British Journal of Aesthetics, Vol. 24, No. 4, Autumn 1984

FRAMING THE REFERENCE: NOTES TOWARDS A CHARACTERIZATION OF CRITICAL TEXTS

A. N. Staif

I) FEW WOULD dispute that, within the field of humanities, the nature of the material under consideration determines to a great extent, the way it is most rewardingly approached.[1] For, in dealing with the material, the approach must accommodate its main distinguishing features, account for them, reveal their significance and relevance to human life and finally locate them within the overall structure of the society which produces this material.

It is, therefore, appropriate for the student of literary criticism, particularly modern criticism, to examine his material and define its character, so that he can employ the right approach, one which will identify the intellectual grammar that governs the critical act.

II) CHARACTERIZING THE CRITICAL TEXTS

Although it is true to say that 'each historical moment produces its own characteristic forms of critical act, its own arena in which critic and text challenge each other, and thereby its own depictions of what constitutes a literary text',[2] one can none the less use certain indicators and employ them as dynamic variables in the process of the production of the critical text.

IIa) LITERARY CRITICISM IS A DISCOURSE UPON A DISCOURSE

'Literary criticism', writes Gérard Genette,

> distinguishes itself formally from other kinds of criticism by the fact that it uses the same materials—writing—as the works with which it is concerned; art criticism or musical criticism are obviously not expressed in sound or colour, but literary criticism speaks the same language as its object: it is a metalanguage[3]

or, as Roland Barthes would put it, 'discourse upon discourse'.[4] It can, therefore, be a meta-literature, that is to say, 'a literature of which literature itself is the imposed object'.[5]

Being 'a discourse about literature'—a discourse which might include 'description, analysis, interpretation as well as the evaluation of specific works of literature and discussion of the principles, the theory and the aesthetics of literature, or whatever we may call the discipline formally discussed as poetics and rhetoric',[6] literary criticism is thus 'clearly circumscribed by its theme'[7] or

its subject-matter, just as any other discipline is. That is to say that the main formative factors of the literary discourse are the same as those which operate on the critical discourse itself. Furthermore, this vital link between these not too dissimilar types of discourse means that some of their basic characteristics are identical, notwithstanding their differences which still justify the perception of them as two distinctive forms of human discourse. For they are indeed social discourse which is enmeshed in circumstances, time and place; that is to say, they are both squarely placed in the world or they are 'worldly'. In addition, they are both texts whose textuality is established first and foremost by their context or, in short, they are context-bound. Finally, as a discourse and a text which can only be produced by human beings, they represent a human activity which cannot be fully grasped without relating it to other forms of human activity.[8]

IIb) LITERARY CRITICISM IS A SOCIAL DISCOURSE

'First and foremost, literature', writes Roger Fowler, 'is a kind of *discourse*, a language activity within a social structure like other forms of discourse'.[9] As it is circumscribed by its subject-matter or object, that is, literature, literary criticism is also a social discourse. For 'no one writes simply for oneself. There is always an Other, and this Other willy-nilly turns interpretation into a social activity'.[10] In a way, to treat literature and, by implication, its criticism as social discourse is, as Roger Fowler rightly suggests, 'to see the text as mediating relationships between language users: not only relationships of speech, but also of consciousness, ideology, role and class. The text ceases to be an object and becomes an action or a process'.[11] That is to say, it becomes 'the communicative interaction of implied speakers, and thus of consciousness and of communities'.[12]

Viewed as such, literature and literary criticism are, like all forms of language, 'interaction between people and between institutions and people. To regard them as social discourse is to stress their interpersonal and institutional dimension, concentrating on those parts of textual structure which reflect and which influence relations within society'.[13] Literary criticism is practised within social institutions, which in one way or another subject the critical act to all kinds of extra-literary influences. It is performed in educational institutions with all their social, educational, cultural and organizational restraints; published in periodicals and books which are usually addressed to a particular reader, of a particular social and cultural background, within a particular context and conforming to a particular set of rules and procedures which are practised within those social institutions; and offered in conferences, seminars and public lectures. In short, the very existence of literary criticism has a vital link with the social setting, on which literary and extra-literary considerations act and upon which they consequently exert great influence. Furthermore, the critical act itself implies a sense of responsibility towards others without which literary criticism becomes pointless.

