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LITERATURE, FORM, AND MEANING

Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.

—Ezra Pound

LITERATURE AND FORM

We all know why we value a newspaper or a textbook or an atlas, but why do we value a verbal work that doesn't give us the latest news or important information about business cycles or the names of the capitals of nations? About a thousand years ago a Japanese woman, Lady Murasaki, offered an answer in *The Tale of Genji*, a book often called the world's first novel. During a discussion about reading fiction, one of the characters offers an opinion as to why a writer tells a story. We quoted this opinion at the beginning of our book, but it is worth quoting again.

> Again and again something in one's own life, or in the life around one, will seem so important that one cannot bear to let it pass into oblivion. There must never come a time, the writer feels, when people do not know about this.

Literature is about human experiences, but the experiences embodied in literature are not simply the shapeless experiences—the chaotic passing scene—captured by a mindless, unselective camcorder. Poets, dramatists, and storytellers find or impose a shape on scenes (for instance, the history of two lovers), giving readers things to value—written or spoken accounts that are memorable not only for their content but also for their *form*—the shape of the speeches, of the scenes, of the plots. (In a little while, we will see that form and content are inseparable, but for the moment, we can talk about them separately.)

Ezra Pound said that literature is "news that *stays* news." Now, "John loves Mary," written on a wall, or on the front page of a newspaper, is news, but it is not news that stays news. It may be of momentary interest to the friends of John and Mary, but it's not much more than simple information, and there is no particular reason to value it.

Literature is something else. The Johns and Marys in poems, plays, and stories—even though they usually are fairly ordinary individuals, in many ways often rather like us—somehow become significant as we perceive them through the writer's eye and ear. The writer selects what is essential, and makes us care about the characters. Their doings stay in our minds.

To say that their doings stay in our minds is *not* to deny that works of literature show signs of being the products of particular ages and environments. It is only to say that these works are not exclusively about those ages and environments; they speak to later readers. The love affairs that we read about in the newspaper are of little or no interest a day later, but the love of Romeo and Juliet, with its joys and sorrows, has interested people for 400 years. Those who know the play may feel, with Lady Murasaki's spokesman, that there must never come a time when these things are not known. It should be mentioned, too, that readers find, on rereading a work, that the works are still of great interest but often for new reasons. That is, when as adolescents we read *Romeo and Juliet* we may value it for certain reasons, and when in maturity we reread it we may see it differently and value it for new reasons. It is news that remains news.

As the example of *Romeo and Juliet* indicates, literature need not be rooted in historical fact. Although guides in Verona find it profitable to point out Juliet's house, the play is not based on historical characters. Literature is about life, but it may be fictional, dealing with invented characters. In fact, almost all of the characters in literature are imaginary—although they *seem* real.

One reason that literary works endure (whether they show us what we are or what we long for) is that their *form* makes their content memorable. Because this discussion of literature is brief, we will illustrate the point by looking at one of the briefest literary forms, the proverb. (Our definition of literature is not limited to the grand forms of the novel, tragedy, and so on. It is wide enough, and democratic enough, to include brief, popular, spoken texts.) Consider this statement:

> A rolling stone gathers no moss.

Now let's compare it with a **paraphrase** (a restatement, a translation into other words):

> If a stone is always moving around, vegetation won't have a chance to grow on it.

What makes the original version more powerful, more memorable? Surely much of the answer is that the original is more concrete and its form is more shapely. At the risk of being heavy-handed, we can analyze the shapeliness thus: *Stone* and *moss* (the two nouns in the sentence) each contain one syllable; *rolling* and *gathers* (the two words of motion) each contain two syllables, each with the accent on the first of the two syllables. Notice, too, the nice contrast between stone (hard) and moss (soft).

The reader probably *feels* this shapeliness unconsciously, rather than perceives it consciously. That is, these connections become apparent when one starts to analyze, but the literary work can make its effect on a reader even before the reader analyzes. As T. S. Eliot said in his essay on Dante (1929), "Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood." Indeed, our *first* reading of a work, when we are all eyes and ears (and the mind is highly receptive rather than sifting for evidence), is sometimes the most important reading. Experience proves that we can feel the effects of a work without yet understanding *how* the effects are achieved.

Most readers will agree that the words in the proverb are paired interestingly and meaningfully. Perhaps they will agree, too, that the sentence is not simply some information but is also (to quote one of Robert Frost's definitions of literature) "a performance in words." What the sentence *is*, we might say, is no less significant than what the sentence *says*. The sentence as a whole forms a memorable picture, a small but complete world, hard and soft, inorganic and organic, inert and moving. The idea set forth is simple—partly because it is highly focused and therefore it leaves out a lot—but it is also complex. By virtue of the contrasts, and, again, even by the pairing of monosyllabic nouns and of disyllabic words of motion, it is unified into a pleasing whole. For all of its specificity and its compactness—the proverb contains only six words—it expands our minds.

