Reading as a Reader and Reading as a Critic

Transcript

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I have to admit that thinking back to my application for this splendid Professorship and the lectures I proposed, that I wasn’t immediately sure – when I started work on tonight’s talk – exactly what I had meant by tonight’s title, and therefore lecture: ‘Reading as a Reader and Reading as a Critic’.


So I think what I thought (!) was that there would be some logic in considering, at this point, lecture 5, different ways, modes, or manners of reading. And as my day job - so to speak – is, amongst other things, teaching undergraduate students to read with greater attention to how a literary text works and exercises its magic over us, I may have had in mind that this would be an opportunity to answer a remark sometimes made by my students. Occasionally one of them will say that literary analysis – a large part of what I try to teach, the unpicking [gloss]... has ‘spoilt’ the poem, novel, play or whatever it might be – for him or her. I think I know what they mean. Reading as a reader we allow words to do their magic. We don’t necessarily think how they are working that enchantment. As soon as we begin to analyse, we’re engaging with the words in a quite different way.

What I want to propose this evening is that thinking about the how of a literary work’s effect on us as readers, in no way detracts from our pleasures. On the contrary, I want to try to demonstrate that there can be two simultaneous pleasures - being seduced by our reading at the same time as being shrewdly aware of how the seduction takes place. To take the analogy further, Ovid warned women readers of love-letters to consider the possible motives of their correspondent before allowing the letter to enchant. He thought it best that they read love-letters with a degree of circumspection, in order to avoid exploitation or an unhappy union. But that didn’t mean that they mightn’t read them with the deepest pleasure in all the world if they believed their suitor’s words. By the same token I think that reflecting on the way literary works have been constructed and spun into a web of words, can further enhance our pleasure and, maybe, our recognition of truth value. It was truth value in a love letter that Ovid thought the reader should try to discern.

Virginia Woolf, in a lecture (later an essay), simply entitled ‘How Should One Read a Book?’ said, ‘Every literature, as it grows old, has its rubbish heap’. What is on this rubbish heap has no value, she argues, ‘It is negligible in the extreme, yet how absorbing’ (my emphasis). We all know how a lightweight novel bought in an airport bookshop can distract us from the tedium of a long flight. But what Woolf goes on to suggest is that ‘we tire of rubbish-reading in the long run’. Now we might be tempted simply to dismiss Woolf as a literary snob. But she has an important point to make about the nature of rubbish-reading: ‘We tire of searching for what is needed to complete the half-truth’. In other words second-rate writing doesn’t really persuade us of its truth. We have to give it a strong and steady helping hand. ‘Facts’, according to Woolf, ‘are all that they can offer us, and facts are a very inferior form of fiction.’ What she means by ‘fact’ here needs to be glossed. She doesn’t mean an historical truth, she means that second-rate fiction simply states its case, states facts and facts have no persuasive or enchanting power in and of themselves.

To illustrate this I’d like to make a very small adjustment to the opening sentence of one of Woolf’s own novels, Mrs Dalloway. ‘Mrs Dalloway said she was going to buy some flowers.’ This is a statement of what we could call fictional fact. A character, Mrs Dalloway, presumably the protagonist of the story, its eponymous heroine, has said something to another character or characters in the story, to the effect that she has the intention of buying some flowers. Woolf’s actual opening sentence is subtly different: ‘Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.’ Now in this, Woolf’s original version, the story has begun in medias res (in the middle of the thing). Flowers have clearly been mentioned before and there has been some question as to who will buy them. This allows the reader to engage not with a statement, but with richly suggestive possibilities for ‘the truth’ of the fiction. The implication is that ‘the flowers’, matter, and flowers are potentially highly socially significant – as presents, as memorials, as decoration for a dinner party. Someone else was going to buy them, but Mrs Dalloway now says she will buy them herself. Has she been let down? Has she been abandoned to her task? This is how I read that opening sentence. But it is a reading that has to be adjusted retrospectively. The text continues:

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer’s men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning — fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a
Lucy, by implication, had been going to buy the flowers, but Mrs Dalloway, recognising that Lucy ‘had her work cut out for her’, decides to buy them herself. That Mrs Dalloway is kind and considerate is immediately recognised by the reader. She is also happy, happy, perhaps, as a child bathing in the sea. This is suggested by the vocabulary, ‘fresh as if issued to children on a beach’, ‘plunge’, ‘plunged’, ‘flap of a wave’, and ‘kiss of a wave’.