Furthermore, literary criticism in its interpretative form is an attempt to understand and comprehend, and respond to, the literary text involved and all of these processes are social. They all occur in a context. Viewed from whatever angle literary criticism remains texts produced by critics who

> . . . are not merely the alchemical translators of texts into circumstantial reality or worldliness; for they too are subject to and producers of circumstances, which are felt regardless of whatever objectivity the critic's method possesses. The point is that texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarified form are always enmeshed in circumstances, time, place and society—in short, they are in the world—and hence worldly. . . . The same implications are undoubtedly true of critics in their capacities as readers and as writers in the world[14]

In a way, the classical Arab critics were right when they suggested that rhetoric is catering for the requirements of the situation. For indeed each 'utterance is its own occasion and as such is firmly anchored in the worldly context in which it is applied'.[15] This worldly context or specific situation of the literary text places 'restraints upon the interpreter and his interpretation' (and the critic, whether interpreting a literary text or reflecting on a particular issue related to the production of literary texts in general, is an interpreter of previous texts, a reader who integrates his readings into a new textuality). This is not 'because the situation is hidden within the text as a mystery, but rather because the situation exists at the same level of surface particularity as the textual object itself'.[16]

Texts 'are in the world'—'they place themselves—one of their functions as texts is to place themselves—and indeed are themselves by soliciting the world's attention'.[17] Therefore, when critical texts are considered, studied and analysed, these worldly considerations must be taken into account. Because texts turn out to the world as much as they turn inwards to textuality, to 'privilege the one over the other is to overlook a text's way of being'.

As Josué V. Harari puts it:

> Texts are in the world in a *material* sense first of all; they are subjected to the same legal, political, economic and social constraints as any other cultural product. The understanding of a text consists first of all of placing it in its proper sociopolitical configuration, in having the text confront its historical context, and in calling on a broad anthropological tradition. Hence the questions of placement, situation, and cultural diffusion that Said raises about texts and their relationships to the 'world', how a text was produced, how it confirms, justifies or modifies what came before it, how it reveals what is contemporaneous with it, or what is taking place at the same time in adjacent disciplines; how a text is transmitted or preserved, how institutions accept, modify or reject it, and in turn, what kind of influence a text can exert on these same institutions which have produced it.[18]

IIc) LITERARY CRITICISM IS A HUMAN ACTIVITY

Literary criticism is a discourse, a communicative act performed through the

medium of natural language, a human activity. Viewed as such, it must always be located within the overall structure of the other activities of man—the producer of this discourse. 'There is an undeniable truth', René Wellek writes,

> to the view that reality forms a seamless web, that any activity of man is involved with all his other activities. Literary criticism is related to the history of literature and to other arts, to intellectual history, to general history, whether political or social, and even economic conditions play their part in shaping the history of criticism.[19]

The student of literary criticism is required, therefore, to describe the relationship 'of criticism to all other activities of man without giving up the focus on the central subject'.[20]

IId) LITERARY CRITICISM IS CONTEXT-BOUND

Literary criticism as (a) a discourse upon a discourse; (b) a social discourse; (c) a worldly discourse; and (d) a human activity, is an over-determined text which, if it is to be fully understood and its underlying assumptions pin-pointed and laid bare, must be opened onto the context which gives it significance and importance as a motivating force for the process of literary production performed within society. Thus, modern critical texts are context-bound and only when they are located within their proper context can they yield their full significance. For it is vitally important to see how this multitude of internal and external factors has shaped these texts, their basic premises, arguments and frames of reference or, in short, their intellectual grammar.

'Every text', as T. K. Seung rightly points out,

> is no more than a blank tablet unless and until it is interpreted in a proper context of signification. Every textual analysis presupposes a context of signification and communication. The question of meaning-context is neither extratextual nor intratextual. The distinction between intratextuality and extratextuality can arise only after the textuality of a text is established. But its textuality can be established only in a contextual framework.[21]

Therefore, before any attempt is made to pin-point the underlying assumptions which govern the process of production of critical texts, it is essential to establish their textuality by locating them in the network of relationships which they have with formative factors, that is, in their context. The fact that the context of modern critical texts has often been overlooked is understandable. 'The context of meaning and understanding is such an integral feature of our very being as knowing subjects that we are usually not even aware of its presence and operation'.[22] However, critical texts, like other forms of writing about human society cannot be so new as to be completely original,[23] since they always draw on other texts which they interpret and integrate into new textuality which can only be established in its new contextual framework, their meaning, that is to say, their interpretation 'involves the problem of meaning-context to the extent that the meaning of a text and its interpretation are context-

dependent'.[24] In other words, recovering their true significance requires placing them in this context.