A brief exercise: Take a minute to think about some other proverb, for instance, "Look before you leap," "Finders keepers," "Haste makes waste," "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." Paraphrase it, and then ask yourself why the original is more interesting, more memorable, than your paraphrase.

Literature and Meaning

We have seen that the form of the proverb pleases the mind and the tongue, but what about **content** or **meaning?** We may enjoy the images and the sounds, but surely the words add up to something. Probably most

people would agree that the content or the meaning of "A rolling stone gathers no moss" is something like this: "If you are always on the move—if, for instance, you don't stick to one thing but you keep switching schools, or jobs—you won't accomplish much."

Now, if this statement approximates the meaning of the proverb, we can say two things:

- The proverb contains a good deal of truth, and
- it certainly is not always true.

Indeed this proverb is more or less contradicted by another proverb: "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." Many proverbs contradict other proverbs. "Too many cooks spoil the broth," yes, but "Many hands make light the work"; "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," yes, but "Out of sight, out of mind"; "He who hesitates is lost," yes, but "Look before you leap." The claim that literature offers insights, or illuminates experience, is not a claim that it offers irrefutable and unvarying truths covering the whole of our experience. Literature does not give us *the* truth; rather, it wakes us up, makes us see, helps us feel intensely some aspect of our experience and perhaps evaluate it. The novelist Franz Kafka said something to this effect, very strongly, in a letter of 1904:

> If the book we are reading does not wake us, as with a fist hammering on our skull, why then do we read it? . . . What we must have are those books which come upon us like ill-fortune, and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves. . . . A book must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.

Arguing about Meaning

In Chapter 7 we will discuss at length the question of whether one interpretation—one statement of the meaning of a work—is better than another, but a word should be said about it now. Suppose that while discussing "A rolling stone gathers no moss" someone said to you,

> I don't think it means that if you are always on the move you won't accomplish anything. I think the meaning is something like the saying "There are no flies on him." First of all, what's so great about moss developing? Why do you say that the moss more or less represents worthwhile accomplishments? And why do you say that the implication is that someone should settle down? The way I see it is just the opposite: The proverb says that active people don't let stuff accumulate on them, don't get covered over. That is, active people, people who accomplish things (people who get somewhere) are always unencumbered, are people who don't stagnate.

What reply can be offered? Probably no reply will sway the person who interprets the proverb this way. Perhaps, then, we must conclude that (as the critic Northrop Frye said) reading is a picnic to which the writer brings the words and the reader brings the meanings. The remark is witty and is probably true. Certainly readers over the years have brought very different meanings to such works as the Bible and *Hamlet*.

However, even if readers can never absolutely prove the truth of their interpretations, all readers have the obligation to make as convincing a case as possible. When you write about literature, you will begin (in your marginal jottings and in other notes) by setting down random expressions of feeling and even unsupported opinions, but later, when you are preparing to share your material with a reader, you will have to go further. You will have to try to show your reader *why* you hold the opinion you do. You must *argue* your case. In short,

- you have to offer plausible supporting evidence, and
- you have to do so in a coherent and rhetorically effective essay.

That is, you want to win over your readers, making the readers in effect say, "Yes, I see exactly what you mean, and what you say makes a good deal of sense." You may not thoroughly convince your readers, but they will at least understand *why* you hold the views you do.

FORM AND MEANING

Let's turn now to a work not much longer than a proverb—a very short poem by Robert Frost (1874–1963):

THE SPAN OF LIFE

The old dog barks backward without getting up.
I can remember when he was a pup.

Read the poem aloud once or twice, physically experiencing Frost's "performance in words." Notice that the first line is harder to say than the second line, which more or less trips off the tongue. Why? Because in the first line we must pause between *old* and *dog*, between *backward* and *without*, and between *without* and *getting*—and perhaps between *back* and *ward*.

Further, when we read the poem aloud, or with the mind's ear, in the first line we hear four consecutive stresses in *old dog barks back*, a noticeable contrast to the rather jingling "when he was a pup" in the second line.

No two readers will read the lines in exactly the same way, but it is safe to say that most readers will agree that in the first line they may stress fairly heavily as many as eight syllables, whereas in the second line they may stress only three or four:

> The OLD DOG BARKS BACKWARD withOUT GETTing UP.
> I can reMEMber when HE was a PUP.

The *form* (a relatively effortful, hard-to-speak line, followed by a bouncy line) shapes and indeed is part of the *content* (a description of a dog that no longer has the energy or the strength to leap up, followed by a memory of the dog as a puppy).