You may read these first sentences differently, and that’s because it isn’t simply what Woolf would call facts. There’s a fictional paradox at work here: ‘facts’ don’t persuade us of their truth as much as what is suggested or implied. There is something that persuades us of the ‘truth’ or credibility about Woolf’s first sentence. My altered version doesn’t. Life is like Woolf’s account, not mine. We are at once alone in the world, and at the same time bound up with others, and that bound-uped-ness leaves us vulnerable. This is the truth that lies at the heart of all Woolf’s fiction and we feel Mrs Dalloway’s vulnerability at the very outset of the novel of the same name as well as her independence and capacity for enjoyment of life - alone.

Another way of describing Woolf’s art is that it creates the impression of realism through the suggestion of social, or more specifically domestic, psychological complexity. C.S.Lewis used the term ‘Realism of Presentation’ and illustrates it by reference to Chaucer’s friar. Wanting to sit down, the friar has first to drive the cat off the bench, a ‘realistic touch’, as Lewis says. Woolf’s realism of presentation is a psychological version, sometimes called stream of consciousness, although it’s a term that risks oversimplifying Woolf’s art.

The kind of reading I’m advocating is what Woolf describes as ‘open[ing] the mind wide to the fast flocking of innumerable impressions’ and then reflecting on them self-consciously. This is how a ‘critic’, a ‘literary critic’ does it. A critic is something like a ‘professional’ reader, someone who has undergone a certain training. That’s not to say that readers can’t teach themselves to read like a critic. On the contrary, the more one reads and thinks about reading the more ‘professional’ one’s reading becomes.

At the same time there are, of course, large numbers of formalised approaches to literature of which many serious readers may be unaware. I’d like to talk briefly about one of these which, I hope, will give a glimpse into one of the most scholarly and rigorous literary methodologies. I’d then like to mention myriad other approaches, before considering literary language’s relation to subliminal advertising and then the role of rhetoric in literary criticism.

One of the most intellectually rigorous branches of literary criticism is classical textual criticism. It was first devised by the ancient Greeks who were concerned with the preservation of literary works like those of Homer. They wanted the texts that were preserved to be ‘authentic’, that is as close to the original author’s intentions as possible. ‘Modern’ textual criticism, on the other hand, was inaugurated by Karl Lachmann (1793 – 1851), a German philologist and critic, whose work on Lucretius used a methodology which is essentially what has been used since.

There are essentially four basic steps in the process although all four may not be necessary. The first is termed recensio (an enumeration, review or reassessment) which establishes a family tree of the various and varied manuscripts of a particular work. The second is selectio, which involves comparing the various family members in order to determine which is the oldest. Then comes examinatio, a careful study of the text to check for basic mistakes. The fourth stage, emendatio or divinatio, involves correcting the primitive errors. To illustrate this, let’s consider Wulfstan’s thirteenth homily, a pastoral letter in Anglo-Saxon. There are five extant manuscripts known as B, C, E, K and M. The textual scholar Dorothy Bethurum has established this family tree. Lost manuscripts are shown in square brackets:

1. [ARCHETYPE]
2. |  
3. -----------
4. |  
5. [X] [Y]
6. |  
7. -----  
8. |  
9. C E B
10. |  
11. [Z]
12. |  
13. -----  
14. |  
15. K M

So, the archetype, or original text, gave rise to two manuscripts, X and Y, both now lost. B was copied from Y,
Next, we work out what the family tree tells us. Firstly that K and M are direct descendants, according to Bethurum, of C. So they can’t possibly add anything and should be ignored. Secondly, while C, E and B are all primary witnesses, their importance is not equal. As C and E derive from a common archetype, X, their combined evidence is no greater than B alone, which goes back to a separate archetype. X may be a better witness than Y but we can’t know. What we do know is that C and E are dependent while B is independent. This means that the combination B-C against E is a good one, as is B-E against C. C-E against B is less good as it’s a case of one witness against another.

