

ulation, but rather the history of influence: that "which results from the event" and which from the perspective of the present constitutes the coherence of literature as the prehistory of its present manifestation.

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Thesis 7. The task of literary history is thus only completed when literary production is not only represented synchronically and diachronically in the succession of its systems, but also seen as "special history" in its own unique relationship to "general history." This relationship does not end with the fact that a typified, idealized, satiric, or utopian image of social existence can be found in the literature of all times. The social function of literature manifests itself in its genuine possibility only where the literary experience of the reader enters into the horizon of expectations of his lived praxis, preforms his understanding of the world, and thereby also has an effect on his social behavior.

The relationship between literature and reader can actualize itself in the sensorial realm as an incitement to aesthetic perception as well as in the ethical realm as a summons to moral reflection. The new literary work is received and judged against the background of other works of art as well as against the background of the everyday experience of life. Its social function in the ethical realm is to be grasped according to an aesthetics of reception in the same modalities of question and answer, problem and solution, undet which it enters into the horizon of its historical influence.

It follows from all of this that the specific achievement of literature, in social existence is to be sought exactly where literature is not absorbed into the function of a *representational* art. If one looks at the moments in history when literary works toppled the taboos of the ruling morals or offered the reader new solutions for the moral casuistry of his lived praxis, which thereafter could be sanctioned by the consensus of all readers in the society, then a still-little-studied area of research opens itself up to the literary historian. The gap between literature and history, between aesthetic and historical knowledge, can be bridged if literary history does not simply describe the process of general history in the reflection of its works one more time, but rather when it discovers in the course of "literary evolution" that properly *socially formative* function that belongs to literature as it competes with other arts and social forces in the emancipation of mankind from its natural, religious, and social bonds.

If it is worthwhile for the literary scholar to jump over his ahistorical shadow for the sake of this task, then it might well also provide an answer to the question: toward what end and with what right can one today still—or again—study literary history?

1969, 1970

RAYMOND WILLIAMS

1921-1988

Arguably the leading literary intellectual in Britain in the later twentieth century, Raymond Williams is best known for espousing the study of culture and society alongside that of literature. A committed socialist and political activist as well as a highly productive scholar throughout his life, he provided a model for those interested in investigating literature in terms of politics, ideology, and social history. He was a literary journalist and novelist; a prominent critic of drama, the novel, culture, and media; and one of the founding figures of British cultural studies and of media studies and communications. Arguing against traditional views that assume the autonomy of literature and its privileged cultural value, Williams analyzes it as a specific historical product, carrying class values.

The son of a railway worker, Williams grew up in a small farming village, Pandy, in Wales. A sense of class and place informs all his work, most visibly his novels, which depict working-class life and politics in Wales. In 1939 he entered Cambridge University on a state scholarship, where he became acutely aware of class distinctions; he was politically active in the Socialist Club and, for a short time, the Communist Party. In 1941 he left to serve in an artillery division of the British Army during World War II. He returned to Cambridge after the war, taking a degree in English in 1945. By that time he was married, with one small child and another on the way; so instead of accepting a postgraduate fellowship, he began teaching evening classes at Oxford in drama and fiction. His experience in adult education and his involvement with the Workers Educational Association helped convince him of the importance of literature's social and political contexts and of the need for a democratic, "permanent education." In 1961 he returned to Cambridge as a lecturer, and in 1974 a professorship of drama was created for him, a position he held until retiring in 1983. At Cambridge Williams not only wrote prolifically but taught a number of students—among them, STUART HALL and TERRY EAGLETON—who would themselves become important figures in literary and cultural studies.

Literary studies in England after World War II were dominated by "Cambridge English," strongly influenced by F. R. Leavis, a longtime professor at Cambridge and the editor of the leading critical journal of its day, *Scrutiny*. Extolling, in his famous phrase, "the Great Tradition," Leavis privileged literature above all other disciplines, as offering a special morally edifying force. In so doing, he followed MATTHEW ARNOLD, who in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) claimed that the literary canon could provide a civilizing "sweetness and light" to society, in effect assuming the redemptive power previously enjoyed by religion. Williams desacralizes literature by setting it in its historical context and examining its social uses.

