

THE QUESTION OF LITERARY HISTORY

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Is literary history, *history*? Is *literary* history possible? What *don't* we understand, *necessarily*, when we study the past through literary texts, and vice versa? These are the kinds of questions that have accompanied the current explosion of interest in literary history. What's striking about them is that they're neither rhetorical, carrying self-evident answers, nor are they thesis questions, a pretext for answers to follow. They're questions that express the subject matter, the substance and texture of literary history. The principle here is that fundamentally we end with the same questions we start with. When we explain what we're doing, it turns out to be a list of problems: contradictions in subject matter; complaints about the power of historical amnesia; frustrations with seeking truth in a realm we can't really *know*. Suppose we had to infer the nature of the entire enterprise of literary history from these *problems*. Imagine that they were offered as evidence of what literary history is. And one further step: imagine that that inference were made the basis of speculation about the character of literary studies in general. What would the discipline of literary studies look like?

First, it would not look like a discipline. The question of literary history reminds us of the precariousness of our field of study, which is more transparently *constructed* than any other. Professionally, it's barely a century old; grounded in a genteel establishment that prided itself on taste, tact, and sensibility—a categorical separation of the aesthetic from the cognitive faculties—and in its brief career, it has gone through several startling metamorphoses, from scientific philology to poststructural constructivism. Is there a *literary* body of knowledge? Does it constitute *an* area of specialization? A discipline, after all, is a system of understanding. It demands a certain kind of rigor, certain modes of persuasion, certain standards of validation and invalidation. And, while "certain" here often means processual, open to new developments, nonetheless, systemically, it represents process as certainty. "Certain" closes off earlier hypotheses: we know "x" because it corresponds to a *certain* Q.E.D., like the last house on the block—another house might spring up but, when it does, that will invalidate the claim that "x" is the last house.

In the case of history, the standard of certainty is empirical truth, and empirical

truth is systemic. However provisionally, it yields true-or-false answers that render earlier answers inadequate. That's why historians balk at narrative theory. Even after they've taken the "linguistic turn," they want to know what verifiably happened. And they should: it would be scandalous to revise the past without strict regard to "hard evidence." In this sense, history may stand for all other disciplines connected to literary studies. Different though these are from each other, they're all bound to the principles of rationality. Literary study is bound to those principles too, of course, and literary *history* in particular. But insofar as it remains *literary*, it's equally bound to the principle of resistance to any unified system of closure. Or (to put this another way) literature is conspicuously open to many systems of closure.

"Whereof one cannot speak," Wittgenstein famously remarked, "thereof one must be silent." Wittgenstein himself, and all philosophy, tells us what we can reasonably articulate; history, what we can say in fact about the past. Literature is the voice of cognitive silence. It keeps recalling us to areas (experienced and imagined) where knowledge and explanation fail. It speaks to the multiple ironies (implicit in Wittgenstein's apparent tautology) distinguishing speech from knowledge. Speaking is not the same thing as knowing, and yet language and knowledge are coextensive. We often talk about what we *don't* know: this can make for very animated conversation on any subject but, in traditional disciplines, the point of the conversation is to find answers. Literature works the other way around, turning general answers into questionable specifics. Hence Plato's *Republic*, where philosophers, who *know*, and therefore tell the rest of us what to do, tell poets to do something else. Wittgenstein's equivalent is a categorical imperative: "one *must* not speak." But granted the disciplinary claim—speaking is not the same thing as knowing—should the voice of not-knowing be silenced? Imagine a state that, for enlightened disciplinary purposes, outlaws all forms of language that inherently (if not by design) unsettle knowledge. Literature is the antidote to that bleak utopia. It directs us, *as literature*—which as such may also include works classified as philosophy and history, along with theology, psychology, and the social sciences—toward unanswered (and, for all we know, unanswerable) questions in the various explanatory systems we've inherited. Here the question of the last house on the block is the conclusion you arrive at.

I'm aware that this itself is an answer of sorts, a sweeping abstraction about the nature of literature and, by extension, of literary history. It's not offered here as the last word on the subject. In fact, what I mean by literature is just professional common sense: the substance of what we expect when we scan the contents of a college catalogue or a literary history. Contents change, of course, but change may be a sign of disciplinary *vitality*. In any case, for present purposes, the substance I speak of is an amorphous procession of texts we've learned to call literary because (among other things) their language is resistant to closure. This tells us something fundamental about language, and so holds true in some sense for works in virtually any discipline. Still, the functional disciplinary distinction remains crucial. *The Interpretation of Dreams* seeks to pro-