Thinking further about Frost's poem, we notice something else about the form. The first line is about a dog, but the second line is about a dog *and* a human being ("*I* can remember"). The speaker must be getting on, too. And although nothing is said about the dog as a *symbol* of human life, the reader, prompted by the title of the poem, makes a connection between the life span of a dog and that of a human being. Part of what makes the poem effective is that this point is *not* stated explicitly, not belabored. Readers have the pleasure of making the connection for themselves—under Frost's careful guidance.

Everyone knows that puppies are frisky and that old dogs are not—although perhaps not until we encountered this poem did we think twice about the fact that "the old dog barks backward without getting up." Or let's put it this way: Other people may have noticed this canine behavior, but perhaps only Frost had the ability to put his perception into memorable words. Part of what makes this performance in words especially memorable is the *relationship* between the two lines. Neither line in itself is anything very special, but because of the counterpoint the whole is more than the sum of the parts. Skill in handling language, obviously, is indispensable if the writer is to produce literature. A person may know a great deal about dogs and may be a great lover of dogs, but knowledge and love are not enough equipment with which to write even a two-line poem about a dog (or the span of life, or both). Like other kinds of literature, poems are produced by people who know how to delight us with verbal performances.

Presumably Frost reported his observation about the dog not simply as a piece of dog lore, but because it concerns all of us. It is news that stays

news. Once you have read or heard the poem, you can never again look at a puppy or an old dog in quite the way you used to—and probably the poem will keep coming to mind as you feel in your bones the effects of aging.

As we will see, there are many ways of writing about literature, but one of the most interesting is to write not simply about the author's "thoughts" (or ideas) as abstractions but about the particular *ways* in which an author makes thoughts memorable, chiefly through the manipulation of words.

THE LITERARY CANON

You may have heard people talk about the **canon** of literature, that is, about the recognized body of literature. *Canon* comes from a Greek word for a reed (it's the same as our word *cane*); a reed or cane was used as a yardstick, and certain works were said to measure up to the idea of literature. Many plays by Shakespeare fit the measure and were accepted into the canon early (and they have stayed there), but many plays by his contemporaries never entered the canon—in their own day they were performed, maybe applauded, and some were published, but later generations have not valued them. In fact, some plays by Shakespeare, too, are almost never taught or performed, for instance, *Cymbeline* and *Timon of Athens*. And, conversely, some writers are known for a single work, although they wrote a great deal.

The canon, in actuality, has always been highly varied. True, it chiefly contained the work of white males, but that was because in the Euro-American world until fairly recently white males were the people doing most of the publishing, and white males controlled the publishing industry. (The reasons why women and persons of color were not doing much publishing are scarcely to the credit of white males, who controlled society, but that's not the subject we are talking about here.) Even in the traditional male-dominated canon, however, the range was great, including ancient epic poems by Homer, tragedies and comedies by Shakespeare, brief lyrics by Emily Dickinson, and short stories and novels by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Ralph Ellison.

What is or is not literature, then, changes over the years; in the language of today's criticism, "literature" as a category of "verbal production and reception" is itself a "historical construction" rather than an unchanging reality. Insofar as a new generation finds certain verbal works pleasing, moving, powerful, memorable, compelling—beautiful and true, one

might say—they become literature. Today a course in nineteenth-century American literature is likely to include works by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass—even as it continues to include works by long-established favorites such as Emerson, Hawthorne, and Whitman.

Some works have measured up for so long that they probably will always be valued; that is, they will always be part of the literary canon. But one cannot predict the staying power of new works. Doubtless some stories, novels, poems, and plays—as well, perhaps, as television scripts and popular songs—will endure. Most of the literature of *any* generation measures up only briefly; later generations find it dated, uninteresting, unexciting. Lincoln's address at Gettysburg has endured as literature, but Kennedy's inaugural address—much praised in its day—now strikes many readers as strained, even corny. (These adjectives of course imply value judgments; anyone who offers such judgments needs to support them, to argue them, not merely assert them. Elsewhere in this book we discuss arguing a thesis.) Kennedy's inaugural address retains its historical importance, but it belongs in a course in politics, rather than in a course in literature.

LITERATURE, TEXTS, DISCOURSES, AND CULTURAL STUDIES

These pages have routinely spoken of *literature* and of literary *works*, terms often supplanted now by *text*. Some say that *literature* is a word with elitist connotations. They may say, too, that a *work* is a crafted, finished thing, whereas a *text*, in modern usage, is something that in large measure is created (i.e., given meaning) by a reader. Further, the word *text* helps to erase the line between, on the one hand, what traditionally has been called literature and, on the other hand, popular verbal forms such as science fiction, Westerns, sermons, political addresses, interviews, advertisements, comic strips, and bumper stickers—and, for that matter, nonverbal products such as sports events, architecture, fashion design, automobiles, and the offerings in a shopping mall.