While engaging with history, sociology, and politics, Williams characteristically begins with literary analysis, often examining "keywords" of modern culture. In his masterwork *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (1958), whose title signals its revision of Arnold, Williams unfolds the history of *culture, art, democracy, industry, and class*. For example, *culture*, a term originally applied to agriculture, shifted in the eighteenth century to encompass "tending" the human mind, so that one might be a "cultured" or "cultivated" individual. In the course of the nineteenth century, the term came to mean a general classification of the arts and literature, implying a high social value. Williams connects these transformations to the rise of industrial capitalism; he himself adopts a broader definition, arguing in a famous passage that "a culture is not only a body of intellectual and imaginative work; it is also a whole way of life."

Our selection, "Literature," from *Marxism and Literature* (1977), similarly examines literature. With the rise of industrial capitalism, a term once applied to any written material began first to designate more specifically works of the imagination,

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particular great works, as against the 'abstraction' and 'generality' of other concepts and of the kinds of practice which they, by contrast, define. Thus it is common to see 'literature' defined as 'full, central, immediate human experience', usually with an associated reference to 'minute particulars'. By contrast, 'society' is often seen as essentially general and abstract: the summaries and averages, rather than the direct substance, of human living. Other related concepts, such as 'politics', 'sociology', or 'ideology', are similarly placed and downgraded, as mere hardened outer shells compared with the living experience of literature.

The naivety of the concept, in this familiar form, can be shown in two ways: theoretically and historically. It is true that one popular version of the concept has been developed in ways that appear to protect it, and in practice do often protect it, against any such arguments. An essential abstraction of the 'personal' and the 'immediate' is carried so far that, within this highly developed form of thought, the whole process of abstraction has been dissolved. None of its steps can be retraced, and the abstraction of the 'concrete' is a perfect and virtually unbreakable circle. Arguments from theory or from history are simply evidence of the incurable abstraction and generality of those who are putting them forward. They can then be contemptuously rejected, often without specific reply, which would be only to fall to their level.

This is a powerful and often forbidding system of abstraction, in which the concept of 'literature' becomes actively ideological.¹ Theory can do something against it, in the necessary recognition (which ought hardly, to those who are really in contact with literature, to need any long preparation) that whatever else 'it' may be, literature is the process and the result of formal composition within the social and formal properties of a language. The effective suppression of this process and its circumstances, which is achieved by shifting the concept to an undifferentiated equivalence with 'immediate living experience' (indeed, in some cases, to more than this, so that the actual lived experiences of society and history are seen as less particular and immediate than those of literature) is an extraordinary ideological feat. The very process that is specific, that of actual composition, has effectively disappeared or has been displaced to an internal and self-proving procedure in which writing of this kind is genuinely believed to be (however many questions are then begged) 'immediate living experience' itself. Appeals to the history of literature, over its immense and extraordinarily various range, from the *Mabinogion* to *Middlemarch*, or from *Paradise Lost* to *The Prelude*,² cause a momentary hesitation until various dependent categories of the concept are moved into place: 'myth', 'romance', 'fiction', 'realist fiction', 'epic', 'lyric', 'autobiography'. What from another point of view might reasonably be taken as initial definitions of the processes and circumstances of composition are converted, within the ideological concept, to 'forms' of what is still triumphantly defined as 'full, central, immediate human experience'. Indeed when any concept has so profound and complex an internal specializing develop-

ment, it can hardly be examined or questioned at all from outside. If we are to understand its significance, and the complicated facts it partially reveals and partially obscures, we must turn to examining the development of the concept itself.

In its modern form the concept of 'literature' did not emerge earlier than the eighteenth century and was not fully developed until the nineteenth century. Yet the conditions for its emergence had been developing since the Renaissance. The word itself came into English use in the fourteenth century, following French and Latin precedents; its root was Latin *littera*, a letter of the alphabet. *Litterature*, in the common early spelling, was then in effect a condition of reading: of being able to read and of having read. It was often close to the sense of modern *literacy*, which was not in the language until the late nineteenth century, its introduction in part made necessary by the movement of *literature* to a different sense. The normal adjective associated with literature was *literate*. *Literary* appeared in the sense of reading ability and experience in the seventeenth century, and did not acquire its specialized modern meaning until the eighteenth century.