vide a once-and-for-all explanation. For psychoanalysts, it makes the Elizabethan theory of humors as antiquated as the Ptolemaic system. *Light in August* seeks to explore an old set of perplexities and returns us to *Oedipus Rex* with a renewed respect for its contemporaneity. That's not because Faulkner was deeper than Freud or because his novel is timeless, but (1) because his enterprise as novelist was different from Freud's as psychologist (or as a scientist, as Freud believed, mistaking a discipline for objectivity); and (2) because Faulkner's different depth is the opposite of timeless. It derives from the power of his text to keep recalling us away from the absolutes we inherit, including the ones to which we consent, toward the problematic details out of which those absolutes are constructed. Freud returns to *Oedipus* in order to transcend: he aspires to see the situation from outside, in its totality. Accordingly, he provides an interpretative framework that's adaptable to a variety of persons and occasions across time and place. The play *Oedipus Rex* draws on an abstract design, an exemplum of fate, to tell a story about a particular man who married the wrong woman. Insofar as it's about fate (a story that unveils the answer to a riddle called Man), it *questions* our norms of causality, agency, and self-knowledge.

The relation between *Light in August* and *Oedipus Rex* consists in the historical specifics that questionably connect two inside narratives. The inside narrative is what Keats meant by negative capability: the capacity to resist totality, the readiness to assume limits. Disciplinary thinking is a form of totalization from outside. Wittgenstein compares that process to driving a car. You're supposed to get from where you are to some other place—preferably a place from which to make generalizations about the situation you came from. If you find yourself in the same place, it means the engine is idling. Freud means to take us from literature to science by illuminating the abstract meaning of Jocasta's throwaway line: "many a man has dreamed about sleeping with his mother." Sophocles leaves the dream where Jocasta found it, and where Faulkner leaves the Oedipal connection in his novel, idling in the dark.

Literary texts prevail because they do *not* transcend. The details they're made of derive from all-too-familiar situations. The questions they raise—cunningly or innocently, in bewilderment, outrage, empathy, or amusement—come in response to answers already given. And they challenge those answers not because the authors are essentially dissenters (the archetype of the Subversive Artist is a Romantic invention, one more time-bound absolute we've inherited)—not because they're rebels, but because their project, considered as literature, returns us to gaps between experience and explanation, now as then.

These gaps can be called distinctively literary in precisely the sense of the questions I began with. They direct us *through* systemic structures toward questionable particulars. Systemic structures are coherent, abstract, and explanatory. They aspire, however modestly, to capital letters. Questionable particulars insist on lowercase, *local* matters. However grandiose in form and content, they detail our limitations of mind, imagination, knowledge, and endurance. Disciplines deal in absolutes—that is, in solutions

devised by certain persons at certain times and accepted by certain groups. Writers often endorse these absolutes, but insofar as they produce what we call literature, they deal in universals—that is, in the sorts of problems we continue to live with.

Consider the question of narrative irony. Wittgenstein's rule for speaking concludes his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, an early work that seeks to solve all the problems of philosophy. That conclusion—"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent"—is interpretable as a mockery of the entire work. It would then be Wittgenstein's ironic comment about the ostensible author of the *Tractatus*: the would-be problem-solver, "Ludwig Wittgenstein," who *should* have kept silent, since he's been talking all along about things of which "one cannot speak." To read the *Tractatus* in this way would be to turn it into a literary work, the logic of a genius gone mad, or half-mad, not unlike (say) Kafka's "Story of a Dog," in which the narrator, eloquently, meticulously, and brilliantly *fails* to explain the human world he's exploring. It's a staple technique in literature, and narrative irony, accordingly, is a staple of literary criticism. We could teach a course in literary history from that angle—but *not* a course in philosophy, history, or social science. It's a *donnée* of the academic profession that Kant was not mocking the author of *The Critique of Pure Reason* or Gibbon the author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Only a *literary* reading of *Kapital* could find in it a Marx who was on the side of capitalism without knowing it; and even so that reading wouldn't matter, disciplinarily, in "objective" socioeconomic terms.

The issue, in short, is not authorial intention (conscious or unconscious); it's professional intentionality. Kant, Gibbon, and Marx all acknowledge (even champion) the limits of subjectivity and the pressures of context, but disciplinarily each speaks under the aspect of eternity. Hence the *paradoxes* of ideological, skeptical, and relativist argument, where *paradox* denotes logical weakness or inconsistency: the argument for partiality is being made disciplinarily, through a logic, a form of argumentation, that *itself intends* totalization. Authority in each case is metahistorical, metapersonal, transcendent: the authority of reason and of fact. Whatever particular is adduced is meant to signify an absolute—a generalization that embodies some abstract truth and (its adherents hope) Truth with a capital T. This holds true even when the truth is that capital T's are inaccessible, as in the later Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. It holds true even when the evidence consists of a series of particulars—a chess match, the last house on the block, a builder shouting "slab" to his assistant—as indeed Wittgenstein indicates by the strict numerical ordering of these examples. Wittgenstein's remark about Kafka is pertinent in this regard: "Here's a man who takes a lot of trouble to tell us what's *not* troubling him." I think Wittgenstein was right, disciplinarily. His image of trouble is a fly trapped in a bottle. The philosopher shows it the way out. Kafka tells us what it's like to be the trapped fly.

