

## Teaching Literature in Ireland Today

*Dermot Moran*

What is literature? Literature is a category applied to written texts, which indicates that these texts may be read for their own sake and not simply in order to learn about something else (unlike, for example, a medical text-book). Who decides what literature is? The category of literature is formed by a series of social acts and decisions, largely anonymous, carried out by a coalescence of interest groups, the parents, the school, the media, the university, the editors of publishing houses, the examining boards, the department of education, the prevailing tradition, the economic structure of the society, censorship boards and so on. In order to understand what literature means in our society it is necessary to uncover the complex series of decisions which go to formulate this structure. But we must beware of attaching too much significance at first to the idea of a conspiracy. If the educational system, the family and the state are promoting a certain idea of literature to us, and attempting to inculcate certain values through literature and reading, it is surprising that the liberal arts education continues to be so underfunded in our society as well as being regarded as ideologically subversive and vaguely dangerous. While it is possible that our category of literature stands for that kind of writing which is acceptable to a small open capitalist economy linked by history and the English language to the major powers of Britain and the U.S.A. it is not at all clear just how our literature is, as a result, either alienating or dehumanising. It is better for the moment simply to note that "literature" is a social and historical category dialectically linked with the conditions of the surrounding world. Literature does not stand on its own.

How then are we to approach the socially constructed category of literature? Well, in recognising that literary practice and reading involve a degree of decision and choice we are heading in the right direction. There is, we may say, a fiction of fiction. To unveil the fiction of fiction is a liberating task. It will move us from the mythical stage of seeing literature as something natural, something given, to the rational, critical, indeed an enlightening stage of seeing literature as a social construct.

In order to defend the teaching of literature in the arts faculties of our universities, we must first know what it is, and what it does. If literature is not fulfilling its proper function (assuming, for the moment, that it has one) then it cannot and should not be defended.

We can see, already, that this area is beset with difficulties. We cannot simply uncover the series of decisions which go into the choosing of the literary. We are in need of concrete data. Even school text books, and, in general, the selection of literature for examination are not good guides, because the principles behind their decisions are not clearly visible. The Department of Education, for example, does not clearly state what it considers to be literature, nor does the Arts Council, although they clearly operate with certain tacit assumptions - the Arts Council for

example likes to support literature which is "creative" as opposed to non-fictional.

Similarly the Censorship Board obviously has views on the function and effect of literature and reading in general yet the principles on which its decisions rest are far from clear. Indeed a bureaucratic fear of being overtly ideological lies at the heart of the problem here, it is always better (read "more objective") to hide behind an amorphous anonymity, hiding as it were in a glass building which pretends to keep everything in view.

Even examining Leaving Certificate anthologies to see what literary forms are represented, whether the authors are male or female, living or dead, foreign or Irish, these inspections of the literary field can never claim to be other than superficial — so long as they do not inquire into the assumptions with which they themselves are operating — the assumption for example that authorship is significant with respect to a text.

It is therefore necessary to look beyond literary fact and plunge into theory of literature, if we are going to understand how literature operates in our society. I am of course assuming that literature does operate, does still act as a potent voice in the area of human meaning and value, a point of view not shared by all theorists of literature. Well, let us look further at this claim that literature actually does something.

One of the prime motivations for the present study is the realization that the arts education has been under considerable attack from fiscal authorities and the proponents of technological education. The problem is not reaching crisis proportions. Unfortunately, in many instances, the theorists of literature who see literature as a mere cultural ornament, or as a nihilistic play of the imagination, or as deracinated activity of various kinds, are themselves aiding and abetting the attackers, threatening the citadel from within.

Moreover, the traditional liberal and bourgeois justifications of the liberal arts education are based on extremely flimsy arguments which are easily overturned. Classically, a training in the arts and in literature was considered to be a training in social and cultural values, a training in humanitas. Practitioners of the arts were seen as the enlightened beacons of morality in a dark and dangerous world. The arts were thought to cultivate character, inspire the reader with respect for personal values, edify and enlighten. The student by reading is supposed to become a rational animal, critically aware, exercising his/her judgement to promote goodness and harmony. One such liberal-arts education apologist was even driven to defend such "liberalness" by arguing that it was compatible with the McCarthyite Oath of Allegiance which was being demanded of university teachers in the fifties. These defenders argue in favour of bourgeois values of morality, security and the domesticity of literature. But gradually this hymn to the humanising influence of the aesthetic education dies down, as the writings of Adams, Benjamin, George Steiner and others begins

to be heard. The vision of the orchestras in the concentration camps haunts the bourgeois justification of literary education as the promotor of moral growth. It is clear that literary excellence can keep count with the most extreme inhuman degradation. An entire reading of western civilisation is threatened by this discovery.