The next stage involves guesswork as one text has to be chosen against which to collate the others. Some scholars will select the oldest manuscript, some the most complete, some the text which is freest from scribal errors. After the manuscripts have been collated the textual critic will begin to establish the stemma [gloss]. One approach to this and Lachmann’s own, is known as ‘agreement in error’. In other words manuscripts that contain the same grammatical errors are presumed to be the work of the same scribe. Some critics have suggested that this is a fallacy... I should add that there are other approaches to textual criticism, some involving complex computer software.

So to conclude, literary critics come in many guises and in terms of the family tree of professional readers the classical textual critic comes first, establishing in so far as possible, ‘authentic texts’ for the next tier of literary critics to engage with. These critics tend to read according to a particular ‘theory’, for example, Marxist literary criticism. This approach involves determining the political tendency of a literary work. This may be more or less explicit. In the case of Dickens, his political sympathies are almost always evident. Marx himself, in 1854, included him among ‘[t]he present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together’. Charlotte Bronte, in Jane Eyre, for example, gives a much subtler insight into class structure. The Marxist critic will generally try to determine whether or not the social content or literary forms are progressive or reactionary. Class structures and power systems are often exposed for comment. Aside from the Marxist approach there are myriad other approaches: Archetypal criticism, Biographical criticism, Chicago school, Cultural materialism, Darwinian criticism, Deconstruction, Ecocriticism, Feminist criticism, Formalism, Geocriticism, Literary particularism, New Criticism, New Historicism, Postcolonial criticism, Psychoanalytic criticism, Reader-response criticism, Russian formalism, Semiotic criticism, Sociological criticism, Source criticism, Thing theory [gloss], Queer Theory. There is also growing interest in what neuroscience can tell us about the reading process.

Now you’ll be relieved to hear that I don’t intend to work through this list giving an explanation of what is particular to each approach. Rather I’d like to propose a new model of reading that illustrates, I hope, the distinction I want to make between reading as a reader and reading as a critic. It’s analogous to forms of subliminal advertising. Subliminal messages, for example, are stimuli that register below our level of conscious perception and which can only be noticed by the subconscious mind. Here are four of my favourite examples [gloss].

So, imagine that the novel you are reading is printed on a transparent acetate sheet. As an absorbed reader what you see is the world conjured by the novel – a place, people, events and so on. You read the words but in some sense you don’t see them, you see the world on the other side of the acetate sheet, the world conjured by the novel. Now, as a critic you have to keep your eye on the words on the acetate sheet and not allow yourself the immediate ‘vision’ that they conjure. This is where a knowledge of rhetoric comes in. Familiarity with figures of speech allows the critic to identify how words make their impression on us. So what are ‘figures of speech’? Classical rhetoricians regarded them as the ‘graces of the language’, as ‘the dressing of thought’, as ‘embellishments’ but as more than this. Aristotle recognised that figures add ‘charm and distinction’ to our language but also that they provided a way to balance ‘the obvious and the obscure’ so that listeners or readers quickly understood what was being argued and would be disposed to accept the argument. Quintilian defined figures as ‘any deviation, either in thought or expression, from the ordinary and simple method of speaking, a change analogous to the different positions our bodies assume when we sit down, lie back, or look back... . Let the definition of a figure, therefore, be a form of speech artfully varied from common usage’ (Instit. Orat., IX, i.ii). Figures are often subdivided into schemes and tropes. The former involve a deviation from the ordinary pattern or arrangement of words, the latter involve a deviation from the ordinary or principal signification of a word. Both figures involve transference. A scheme involves a transference of order and a trope a transference of meaning.