Insofar as a history is literary, it's a bottled-in narrative. Most authors have actually believed in a way out, but they then proceed, as *literary* authors, to describe it through concrete persons, places, and experiences, in language that resists capital letters. Liter-

ary solutions, that is, come to seem true to us—we understand them, intellectually as well as emotionally—through volatile and malleable particulars. This describes the anonymous medieval Everyman and Bunyan's allegorical Christian no less than it does Kafka's dog. Both form and context in the literary text focus our attention on the sorts of limitations that ipso facto invite questions of narrative irony. Even when the experience is pointedly abstract, as in Blake's *Innocence* or Dickinson's *Eternity*, even when the name is pointedly general, as in Joyce's *Ulysses* or Melville's *Ishmael*, and even when we know what the author believed, as in *Paradise Lost* or *Notes from Underground*, the work itself remains open to questions of narrative irony. A philosopher may open his work to those questions, as Kierkegaard does. But then, the reverse applies as well: a poet or novelist may choose to write philosophically, in abstractions, like Tolstoy. In either case there's a change in disciplines, not a demonstration of metadisciplinarity. The philosopher is trying to persuade through universals, like a novelist; the novelist is arguing through absolutes, like a philosopher.

This contrast between absolutes and universals is counterdisciplinary, maybe counterintuitive, and it warrants a word of elaboration as a contrast on which literary history builds. Universals belong to the realm of nontranscendence. They are the sorts of boundaries and particulars that are always there, transhistorically, transculturally. As such, they remind us that our absolutes are time-bound answers that sometimes work, up to a point. Absolutes are our disciplinary vehicles of progress, economically, sociologically, historiographically. Or else, they help make sense of how and why things work, ontologically. Literature (the data of literary history) is neither progressive nor explanatory in this sense. The reason we cannot say that Whitman marks an advance over Sappho is not because Sappho found answers that were 2,000 years ahead of her time. On the contrary, it's because *as a poet* Whitman, for all his faith in modernity, dealt with the same old questionable specifics. We know a great deal more than Homer did about death, medically and sociologically, but we can't say that Morrison's *Beloved* teaches us more about the problem of death than *The Iliad* does. Literary texts are not progressive, because the sort of evidence they provide neither confirms nor denies explanations of the past. That is, their evidence may be interpreted (within limits) to either confirm or deny, because it's evidence of what we don't know; *at least* not yet. What some aestheticians call progress in literature—free verse, the novel, stream-of-consciousness—is a locus of dispute, not the ground of consensus; and, either way, progress means development only in the photographic sense of the word: as an enlargement, variation, or refinement in techniques of representing particulars.

I would go so far as to call this not only a difference but a contribution. Literature contributes to history—contributes to knowledge, morality, culture, and society—by questioning stories of progress and designs of totality. In literary history, absolutes are never universal, and universals are never absolute. That's the correlative of the contrast I just elaborated. *Absolutes are never universal*: they're made up, culture-specific by definition, unless appropriated by, or imposed upon, other cultures. *And universals are never*

absolute: they're the tangled multilayered specifics we can't get away from, unless we refuse to acknowledge our relatedness to a common humanity. Literature contributes to historical knowledge by directing us, sometimes through an unwilling suspension of belief, to recognize that our current answers are as provisional as the answers that (often with good reason) we've left behind. Theologically, for example, God *may* be dead; historically, we *may* be advancing toward some end-time utopia; scientifically, the universe *may* be an impersonal mechanism. But (as Hilary Putnam points out) it requires enormous arrogance or ignorance on our part to draw those conclusions from what theology, history, and science have taught us. *The truth is, we don't know*. At most, we're midway between knowing, *perhaps*, and not knowing. That's also where traditional disciplines stand, but with this difference, that they tell where we are to the best of our knowledge. Literature speaks to us from the other side of the divide.

