the tendency for the argument to operate on two levels: the main argument, which is perhaps excessively bare and skeletal, and a second level, conducted mostly in the footnotes with which the bare text is rather baroquely encrusted, which suggests ways in which the main argument might be developed more adequately. (Some readers may feel, for example, that I have allowed concepts such as “pre-conscious” or “pre-experiential” to become a catch-all for philosophical problems which have merely been displaced rather than adequately dealt with. There is truth in this; but to explore this region would take another book, or several others, and it might even perhaps be argued that it is in this area of the nature of “the pre-conscious subject” and of the relationships between our pre-conscious and our conscious subjective awarenesses that some of our most important philosophical problems can now be seen to lie.)

As far as intellectual debts are concerned, it must be emphasized that the continual engagement and re-engagement with Kant which is to be found here does not signify a presumption of “refuting” Kant so much as a recognition that it was Kant who, by engaging with some of the most important problems of philosophy, by insisting on the possibility of a priori philosophical argument, and above all by linking the continental-European and the English-speaking philo-

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sophical traditions, provides the best platform for the present – however inferior, logically unrigorous, and generally amateurish – argument to take off from and return to. More recently, I must register a debt to P. F. Strawson for his re-presentation of various Kantian issues in a compellingly modern metaphysical way, however much I am unable to measure up to the strictness and the elegance of his dealings with them. My other main philosophical debts have perhaps been to Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, George Santayana, and Owen Barfield; these debts are far too general for specific acknowledgement, even if I could begin to trace them, and are to be felt on every page of my discussion.

I would like, finally, to thank the following for reading earlier versions of parts of the text and for making valuable suggestions: Rosemary Ashton, Stuart Hampshire, Iris Murdoch, Richard Rorty, Roger Scruton, Charles Taylor, and Jerry Valberg. Among these I would particularly like to emphasize my gratitude to Iris Murdoch and Charles Taylor for their much-needed help and encouragement at difficult times. Other thanks are due to Perry Anderson, Renford Bambrough, John Bayley, William Cookson, Peter Dews, James Dougherty, Jude P. Dougherty, Denis Dutton, John Fisher, Roger Gard, Warwick Gould, Cleo McNelly, Tom Paulin, Christopher Ricks, M. L. Rosenthal, George Steiner, Stephen Wall, and Julian Wood.

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A further part of chapter 1, under the title “Structure and intuition” in *Philosophy and Literature*, 9 (1985), 184–97.

Part of chapter 2, under the title “The process of meaning-creation: a transcendental argument” in *The Review of Metaphysics*, 38 (1985), 503–28.

Part of chapter 3, under the title “A defence of poetry” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 44 (1986), 393–403.

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I am grateful to the editors and publishers concerned for their permission to reprint this material.

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Throughout the text the philosophical "he" or "his" should be taken to mean "he or she" or "his or her" in all cases. Translations in the text which have not been otherwise attributed are my own.