Let’s consider some examples. Here is a description of a clergyman by Samuel Johnson: ‘Though studious, he was popular; though argumentative, he was modest; though inflexible, he was candid; and though metaphysical, yet orthodox.’ (Dr Samuel Johnson on the character of Reverend Zacariah Mudge – wonderful name (!), The London Chronicle, May 2, 1769). We recognise Johnson’s wit here as he sums up a man’s character with aphoristic neatness. But what is at work here to produce the effect is known as antithesis or the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, often in parallel structure. And it is a ubiquitous rhetorical device in advertising. A bottle of men’s cologne by Dana was advertised with the slogan, ‘By the time it’s empty, life will be full.’ I suppose it’s a form of subliminal advertising as you don’t need to know that antithesis is at work to be seduced by the idea...
that you’ll have seduced a beautiful woman - or two - by the time you’ve used up the bottle, perhaps.

Compare these two quotations: ‘The emotional isolation, the preoccupation with God and themselves, the struggles for freedom, which seem to have possessed many of my friends at the same age, I know almost nothing of.’ (C.P. Snow, *The Search*); ‘I got, so far as the immediate moment was concerned, away.’ (Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*). There’s something that surprises us in both these examples, they grab our attention, they provide emphasis. How? The rhetorical term is anastrophe, the inversion of the natural or usual word order. The beginning and end of a clause are the places of greatest emphasis and what Snow and James do, by using anastrophe is to move from an earlier position in the clause to the end, what it is that they want to underline. [gloss] And again anastrophe crops up frequently in advertising. Peugeot advertised their cars with the caption, ‘one ad does not a survey make’.

Schemes of repetition, the repetition of initial or medial consonants in two or more adjacent words - that is alliteration - is a common feature of traditional poetry. In fact, in Anglo-Saxon poetry alliteration rather than rhyme served to bind verses together. In an earlier lecture I spoke of the delights of Dylan Thomas’s use of language in his poem ‘Fern Hill’. These lines are an admirable illustration of the effects of alliteration:

> I would hear him fly with the high fields  
> And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land. (ll. 50-51)

Sprite advertised its fizzy drink with the alliterative slogan, ‘Tart, tingling, and even ticklish’.

Assonance is also a common poetic effect where similar vowel sounds are preceded and followed by different consonants. Dylan Thomas, this time in ‘Ballad for the Long-Legged bait’ has these wonderful lines:

> Whales in the wake like capes and Alps  
> Quaked the sick sea and snouted deep

French Line Ships used the slogan, ‘Refresh your zest for living’.

I don’t want to simply to work through the plethora of schemes that are part of rhetoric but I should mention one more, dear to Shakespeare and that is anthimeria. Take the lines from Coriolanus (V, i, 5):

> A mile before his tent fall down and knee  
> The way into his mercy  
> Or this line from King Lear (IV, vi, 103):  
> The thunder would not peace at my bidding.

Turning to the rhetorical tropes some will be familiar like metaphor, irony, rhetorical questions, and simile. There are more obscure tropes, however, like auxesis, a form of hyperbole or exaggeration. Auxesis is a way of subtly persuading the listener or reader that something is more serious than it may really have been. Lawyers may refer to ‘wounds’ that have been inflicted to emphasise the gravity of the assault. But the ‘wounds’ may have been more like scratches. ‘Embezzlement’ might be used rather than ‘petty-pilfering’ for the same reasons.