This is neither to privilege literature, nor to mystify ignorance. I believe that the disciplinary effort to know is not only valid but indispensable. We owe it to ourselves to respect our need for absolutes. We *should* want to try to find *the* answers (what really happened, how best to organize society, what the truth is). Not to try would make us less human, less than human. But it's the job of literature—its peculiar cultural function—to keep the search open. Other disciplines express our dreams of closure and our capacity to progress toward their realization. Literature, as we've come to define it, metaprogressively, keeps us grounded in the realm of nontranscendence. And in doing so it presents us with a peculiar academic dilemma: how to use disciplinary methods, the instruments of closure (coherence, explanation, causal relation, rational design), to make sense of materials whose power—the power of language, imagination, emotion, and experience—depends on resistance to closure.

That dilemma has taken on a special urgency these days. I refer, on the one hand, to the growing emphasis on interdisciplinarity, and, on the other hand, to the widening rift between appreciative and cognitive criticism. Increasingly, the professional question is how to turn the hostilities between literary and cultural studies—the strategies by literary critics for turning (say) historiography into story telling; and the counterstrategies on the part of other disciplines for solving (or dis-solving) the problems of literature—how to turn that cold war of imperial disciplinary powers into a mode of interdisciplinary reciprocity. I don't have a ready and easy answer. From my experience with literary history, however, I venture six principles by which to proceed:

One: The relation between the literary and the historical is the reverse of what tradition has told us it is. In general, aesthetics has privileged the "higher" absolute over the "lower" particular. In general, history has moved from a set of empirical facts to a conceptual overview. In either case, the closer the particular gets us to the general, the better. By contrast, literary history is a *descent* from abstract to particular and from solutions to problems. The closer we get to particulars and predicaments, the better.

Two: This focus on particulars and predicaments by no means excludes the question of ends. On the contrary: literary history is profoundly, fundamentally, engaged in

problems of morality, politics, etc., but it reformulates the concept of ends as a function in context. The ends remain subject to question, that is, by the particulars from which they're abstracted. They provide closure on the premise that we'll probably have to explain things all over again. What's disciplinarily frustrating here can be interdisciplinarily enabling.

Three: Traditional disciplines are closed systems by definition. They allow for open-endedness on the condition that the next solution will incorporate or invalidate the last "definitive" framework. Literary history, by contrast, is open-ended. It allows for "comprehensive" and "definitive" status on the condition that the materials comprehended are inherently redefinable. As such they may be said to confirm the importance of disciplinarity. After all, to acknowledge our ignorance as problematic is to recognize that we *want* to know (and we *should*); and the best means to that end, to the best of our knowledge, is an (artificial) division of cognitive labor.

Four: The fabric of literary history is the *common* networks of meaning that link text and context. Historians tend to emphasize materialist determinants (laws of history, patterns of culture). Aestheticians tend to emphasize creative agency, the free play of the imagination. Literary history is about the semantic meeting ground between. Context is neither an abstraction drawn from another discipline nor a kaleidoscope of Great Books. Rather, context is a social symbology, the ordinary expressive forms that make for public discourse and shared meaning. Literary history affirms differences in quality between texts—but differences identified through the contexts that constitute their commonality—and it affirms the existence of universals but (again) universals that express our abiding conditions of limitation.

Five: Literature is not a criticism of life. It is life's criticism of absolutes: language's skepticism about the dogma of answers or the consolation of explanations. Often enough, literary texts aspire to archetypes, origins, and revelations, but in the process of doing so, they testify, on the contrary, to the powers of mutability and the commonplace. Insofar as literary history is faithful to its materials, it seeks to understand the so-called verbal alchemy through which ordinary language is refined into the extraordinary as a function in context, like a chemical combination of common elements that yields an extraordinary result. What's extraordinary about a literary text is not that it leaves the ordinary behind, but that it resonates with multiple ordinary meanings. Aesthetically and substantively, that resonance reaches *under* culture-specific absolutes. *Under*, as in subject to those absolutes, but also within and through them, at once undergirding the rules they embody and undermining them; *under*, as in underlie, involving possibilities that *these* absolutes *really* transcend—possibilities, too, of an unsettling kind, prospects that have been declared out of bounds or that have not yet been explored—variations or innovations that may effect the status of the absolute and so alter our current frameworks of transcendence. *Under*, as in depth.

Six: So understood, literary depth—the depths by which we should measure the success of a literary history—may be described as a middle ground between disciplin-

arity and universalism (in my sense of the term). And in this sense, literary history is no less averse to relativism than to absolutism. At its best, literary history demonstrates that we—meaning we academic professionals and the people we write for as much as the people we write about—are always, at any time, more than our culture tells us we are, just as a language is more than the discipline in which it's conveyed, just as history is more than *this* history can contain, and just as a literary text is more than either the particular social structures it represents or the sum of the ideologies it accrues as it travels across time and place.

For this last reason, if no other, the recent profusion of literary histories seems to me a hopeful sign for the future of literary and cultural studies.