

dence and hierarchy, then we will never assimilate comfortably and spontaneously medieval allegoresis. In Greek tragedy, we are cut off from the duality of the sacred, at once awesome and taboo, that baffles our rationalistic groping. We can't recapture a pristine, Edenic originality; we can't dismiss the gulf of history and sensibility. We have to face the particularity of our own historical moment, our own habits of ordering and perceiving which are not the text's. What Kernode calls the *spes hermeneutica* will always, as he says, be a little disappointed. We have to acknowledge the ultimate mystery of that alien sign, self-enclosed and enigmatic. Our impulse to move backward against the current will always fall tragically short of its goal. Just as the process of *explicatio* was checked by the text's power of withdrawal, the process of *complicatio* for us is checked by its power of enclosure.

Thus the reader has to settle for an incomplete circuit. The humbling realization of his or her estrangement intercepts the return to the origin. And this realization which comes to restore us to history will gradually initiate again an unfolding movement, a new *explicatio*, as we submit to history. The signifier-in-itself, hermetic and enclosed, will appear to be barren, and we will once again turn to unpacking, construal, paraphrase. We will come to value the signifieds we uncover, despite their partiality, and we will value them the more because they are refined by the discipline of the phase of enfolding. Then this unfolding process will run its course and once again reverse itself. Reading, we discover, involves a shuttle of understanding, a mental dialectic that no *Aufhebung*, no transumption, will resolve.

One can describe the literary text, I submit, as that kind of text which elicits this perpetual, exhilarating shuttle, this double movement of the mind latent in the text's own power. This is not the movement of the psychoanalytic process, where the analyst's mind reaches out for associative signifieds and then returns newly enlightened to the dream symbols that lose their opacity. The literary text alone has the secret of directing our reading without surrendering its core of opacity. It alone has the inexhaustible power to provoke or compel our double response, restless, acquisitive, continuous, absorbing, as it unfolds and enfolds in our understanding.

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Opening a Dialogue on Thomas Greene's Literariness

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At the beginning of his talk, Thomas Greene reminded us of the fact that the specificity of the literary text is one of the most complex and elusive of all the problems posed by contemporary and, if I may add, past criticism. The role of a discussant is to clarify further the position of the main speaker and also to question his ideas and to offer alternatives. From my limited perspective of the topic and in my role as understudy for a more expert expert, I am somewhat embarrassed by this task. As historians, critics and teachers of literature, why would we wish to quarrel with such a seductive conclusion as Greene's:

... the literary text ... [is] that kind of text which elicits [a] perpetual, exhilarating shuttle, this double movement of the mind latent in the text's own power. ... The literary text alone has the secret of directing our reading without surrendering its core of opacity. It alone has the inexhaustible power to provoke or compel our double response, restless, acquisitive, continuous, absorbing, as it unfolds and enfolds in our understanding.

There is room, nevertheless, for observations, questions and alternative approaches. His talk is presented as a contribution to an ongoing debate and not as a final conclusion; it merits serious consideration and the compliment of critical scrutiny. The first necessary observation concerns the typological class to which Greene's proposal belongs. While acknowledging other recent theoretical stances – for instance, the concept of the production of meaning which is the result of a dynamic collaboration between text and reader, the pleasure principle, professionalism and reader consensus – as well as relying implicitly on a canon of great works, Greene does not proceed historically, descriptively and inductively. His statements are, therefore, only denotative in their form; however, he formulates a new prescriptive and ultimately normative definition. It is normative, because whatever does not create the desired 'inexhaustible power' fails the test and may not logically belong to the canon of true literature.

If such a classification of Greene's concept is justified, it has, potentially at least, the usual advantages and shortcomings of this family of definitions. Its major favourable aspect lies in the intellectual seductiveness of a prescriptive statement. Greene's could be – and indeed is – clear, short, fairly simple, and to some extent falsifiable. But there are at least two difficulties inherent in the very nature of such argumentation.

First of all, before being legitimized, it has to compete, diachronically and synchronically, with other definitions: from what may be deduced from Aristotle's *mimesis* and Horace's *dulce et utile* to Georg Lukács' aesthetic reflection and representation of reality; from the idealistic and romantic trinity of *das Schöne, Gute und Wahre* to the formalists' foregrounding of the utterance and their early deautomatization hypothesis, as well as their later concept of literature as a system of functions; from Roman Ingarden's phenomenological, actualized 'aesthetic object' invested with values to Roman Jakobson's linguistic criteria, which determine a special class of language; from René Wellek's and Warren Austin's 'mode of existence of a literary work of art' and the four hierarchical strata derived from Ingarden's analyses to Jurij M. Lotman's cultural semiotics, Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem (dynamic functionalism) and the most recent models inspired by cybernetics. Even within such a spectrum of possible definitions, from pronouncements about what literature is or what good literature is to specific discussions of literariness – and I will mercifully spare you a detailed panorama – Greene's proposal may strike us as a particularly fitting formulation for post-modern times, shaped as they are (if we have faith in the analyses of Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard) by semiotic perspectives and obsessed with information and knowledge. I find it much more reassuring than ironic that it is also, in terms akin to the spirit of our age and culture, and derived in part from a phenomenological stance tempered by reader response theories, a rendering of very old and persistent intuitions about the infinite opportunities for disciplined meaning encapsulated in works of literature. This idea was already expressed in Sanskrit poetics by the image comparing great works to a mighty river, so deep that elephants may drown in it and still shallow enough that children may play safely in its waters; it is reformulated by T.S. Eliot, when he avers of a Shakespearean play: 'For the simplest auditors, there is the plot, for the more thoughtful the character and conflict of character, for the more literary the words and phrasing, for the more musically sensitive the rhythm, for audiences of greater understanding and sensitiveness a meaning which reveals itself gradually' (*Use of Poetry*). All the same,

it is clear that the new definition cannot be accepted without a critical comparison with other homologous, analogous and contrastive prescriptions. Moreover, it is as well to recall that, while appearing timeless, the definition is the product of a moment and a place.