Literature as a new category was then a specialization of the area formerly categorized as *rhetoric* and *grammar*:³ a specialization to reading and, in the material context of the development of printing, to the printed word and especially the book. It was eventually to become a more general category than *poetry* or the earlier *poesy*, which had been general terms for imaginative composition, but which in relation to the development of *literature* became predominantly specialized, from the seventeenth century, to metrical composition and especially written and printed metrical composition. But *literature* was never primarily the active composition—the 'making'—which *poetry* had described.⁴ As reading rather than writing, it was a category of a different kind. The characteristic use can be seen in Bacon—"learned in all literature and erudition, divine and humane"—and as late as Johnson—"he had probably more than common literature, as his son addresses him in one of his most elaborate Latin poems";⁵ *Literature*, that is to say, was a category of use and condition rather than of production. It was a particular specialization of what had hitherto been seen as an activity or practice, and a specialization, in the circumstances, which was inevitably made in terms of social class. In its first extended sense, beyond the bare sense of 'literacy', it was a definition of 'polite' or 'humane' learning, and thus specified a particular social distinction. New political concepts of the 'nation' and new valuations of the 'vernacular' interacted with a persistent emphasis on 'literature' as reading in the 'classical' languages. But still, in this first stage, into the eighteenth century, *literature* was primarily a generalized social concept, expressing a certain (minority) level of educational achievement. This carried with it a potential and eventually realized alternative definition of *literature* as 'printed books': the objects in and through which this achievement was demonstrated.

It is important that, within the terms of this development, literature nor-

1. Fundamental subjects in classical and medieval education (defined much more broadly than they are today).

2. The word *poetry* is etymologically related to the Greek verb 'to make', *poiein*.

3. Written of Milton in the *Life of Milton* (1779).

4. by SAMUEL JOHNSON (1709-1784), the English essayist, poet, and lexicographer. "I learned in all literature..."; a description of King James I in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), by the English philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon (1561-1626).

1. That is, plays a role in the dominant system of ideas and beliefs of modern class-based societies that, according to Marxism, operates subliminally and makes us compliant subjects.

2. Williams names major works of prose and poetry: the *Mabinogion* (comp. 14th c.), a collec-

tion of medieval Welsh tales; *Middlemarch* (1871-72), a novel by George Eliot; *Paradise Lost* (1667) an epic by John Milton; and *The Prelude* (1850) a long autobiographical poem by WILLIAM WORDSWORTH.

mainly included all printed books. There was not necessary specialization to 'imaginative' works. Literature was still primarily reading ability and reading experience, and this included philosophy, history, and essays as well as poems. Were the new eighteenth-century novels 'literature'? That question was first approached, not by definition of their mode or content, but by reference to the standards of 'polite' or 'humane' learning. Was drama literature? This question was to exercise successive generations, not because of any substantial difficulty but because of the practical limits of the category. If literature was reading, could a mode written for spoken performance be said to be literature, and if not, where was Shakespeare? (But of course he could now be read; this was made possible, and 'literary' by texts.)

At one level the definition indicated by this development has persisted. Literature lost its earliest sense of reading ability and reading experience, and became an apparently objective category of printed works of a certain quality. The concerns of a 'literary editor' or a 'literary supplement' would still be defined in this way. But three complicating tendencies can then be distinguished: first, a shift from 'learning' to 'taste' or 'sensitivity' as a criterion defining 'literary' quality; second, an increasing specialization of literature to 'creative' or 'imaginative' works; third, a development of the concept of 'tradition' within national terms, resulting in the more effective definition of 'a national literature'. The sources of each of these tendencies can be discerned from the Renaissance, but it was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that they came through most powerfully, until they became, in the twentieth century, in effect received assumptions. We can look more closely at each tendency.