> For interpretations depend very much on who the interpreter is, who he or she is addressing, what his or her purpose is in interpreting, at what historical moment the interpretation takes place. In this sense, all interpretations are what might be called *situational*. They always occur in a situation whose bearing on the interpretation is *affiliative*. It is related to what other interpreters have said by confirming them, by disputing them or by continuing them. No interpretation is without precedents or without some connection to other interpretations.[25]

However, if texts including critical texts 'cannot escape the linguistic, economic and sociopolitical (as well as textual) pressures culture exerts on them', 'some texts have the power to (re)shape reality by virtue of their *being in the world*'.[26]

The immediate consequence of this dialectical relationship between texts and culture is to undermine the notion of the indeterminability of the meaning of the critical text or the limitlessness of interpretation. For to insist upon this notion is to ignore 'a text's decisive claim on actuality—its participation in shaping the conditions of production of the interpretive activity which bears upon it'.[27]

III) From the foregoing discussion of the characteristics of the critical texts, one can see that modern critical discourse is an over-determined text, the production of which is stimulated by a variety of internal and external factors. In other words, the critical discourse, which is the articulation of the critical consciousness prevailing in a particular society, is informed by the combined impact of political, economic, social, cultural and literary changes undergone by such a society, as well as by the influence of foreign contacts established with other cultures and nations.

Modern critical discourse is, therefore, best approached from a contextual-comparative perspective. Such a perspective caters, through being contextual, for the multitude of internal determinants which contribute to the formation of the critical text, and explains, through being comparative, the role which foreign influence has played in motivating and stimulating most of the developments and changes which modern literary criticism has undergone in recent decades.

REFERENCES

[1] This article is a condensed version of a paper read at the Seventeenth National Conference of the British Society of Aesthetics (College Hall, London, 16–18 September 1983). I am particularly indebted to M. M. Badawi of St Antony's College, Oxford, for his comments on an earlier draft.

[2] Edward W. Said, 'Notes on the Characterization of a Literary Text', in Richard Macksey (ed.), *Velocities of Changes: Critical Essays from MLN* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1974), p. 36.

[3] Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, translated by Alan Sheridan, Introduction by Marie-Rose Logan (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1982), pp. 3–4.

[4] Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, translated from the French by Richard Howard (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1972), p. 258.

[5] Paul Valéry, 'Albert Thibaudet', *Nouvelle revue française* (July 1936), p. 6, cited by G. Genette, op. cit., p. 4.

[6] René Wellek, 'A Historical Perspective: Literary Criticism', in *What is Criticism?* edited and with an introduction by Paul Hernadi (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1981), p. 297.

[7] René Wellek, *The Attack on Literature and Other Essays* (The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1982), p. 138.

[8] Ibid., p. 138.

[9] Roger Fowler, *Literature as Social Discourse: The Practice of Linguistic Criticism* (Batsford Academic and Educational Limited, London 1981), p. 7.

[10] Edward W. Said, 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community' in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.), *The Politics of Interpretation* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1983), p. 9.

[11] Roger Fowler, op. cit., p. 80.

[12] Ibid., p. 94.

[13] Ibid., p. 7.

[14] Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1983), p. 35.

[15] Ibid., pp. 38–9.

[16] Ibid., p. 39.

[17] Ibid., p. 40.

[18] Josué V. Harari, 'Critical Factions/Critical Fictions', in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, edited and with an introduction by Josué V. Harari (Methuen and Co. Ltd., London, 1980), p. 45.

[19] René Wellek, *The Attack on Literature and Other Essays*, p. 138.

[20] Ibid., p. 139.

[21] T. K. Seung, *Semiotics and Thematics in Hermeneutics* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1982), p. 10.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1981), p. 155.

[24] T. K. Seung, op. cit., p. 13.

[25] Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam*, pp. 154–5.

[26] Josué V. Harari, op. cit., p. 46.

[27] Ibid., p. 45.