The second probable difficulty, also inherent in every prescriptive approach to literature, is the relationship between the fixed definition and the vagaries of historical praxis. First, one may think of persistent contemporary attempts, developed by dynamic functionalism, to enlarge quite significantly our view of the boundaries of literature, so as to include so-called paraliterary phenomena or popular genres (detective stories, science fiction, romances, even pornography), literary translations, and many forms of non-fictional narratives. These attempts go well beyond the customary enlarging of the canon through selective 'co-optation' and the (re)discovery of worthy works and, occasionally, of towering figures (Blake, Hölderlin, Melville, Kafka). In the perspective of these other, more radical revisions, which affect the very idea of *Dichtung*, Greene's implied canon situates his paradigm at a conservative point on today's intellectual compass. Second, and more importantly, there is a real need for a careful comparison of his description of literariness with the actual acceptance of verbal constructs as literature in different places and in different times and, for that matter, among different social groups. Undoubtedly, there are overlaps and significant inclusions between the theory and the practice, but there would appear, I suspect, numerous incompatibilities between the two. One such incompatibility is that the theory may suggest a stability and permanence which are not borne out by experience. There may also be a tendency in it to render complex forms of poetry (let us say, certain Renaissance, metaphysical and modernist poems) more rewarding to the critics sharing such assumptions than other forms (for example, traditional oral lyrics or didactic and allegorical verse); the same preference could be given to the intricate fabric of *Don Quixote*, *À la Recherche du temps perdu* and *Ulysses*, as compared to folk-tales, the picaresque novel or naturalistic and other narrative fiction with social engagement.

In general, the situation of folk-literature could again become problematic. On the one hand, there is no historical doubt that the oral tradition represents the early phase and the basis of literature and that this tradition is the fertile ground for such classical masterpieces as the *Gilgamesh* epic, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*; it is increasingly recognized again (as witnessed, for example, by the recent series of lectures by Paul Zumthor at the Collège de France) that the European Middle Ages are strongly indebted to

oral sources and the oral mode of presentation. On the other hand, genuine oral versions of verbal art – of songs, ballads, tales, legends, etc., with the relative exception of riddles, proverbs and similar ‘simplest forms’ – are in perpetual flux, prototype examples of ‘unstable’ texts, so that there is really no final form other than that of written records. These range, of course, from the free literary transpositions of Basile, Straparola and Perrault, to synthetic ‘standardization’ by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Karadžić, Christensen and Moe, Lönnroth, and Afanas’ev, to painstaking transcriptions or, later, tape and video recordings of single performances by contemporary scholars such as Linda Dégh. All these versions show a vast but finite repertoire of contents (themes, motifs, characters, etc.), significant structural uniformities and many formulaic elements; there is also, and particularly so in authenticity examples, a certain laxity of language, a transparency and lack of density, especially in narrative strategies and poetic style. These are characteristics which require evaluative criteria and critical approaches different from those appropriate to literature written by cultural elites.

In any case, and without attempting to probe into world literature within the space of a few sentences, it is possible to contend that the proposed definition may be a projection of present values upon past practice and, therefore, a recuperative operation which contributes to the intellectual enjoyment of sophisticated critics, but which may be wanting in its ability to account for the social functions of literature as a historical institution and for the ideological aspects of all canons.

These, then, are the two basic concerns, which have to be raised in the face of any ‘definitive’ definition of ‘literariness,’ even one as broad and thoughtful as Greene’s. There is an additional point to be made. At the very outset of his talk, Greene contends that the question of the specificity of the literary text ‘calls into doubt the very existence of our profession as literary scholars.’ We should be grateful to Thomas Greene for offering us a very plausible answer to questions invariably raised by able students – and by ourselves, in our more lucid moments of reflection – questions to which, hitherto, we lacked an elegant and still relatively simple answer. His approach also has the advantage of acting as a courteous yet firm check on ‘strong readers’ and their ‘limitlessness of interpretation,’ an activity which may become, when all is said and done, ‘narcissistic hermeneutics’ and ‘shoddy workmanship.’ Furthermore, his approach could allow critics to measure the degree of literariness in a text in terms of its energy, something which – as many of us believe – is not equally present in all ‘verbal artefacts,’ not even in all those ‘carefully constructed.’ Such a measurement could in turn permit the establishing of a spectrum of works,

some firmly embedded in quintessential literariness, others existing at its fringes, many relegated to positions beyond its boundaries, but still sharing a few of the features characterizing this phenomenon. Greene earns our gratitude for having set forth a proposal which is simultaneously historical, contemporary and humanistic. Consequently, he has made a challenging statement and rendered us an intellectual and cultural service.

These qualities notwithstanding, there is no absolute need for us all to cast our lot with literariness. Literature and criticism have been in existence for quite some time and have known periods of prosperity; literary history has been taught and researched at institutions of higher learning for almost two centuries without any universally accepted definition of which intrinsic elements of a text make it function as literature and separate it from other verbal utterances. Admittedly, it would not be satisfying to declare that literature and, therefore, literariness are whatever is accepted in that capacity by a given society. But there exist powerful theoretical suggestions as well as valid historical, descriptive and analytical investigations and critical approaches which have permitted significant insights into literature and literary works without the prerequisites of a covenant of a permanent and universal set of predetermined literary norms. Literariness is definitely not our last entrenchment.

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