More recently defenders of the literary education have chosen to argue their case on functional grounds. Since financial stringency forces the universities to cut back on anything which is not ultimately productive or profitable in some way, some arts defenders restrict their arguments to monetary and technocratic terms. For example, a well-known critic Geoffrey Hartman in his most recent book (whose title is symptomatic of the current mood in much American literary theory), *Criticism in the Wilderness*, argues that the arts do produce a financially productive person, equipped to deal with the language of the boardroom and to suspicion at the "hard-sell" distorted meanings of words:

The humanities because more general in character and more discriminating and even suspicious of words (they lead the student to decode hidden or surreptitious meanings, or to look beyond the literal meaning by a historical and methodical reflection) should actually facilitate the transfer of skilled intelligence from one area to another, and produce people with the ability to think about both educational and fiscal development.

This argument was restated in the *Irish Times* of 18th October 1982 by Mrs. Dermot Montgomery and Eric Guiney of TCD Careers Office. The literature student is not now being defended in terms of morality but in terms of power and control, the ability to communicate in a technological sense. The role of the literary expert will be that of the technocrat skilled in communications, whose function is to make ideas safe, to ensure the smooth workings of a liberal rather than a liberated society.

This defence of literature ends up making the literature itself secondary, a mere means to the end which is skill, rational critical ability, being able to think on ones feet etc. The literature itself could be replaced by sets of problems presented by computers for example.

Finally, another old defence of the arts has surfaced. The growth of technology and robotics, it is argued, produces unemployment. The growth of unemployment provides people with free time, computersiation reduction in working hours and the recession will force people to develop their leisure time. The arts now return to their former place as cultivators of the soul. However, the danger here is that the arts and literature become a palliative, a way of keeping the kids off the streets, promoting a voluntary social control. Teachers become the low-paid servants of the state, minding peoples literature no longer matters, rather it is the passivity which reading imposes which is being extolled here.

Given the falseness of these approaches to literature, now being made even by literati, it is little wonder that there is a crisis of literary "values". It is

worrying to read excellent literary critics and find them weak and ineffectual in their defence of the critical pursuit, talking about the end of literature, or its sense of belatedness, or the failure of criticism and so on. It is good that a certain theoretical honesty is finally taking hold in academic circles, but the kind of nihilism and void which is being promulgated in the name of intellectual honesty is a sign of shallowness and decadence. Recent critics are selling alienation and the void in a manner which devalues our very experience with language, commercialises experience so that it is no longer personal experience. Even complete estrangement from society is not left alone.

This trend in literary criticism seems to me to be the culmination of a long development of the formalist approach to literature. If we leave aside those who seek extra-literary reasons to "save" literature, we are left with those who argue that literature is a world of its own, a set of meanings and relations which are self-enclosed. The new critics, who came to power in American academia because of their opposition to biography, history and philosophy, and emphasised instead the relations within the literary text itself, were also responsible for making literature autonomous, dislocated from experience, an end in itself. All so-called "external" questions were bracketed, the critics function was to attend to the words on the page and their formal interactions. Literature is seen as a perfect empty form. Several generations of students read literature in this way, read literature removed from the social and historical context which gave it birth. By urging a view of art as an end in itself, a self-enclosed set of meanings, they made art and literature ultimately pointless, and, in the last analysis, redundant.

The structuralist and deconstructors who have followed on from the new critics, and now enjoy considerable prestige in the criticism of literature abyss, suffer from a similar drive to remove literature from the ordinary universe, and treat it as a machine running along under its own power, formulating and reformulating its own laws. Literature is just a specific game which language itself is playing, interminably and meaninglessly. However, these critics have at least restored the experience of literature as play, producing pleasure, literature as free caprice, pleasing to the reader because of its sensuousness.