Texts or *discourses* of this sort (said to be parts of what is called a *discursive practice* or a *signifying practice*) in recent years have increasingly interested many people who used to teach literature ("great books") but who now teach *cultural studies*. In these courses the emphasis is not on objects inherently valuable and taught apart from the conditions of their production. Rather, the documents—whether plays by Shakespeare or comic books—are studied in their social and political contexts, especially in view of the conditions of their production, distribution, and consumption. Thus, *Hamlet* would be related to the economic and political system of England around 1600, and *also* to the context today—the educational system, the theater industry, and so on—that produces the work.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Subsequent chapters will cite a number of recent titles relevant to this chapter, but for a start a reader might first turn to an old but readable, humane, and still useful introduction, David Daiches, *A Study of Literature* (1948). Another book of the same generation, and still a useful introduction, is a businesslike survey of theories of literature, by René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (3rd ed., 1962). For a more recent, readable study, see Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987).

Some basic reference works should be mentioned: C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon have written an introductory dictionary of movements, critical terms, literary periods, and genres—*A Handbook to Literature* (8th ed., 1999). For fuller discussions of critical terms, see Wendell V. Harris, *Dictionary of Concepts in Literary Criticism and Theory* (1992), which devotes several pages to each concept (for instance, *author, context, evaluation, feminist literary criticism, narrative*) and gives a useful reading list for each entry. Fairly similar to Harris's book are Irene Makaryk (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms* (1993); Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman (eds.), *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (2nd ed., 2005); and Michael Payne (ed.), *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory* (1996). *The Johns Hopkins Guide*, although it includes detailed entries on individual critics as well as on critical schools, does not have entries for *theory* or for *criticism*, nor does it have entries for such words as *canon* and *evaluation*. To pair with it, we recommend *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (1993). Although *The New Princeton Encyclopedia* does not include terms that are unique to, say, drama or fiction, it does include generous, lucid entries (with suggestions for further reading) on such terms as *allegory, criticism, canon, irony, sincerity, theory,* and *unity*, and the long entries on *poetics; poetry;* and *poetry, theories of;* are in many respects entries on *literature*. For brief definitions of terms, as well as much helpful information about

authors, periods, and works, we suggest consulting Merriam Webster's *Encyclopedia of Literature* (1995) or *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (6th ed., 2000).

For a provocative collection of essays on the canon, see *Canons*, edited by Robert von Hallberg (1984). There is also a good essay by Robert Scholes, "Canonicity and Textuality," in *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*, edited by Joseph Gibaldi (2nd ed., 1992), pages 138–158. Gibaldi's collection includes essays on related topics, for instance, literary theory (by Jonathan Culler) and cultural studies (by David Bathrick). Also stimulating are *Making of the Modern Canon* (1991) and *Reflections on the Cultural Revolution: Canons and Disciplinary Change* (2000), both by Jan Gorak. For lively commentary on the traditional literary canon, see David Denby, *Great Books: My Adventures with Homer, Rousseau, Woolf, and Other Indestructible Writers of the Western World* (1996), and Andrew Delbanco, *Required Reading: Why Our American Classics Matter Now* (1997).

7

WHAT IS INTERPRETATION?

Reading a book is like re-writing it for yourself. . . . You bring to a novel, anything you read, all your experience of the world. You bring your history and you read it in your own terms.

—Angela Carter

Be sure that you go to the author to get at his *meaning, not to find yours.*

—John Ruskin

INTERPRETATION AND MEANING

We can define **interpretation** as a setting forth of the meaning, or, better, a setting forth of one or more of the meanings of a work of literature. Although some critics believe that a work of literature has a single meaning, the meaning it had for the author, most critics hold that a work has several meanings, for instance, the meaning it had for the author, the meaning(s) it had for its first readers (or viewers, if the work is a drama), the meaning(s) it had for later readers, and the meaning(s) it has for us today. Take *Hamlet* (1600–01), for example. Perhaps this play about a man who has lost his father had a very special meaning for Shakespeare, who had recently lost his own father. Further, Shakespeare had earlier lost a son named Hamnet, a variant spelling of *Hamlet*. The play, then, may have had important psychological meanings for Shakespeare—but the audience could not have shared (or even known) these meanings.

What *did* the play mean to Shakespeare's audience? Perhaps the original audience of *Hamlet*—people living in a monarchy, presided over by Queen Elizabeth I—were especially concerned with the issue (specifically raised in *Hamlet*) of whether a monarch's subjects ever have the right to overthrow the monarch. But obviously for twentieth-century Americans the interest in the play lies elsewhere, and the play must mean something else. If we are familiar with Freud, we may see in the play a