Enough of schemes and tropes. Now I’d like to introduce syntax or sentence structure to demonstrate how the constituent parts of rhetoric can be built up, potentially, into something quasi-philosophical. Ideas can be stated, but they can also come alive in the telling. Take this passage of Samuel Johnson’s in which he considers the Stoics’ attitude to the avoidance of affecting pain or emotional hurt by developing numb indifference to life:

> If by excluding joy we could shut out grief, the scheme would deserve very serious attention; but since however we may debar ourselves from happiness, misery will find its way at many inlets and the assaults of pain will force our regard, though we may withhold it from the invitations of pleasure, we may surely endeavour to raise life above the middle point of apathy at one time, since it will necessarily sink below it at another. (Rambler, 47)

There’s an argument here, a point about the fallacy of the Stoics’ approach to life, but the point is articulated in a convoluted syntax and it is only by using this complicated syntax that Johnson can really say what he wants to say. The syntax ‘If... we could’, to ‘but since however...’, to ‘though we may,...’, to ‘we may surely...’, ‘since it will necessarily...’. What Johnson is saying is not straightforward or easily balanced. He is not saying that living without joy will prevent grief; he is not saying that abstaining from happiness will check misery. On the contrary, he is suggesting that pain, grief and misery are part of the human condition and will afflict us whatever we do. What is so compelling is that this doesn’t add up to a gloomy view of things. What the convoluted syntax does is to invert the potentially pessimistic outlook into one of hope: we must risk things in order to enjoy the upside, ‘we may surely endeavour to raise life’.

If I can be excused, briefly, for straying into areas of biographical conjecture, I could add that Johnson was a troubled man. He knew that his thinking was patchy, that some of his ideas had never fully been developed and articulated. He recognised contradictions in his own thinking and gaps. And this is what his complex syntax communicates so deftly. Johnson wasn’t a philosopher, he was a writer, and a writer of consummate integrity.
He found a way of saying what he thought and when his thought fell short of his own ideal, the language reflected his indecision.

Johnson criticised writers who suggested ways of living ‘in abstraction and disengagement, exempt from the enticements of hope, the solicitations of affection, the importunities of appetite, or the depressions of fear’ (Rambler 2). Johnson is never guilty of this. On the contrary, Johnson’s reader feels, amid the complexity of his syntax, the weight of the emotions he describes. One feels a familiarity with complex and contradictory emotional states. As Johnson himself said, ‘Men more frequently require to be reminded than informed.’ (Rambler 2).

Continuing in a trajectory of growing size, I’d like to move from syntax to form, in particular the structure of the first two chapters of Charles Dickens’s masterpiece Our Mutual Friend, written in 1864-5. The novel opens at night, on the River Thames in London. Here is a contemporary illustration. The tide is rising and in the muddy darkness a boat appears amid the floating logs, rubbish and barges. The boat is being rowed by a small girl whose angelic face is half hidden by the hood of her cloak. But dominating the boat is a man standing up at the prow looking out over the water with hungry eyes, clearly looking for something. By the nineteenth century the visual has come to dominate the novel and continues to until the rise of cinema. The opening of Our Mutual Friend is strikingly cinematic, some decades before the advent of film in the 1890s. What is this unlikely pair looking for? We soon discover that the man is looking for the corpses of murder victims and suicides. The waters of the Thames provide rich pickings. The man empties the dead’s pockets of money and delivers the corpses to a nearby police station where he is also offered a reward for his labours. The girl, the man’s daughter, turns her head away from the macabre sight of the bodies, terrified by her father’s work. As Italo Calvino writes in his essay on the novel, ‘Carried along on the corpse-fisher’s boat, we seem to enter the dark side of the world.’

The tension is maintained in the second chapter by an apparent disjuncture. Chapter two could be the opening of a quite different novel and we read on in part to discover the link. The reader is suddenly immersed in a dinner party, hosted by Mr and Mrs Veneering. And the reader quickly realises that everything about them is ‘veneer’:

Mr and Mrs Veneering were brand-new people in a brand-new house in a brand-new quarter of London. Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span new. All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were new, they themselves were new, they were as newly married as was lawfully compatible with their having a brand-new baby, and if they had set up a great-grandfather, he would have come home in matting from the Pantechnicon, without a scratch upon him, French polished to the crown of his head.