The shift from 'learning' to 'taste' or 'sensitivity' was in effect the final stage of a shift from a para-national scholarly profession, with its original social base in the church and then in the universities, and with the classical languages as its shared material, to a profession increasingly defined by its class position, from which essentially general criteria, applicable in fields other than literature, were derived. In England certain specific features of bourgeois development strengthened the shift, the 'cultivated amateur' was one of its elements, but 'taste' and 'sensitivity' were essentially unifying concepts, in class terms, and could be applied over a very wide range from public and private behaviour to (as Wordsworth complained) either wine or poetry. As subjective definitions of apparently objective criteria (which acquire their apparent objectivity from an actively consensual class sense), and at the same time apparently objective definitions of subjective qualities, 'taste' and 'sensitivity' are characteristically bourgeois categories.

'Criticism' is an essentially associated concept, in the same development. As a new term, from the seventeenth century, it developed (always in difficult relations with its general and persistent sense of fault-finding) from 'commentaries' on literature, within the 'learned' criterion, to the conscious exercise of 'taste', 'sensitivity', and 'discrimination'. It became a significant special form of the general tendency in the concept of literature towards an emphasis on the use or (conspicuous) consumption⁷ of works, rather than on their

production. While the habits of use or consumption were still the criteria of a relatively integrated class, they had their characteristic strengths as well as weaknesses. 'Taste' in literature might be confused with 'taste' in everything else, but, within class terms, responses to literature were notably integrated, and the relative integration of the 'reading public' (a characteristic term of the definition) was a sound base for important literary production. The reliance on 'sensitivity', as a special form of an attempted emphasis on whole human response, had its evident weaknesses in its tendency to separate 'feeling' from 'thought' (with an associated vocabulary of 'subjective' and 'objective', 'unconscious' and 'conscious', 'private' and 'public'). At the same time it served, at its best, to insist on 'immediate' and 'living' substance (in which its contrast with the 'learned' tradition was especially marked). It was really only as this class lost its relative cohesion and dominance (and its weakness of the concepts as concepts became evident. And it is evidence of at least its residual hegemony⁸ that criticism, taken as a new conscious discipline into the universities, to be practised by what became a new para-national profession, retained these founding class concepts, alongside attempts to establish new abstractly objective criteria. More seriously, criticism was taken to be a natural definition of literary studies, themselves defined by the specializing category (printed works of a certain quality) of literature. Thus these forms of the concepts of literature and criticism are, in the perspective of historical social development, forms of a class specialization and control of a general social practice, and of a class limitation of the questions which it might raise.

The process of the specialization of 'literature' to 'creative' or 'imaginative' works is very much more complicated. It is in part a major affirmative response, in the name of an essentially general human 'creativity', to the socially repressive and intellectually mechanical forms of a new social order: that of capitalism and especially industrial capitalism. The practical specialization of work to the wage-labour production of commodities; of 'being' to 'work' in these terms; of language to the passing of 'rational' or 'informative' messages; of social relations to functions within a systematic economic and political order: all these pressures and limits were challenged in the name of a full and liberating 'imagination' or 'creativity'. The central Romantic assertions, which depend on these concepts, have a significantly absolute range, from politics and nature to work and art. Literature acquired, in this period, a quite new resonance, but it was not yet a specialized resonance. That came later as, against the full pressures of an industrial capitalist order, the assertion became defensive and reserving where it had once been positive and absolute. In 'art' and 'literature', the essential and saving human qualities insisted, in the early phase, be 'extended'; in the later phase, 'preserved'.

Several concepts developed together. 'Art' was shifted from its sense of a general human skill to a special province, defined by 'imagination' and 'sensitivity'. 'Aesthetic', in the same period, shifted from its sense of general perception to a specialized category of the 'artistic' and the 'beautiful'. 'Fiction' and 'myth' (a new term from the early nineteenth century) might be seen from the dominant class position as 'fancies' or 'fles' but from this alter-

6. Middle-class (as distinguished from aristocratic, working-class, and unemployed, criminal, etc.).

7. "Conspicuous consumption" is a term applied by the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) to the class spending by the modern leisure class designed to enhance their status.

8. Domination; also an allusion to "cultural hegemony," a Marxist concept developed by the Italian philosopher ANTONIO GRAMSCI (1891-

1937), which refers to the manufactured consent that legitimates a dominant group and unifies a

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