These critics have undermined traditionally accepted notions (reminding us that "facts" are no more than frozen theory, things no more than dead metaphors) of the author, the work, the reader. Some of these critics are virulent in their attack on the search for one determinate meaning for a text, others see the last illusion of literature being its pretense that it has significance, import, connection with the real world. The deconstructionist movement has stripped away the authority which once surrounded the notion of literature, we now only have texts in process, and detective novels, advertisements, film, TV, prose fragments may all serve to indicate the process which criticism has set itself to analyse. All the old certainties are gone, the strict departmentalisations between linguistics, literature, anthropology and philosophy have crumbled.

What I am suggesting here is that the theoretical

vacinity present in the attitudes of family, school, state, departments of education and inspectorates, towards literature is not an isolated form of ignorance which can be cured by recourse to current theory of literature. Although this ignorance is due to neglect of theoretical development, even if the educationalists today were well read and highly urbane, they would only be dispensing the contemporary nihilistic approach to literature.

We need to embark on a joint inquiry in respect to what literature is and what it does. The old reliance on the experts will no longer suffice. In order to say what literature is we must return our gaze from the pure literary back to the ordinary process of reading and writing, speaking and listening in our society. We need to undertake a sociological investigation to document the way in which books are read. For instance, to read a novel with the radio on runs counter to the tradition which sees reading as a silent act of absorption. We need to return to the social, historical and political conditions of reading and writing.

What does this mean for us in Ireland? Ireland has found itself caught up in the, as it were, first world of literature. The dominant tradition is based on books written in the English language and published by British publishing houses. Literary criticism merely extends the developments taking place in England, America and recently, in France. Yet this wholesale importation of theory may not suit our local "third world" literary situation.

The development of the Irish economy and the social evolution of our classes may not yet reflect the contemporary global lament over the belatedness of literature, or the anxiety of reading. The conditions which gave rise to the experience of alienation, nihilism, may not yet be fully installed here. We may not even be heading in that direction, I leave these questions open. But what I am concerned with is that literary selections and literary criticism are able to handle accurately the gap which separates the Irish reader from the contemporary novel, and the even more glaring gap between Irish writing and the international "sophisticated" reader. Recent Irish literature has been on the whole dominated by realism and narrative structure in prose, and a concern for personal experience in poetry. It may be transmitting values which no longer have a place in our society. There is something very dated about the mainstream of Irish writing, its tired first person narratives, its juvenile struggles with the dawn of sexuality, its sheepdog-in-the-lane prose. Irish criticism, on the other hand, has tended to be either biographical criticism running parallel to the development of the "realist" literature, or else has used the "advances" of the structuralist modernists to establish the process at work in the writings of Beckett, Joyce and Flann

O'Brien. This latter criticism seeks in some sense to repossess Joyce, Beckett and other Irish writers from the international world of ideas. This is justifiable and, indeed, *The Crane Bag*, itself has been active in this retrieval of Irish literature. But it will continue to be ungrounded and superficial as long as the concept of community and society, a necessary correlative of the concept of literature, remains unexplored.

What I have argued in this essay is that the structures which determine what is thought of as literature in Ireland today cannot be simply pinned down, analysed and criticised. It is not a matter of another Department white paper on the hiring of comparative literature theorists in our universities. The problem is much deeper and is, like all genuine literary problems, a problem of the nature of the society itself. Unless literary critics in Irish academia are willing to address themselves to the fundamental question of the place and nature of literature in our society, and do so in a concrete historical way, our literature and our education will become more and more adrift in a sea of post modern post structuralist ambiguities from which the reading public will protect itself by withdrawing its alienated silence.

In the interests of legibility I have avoided footnotes. But works relevant to the argument presented here are: **Denis Donoghue**, *Ferocious Alphabets*, London, Faber and Faber, 1981.

**Geoffrey Hartman**, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, New Haven, Yale, U.P. 1980.

**Frank Lentricchia**, *After the New Criticism*, London, Athlone Press, 1980.

**H. Bloom**, (et al, eds) *Deconstruction and Criticism*, London: RKP, 1979.

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**Stanley Fish**, *Is There a Text in This Class*.

**Paul de Man**, *Blindness and Insight*, Oxford U.P. 1971.

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**George Steiner**, *Language and Silence: Essays on Languages, Literature and the Inhuman* (New York, 1967).

**Josue Harari** (ed.) *Textual Strategies, Perspectives in Post Structuralist Criticism* (London, Methuen, 1979).