(A Pantechnicon van, usually shortened to pantechnicon, was originally a horse-drawn furniture removal van used by the British company, ‘The Pantechnicon’, for delivering and collecting furniture which customers had stored.)

Here is a contemporary illustration.

Everyone at the dinner party gives the impression of knowing everyone else but this is a façade. The atmosphere is one of a comedy of manners until, just before the end of the chapter the conversation turns to the story of a man who drowned just as he was about to inherit a huge fortune. So we are taken back to the scene of the boatman and his daughter in the murky waters of the Thames - and the atmosphere of death. It turns out that the fortune that the young man was about to inherit was made out of rubbish. The theme of detritus, also introduced in the first chapter, continues. And throughout the novel, whatever the scenes of luxury and brightness, we recognise them as only flimsy disguises hiding the grim and desolate reality of the world. The young man’s father has made a fortune in the London suburbs where enormous rubbish heaps in a field, surround his house.

Dickens crafts the novel brilliantly as apparently disparate sections are artfully woven together. Likewise the metaphorical texture, as detritus, greed and evil are brought into intimate relationship. The rhetoric of Dickens’s language is also deft. He is a master of the simile, bringing characters and scenes to life sometimes with extraordinary economy, sometimes at greater length, as when he wants to suggest the sprawl of the city. In terms of character, imagine someone ‘with an immense obtuse drab oblong face, like a face in a teaspoon’. It’s a brilliant image conveying a sense of dumb stubbornness. Or to conjure an image of someone’s ‘neck and nostrils like a rocking-horse’, to suggest a rather crude physique and flared nostrils.

In terms of setting, here is Dickens on London:

A grey, dusty, withered evening in London city has not a hopeful aspect. The closed warehouses and offices have an air of death about them, and the national dread of colour has an air of mourning. The towers and steeples of the many house-encircled churches, dark and dingy as the sky that seems descending on them, are no relief to the general gloom; a sundial on a church wall has the look, in its useless black shade, of having failed in its business enterprise, and stopped payment for ever.
Dickens begins by personifying London. The people of London may or may not feel hope, but we don’t generally think of a city in this way. The evening is described as ‘withered’, an adjective we generally associate with living things, not a time of day. And the atmosphere of decay is made explicit in the mention of ‘death’, although associated with ‘offices and warehouses’ which are not living beings. This is picked up in the ‘air of mourning’, attributed to a ‘national dread of colour’. All is black, decaying, deathly. The atmosphere is also one of claustrophobia. The churches are ‘house-encompassed’ and the sky seems to be ‘descending on them’. To the blackness, decay and death, we can add ‘dark, dingy and gloom’. The final image of the sundial is an intriguing one. It is described as ‘having failed in its business enterprise’. But this is evening, presumably after the sun has set. A sundial can only provide an indication of the time when the sun is out. But the failed business enterprise, which has ‘stopped payment’ links back to the ‘closed warehouses and offices’ with their ‘air of death about them’. To sum up what the passage describes is a failing urban economy. The Church, and by extension religion, can bring no comfort as the ‘towers and steeples’ which might otherwise symbolise hope, ‘provide no relief’. The brevity of the simile I quoted above, ‘an immense obtuse drab oblong face, like a face in a teaspoon’ contrasts with the extensive description of London in the evening. The length is not otiose. The reader is stuck in the long description just as he or she might be in the streets of London with the sky ‘descending’.

As a reader we see the decaying scene Dickens conjures, we feel the claustrophobia and the hopelessness, but we don’t necessarily see the words on the acetate sheet and recognise how the rhetoric works. One aspect of a critic’s job is to be able to explain how literature makes its effects. Writers likewise have to use a language which will beguile the reader. The ‘facts’, to return to Woolf’s distinction, that we read in washing machine instructions do not conjure, they state. And it’s this capacity for language, novels in particular, to beguile us that I’d like to explore in my next lecture on Tuesday 13th May. This will be the concluding lecture of this academic year’s six lectures. Its title is ‘How Novels Beguile’.

Thank you.