

Introduction

The Business of Reading

This is a book about books and not about literary history or critical debate. It is primarily for the general reader, the book club member and the student – for those who like to talk seriously about novels over tea (or coffee) and cake, or something stronger if the sun is over the yardarm. Or as Miss Callendar puts it succinctly in Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (see chapter 16), 'Do you mean am I structuralist or a Leavisite or a psycho-linguistician or a formalist or a Christian existentialist or a phenomenologist? ... well, I'm none of them ... I read books and talk to people about them.'¹ *The Business of Reading* introduces twenty English novels of the past hundred years (that is, since the end of the First World War), some well known but most less so, as well as revisiting a nineteenth-century classic. It tries to avoid any distinction between 'literary' and 'popular' novels: critics have to make value judgments, but the categories are not mutually exclusive and arguably 'popular' novels often have more impact than their more literary counterparts. Charles Dickens was, after all, very much a 'popular' novelist in his time however we regard him today.

The critical pendulum has a disorientating habit of swinging from one extreme to another. The earliest English novelists often chose to stay in the background: for example, in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) Daniel Defoe claimed only to be the editor of Crusoe's own autobiographical story, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) was attributed to Lemuel

¹ Malcolm Bradbury, *The History Man* (London: (Secker and Warburg, 1975), chapter 6.

Gulliver (in part because Swift was worried about the possibility of prosecution for his anti-Whig satire), and the first edition of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* was published anonymously. However, forty years later Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779–81) shone a spotlight on the life and times of writers, which have been in and out of fashion as the main critical focus ever since. At the end of the nineteenth century, on an altogether different tack, Anatole France suggested the personal view of the critic is in fact far more important than writers and even their works, declaring that 'A good critic is one who narrates the adventures of his mind among masterpieces.'² Early in the twentieth century, the exponents of practical criticism or close reading dismissed both these approaches and proposed rather sensibly that the text, and not the writer or the reader, should be the centre of critical attention, relegating such things as literary sources, biography of the author and historical context to the sidelines.³ In the United States, the 'new critics' took a similar but harder line, with W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley defining 'The Intentional Fallacy' and 'The Affective Fallacy'.⁴ 'The Intentional Fallacy' argues it is not the critic's job to worry about the author's intention: once the novel, play or poem is launched into the world, it must float or sink because of what it is and not because of what the author thought it should be. 'The Affective Fallacy' warns the reader against subjective critical judgements which colour the text with his or her own emotions. From Europe, in similar vein, came the concepts of structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction, critical theories rooted in the science and philosophy of language, and concentrating more on the linguistic structure of a text than on its meaning and value.

All these developments have transformed literary criticism from a general cultural interest to a rigorous academic discipline, but have also resulted in university departments debating only with each other and ignoring the general reader. Within these debates there have been predictable counter-reactions to the narrowly linguistic theories. Stephen Greenblatt reintroduced the idea of the interdependence of literature and history (and the importance of the critic's own cultural standpoint),

² Anatole France, *La Vie Littéraire*, vol. I (1888), Preface.

³ See I.A. Richards, *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trubner, 1924) and *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trubner, 1929).

⁴ In W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954; Kentucky Paperback, 1967), pp. 3–39.

accidentally launching ‘new historicism’ as a critical movement, while Stanley Fish and Norman Holland (among others) pioneered ‘reader-response criticism’, in which interpretation is seen as necessarily subjective and meaning is at least partially defined by the way the reader interacts with the text.⁵ After all, they suggest, a text can only be created through the active process of reading. It will contain ambiguities and ambivalences, ironies and paradoxes, to which individual readers will react in different ways, and whatever its linguistic structure, it will reveal different things to different people, and even then according to their mood. This is surely one of the reasons we choose to go back again and again to our favourite books and plays, art and music: we know there are always fresh discoveries to be made. Moreover, the reader of a novel (or poem), like the art connoisseur, has the advantage that he or she can approach the work in question without the distorting filter of an intermediary – the director of a play or the conductor of an orchestra or choir, for example – whose job it is to interpret things for us.

In *The Business of Reading* I have tried to chart a course between these various and often intimidating critical rocks, aware they all have something valid to contribute but none has a monopoly of the truth. What C.S. Lewis asserts of art is, I think, the same of the novel: ‘We sit down before the picture in order to have something done to us, not that we may do things with it’, so close reading is a good place to begin; but we must be equally aware (as is Lewis) that reading should be an active rather than a passive pursuit – how else will we appreciate irony, ambivalence and ambiguity?⁶ A.E. Dyson sums it up thus:

The writer’s exuberance is the process of creating; this particular joy is denied to his readers, yet there is the answering joy for them of recreating and entering in. How often have we read something with a marvellously liberating sense of familiarity, as if we have always been waiting for it and only now are complete?⁷

⁵ See, for example, Michael Payne, ed., *The Greenblatt Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). For a useful summary of reader-response criticism, see Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader* (London: Methuen, 1987).

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 19.

⁷ A.E. Dyson, *Between Two Worlds: Aspects of Literary Form* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1972), p. 148.

As readers we often recognise and even share the experiences described in a novel – but we recognise and share them in our own particular way (because of our personality, our experience, our social and cultural background), leading to lively exchanges, not only in seminar rooms, but also in book clubs and between colleagues and friends.

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The selection of titles in *The Business of Reading* is a personal one. I do not claim the novels I have chosen are the best of the last hundred years or even the most representative. They are simply the ones I have enjoyed the most or which have a special meaning for me. Part I is about novels written between 1918 and 1939 and Part II takes us from the Second World War to the cultural watershed of the 1960s. Part III focuses more on narrative technique and Part IV brings us almost up to date. I have used the term ‘English’ rather loosely, smuggling in novels from the Caribbean, Scotland and Ireland, and I have chosen mainly to foreground novels in danger of being forgotten rather than ‘landmark’ titles that have already been examined from every possible angle.

I have taken the liberty of borrowing half my title from Dame Helen Gardner, whose masterly lectures were published as *The Business of Criticism*.⁸ Dame Helen complained that ‘there is very little feeling in critical writing today of someone loving “to fold his legs and have out his talk”’, bemoaning ‘the esoteric and almost unintelligible vocabulary of some critics’ and ‘the appearance of a Dictionary of Critical Terms, comparable to a legal or medical dictionary’, leaving the ‘ordinary cultured reader’ quite baffled.⁹ And that was more than sixty years ago, before the literary criticism and linguistics industries properly got going. In the present context it might be sensible to avoid the term ‘criticism’ altogether and substitute ‘appreciation’, which is surely the proper end for those of us who have an interest in the subject.

However, I am not in any way advocating a less than rigorous approach to literary study. For students the main purpose of such study is to cultivate the ability to read carefully, select evidence, construct and defend complex arguments, and to write and speak clearly (transferable

⁸. *The Business of Criticism* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959) brings together two series of lectures given by Helen Gardner, the first (‘The Profession of a Critic’) at the University of London in 1953 and the second (‘The Limits of Literary Criticism’) at King’s College, Newcastle, in 1956.

⁹. *The Business of Criticism*, pp. 3–4.

skills that will stand them in good stead in later life); and for all of us there is the opportunity to understand better the ways in which novels (and poems and plays) work, as well as the sheer enjoyment they are capable of engendering. What I am advocating is that literary study should be about books and their readers, and not critical ‘-isms’, and be relevant to the many and not the ivory-towered few.

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