

## Maxims On Literature: An Experiment

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### **Character**

Character isolated by a deed  
To engross the present and  
dominate memory.  
—Yeats, "The Circus Animals'  
Desertion"

Character is one's way of being good or evil, admirable or contemptible, or one's way of failing to be those things.

To know character is to know what to expect from a person, to know the dominant tendencies and limits of his or her behavior. Character is "that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a person chooses or avoids" (Aristotle).

The observation of character is one of the great human necessities, but it is also one of the great human pleasures.

One act of kindness does not make a saint nor one crime a criminal, but there are some actions that only a saint or a criminal could perform.

To function in the world requires many habits, but not all of them have significance for the evaluation of character.

There are no neutral categories for our moral habits, only virtues and vices. Moderation is admirable, mediocrity contemptible.

The most telling choices are often between one form of good and another, or between two evils.

Virtues and vices come in pairs—bravery and cowardice, generosity and selfishness, cruelty and kindness, honesty and deceitfulness. Each pair offers terms of judgment for a single dimension of our behavior.

Virtues and vices have characteristic affinities. Bravery and vanity enjoy each other's company; honesty and cruelty are often hard to separate.

Moral judgment is a moral activity, and our judgments themselves are subject to judgment. To put too great a value upon one's own bravery or one's own moderation is a sign of pride; to recognize the worth of others shows fairness or even generosity.

There is no simple way of connecting actions and their motives.

To judge others as good is not only to praise their actions but to assert that they perform them for the right reasons.

"What we take for virtues is often no more than a collection of diverse actions and interests which fortune or our ingenuity knows how to arrange, and it is not always out of valor and chastity that men are valiant and women chaste." – La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*

"Is not Religion a Cloak, Honesty a Pair of Shoes, worn out in the Dirt, Self-love a Surtout, Vanity a Shirt and Conscience a Pair of Breeches, which, tho' a Cover for Lewdness as well as Nastiness, is easily slipt down for the Service of both?" –Swift, A Tale of a Tub (1: 47).

We love to love and admire, and we love to hate and despise. The sharing of praise and blame, and the division of our fellow human beings into good and evil, Us and Them, is one of the constant and compelling human interests.

There are some people we love because they love the same object we do and some people we hate because they love the same object we do. There are some we love because they hate the same object we do, but there there are none we hate because they hate the same object we do.

Love and hatred can be cooperative or competitive. Hatred can be more sociable than love, love more competitive than hatred.

A bond based upon shared hatred may not be as admirable as one based upon the common love of a good thing.

Tragedy and comedy bring the audience and the author together in love. Satire brings them together in contempt. Lyrics bring them together in sympathy.

The poet Simonides mentions three sociable pleasures in his epitaph for Timocreon of Rhodes: eating much, drinking much, and speaking much ill.

We think of character as an aspect of a person. A literary character is an invented person. To invent a character is to endow the idea of a person with a particular set of qualities and set those qualities in motion just as they would be in life.

In life, character is only one part of what we can know about someone. There are other parts—what they look like, where they were born, how they earn a living. Such facts may condition character, but they need not do so in any straightforwardly predictable way. In art, however, these details can become direct signs of character because they imply a type.

The pleasures of praise and shared admiration animate the epic, the romance, the elegy, and, traditionally, the sonnet; the pleasures of contempt animate satire and burlesque.

Speaking too well or too ill of others, better or worse than they deserve, gives embarrassment unless it is done with wit.

Jokes and compliments have a common form. A joke is a witty manner of expressing contempt or disapproval. A compliment is a witty manner of expressing flattery or self-interested praise. Each is designed not only to give pleasure but also to circumvent shame.

One of the chief attractions of literature is that it allows characters to be observed more clearly and definitively than they appear most of the time in real life.

Literature presents not just good and bad people but heroes and villains, and even its mediocrities are mediocre all the way through.

The recognition of good or evil defines the meaning of our emotional responses toward admirable or contemptible characters.

It is partly because our emotions tend toward simple contraries—love and hatred, joy and sorrow—that we are so fond of dividing things and people into good and evil, and making them objects of admiration and contempt.

Conceptions of virtue differ across cultures and periods of history. Knowing how to apply them—or, more accurately, learning to experience life in terms of them—is a large part of what it means to belong to a culture or a group.

Character is revealed in many ways both in literature and in life, but action is the surest indication of character. The more important the action and the greater stakes for the one who performs it, the more reliably it reveals character.

“What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?”—Henry James

What we do under the risk of death and how we act in the moment of death reveal most clearly our good and evil, strength and weakness. Art focuses upon these moments because they are intrinsically dramatic, and they are intrinsically dramatic because they reveal character.

Death is more definitive in literature than in life. The life of a fictional character cannot simply come to an end.

Death is a spectacle of good and evil. As Walter Benjamin put it, “Death is the guarantee of all that the storyteller can tell.”

In the twentieth century, literature often turned away from the world of action toward the inner workings of the psyche. E. M. Forster quotes Aristotle: “All human happiness and misery take the form of action.” He goes on to declare that “We know better. We believe that happiness and misery exist in the secret life, which each of us leads privately and to which (in his character) the novelist has access. And by the secret life we mean the life for which there is no external evidence, not, as is vulgarly supposed, that which is revealed by a chance word or a sigh. A chance word or a sigh are just as much evidence as a speech or a murder: the life they reveal ceases to be secret and enters the realm of action.” —*Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), 83.

In spite of his preference for the “secret life,” Forster is among the purest of moralists, and his characters die most characteristically.

Our ways of thinking, including our moral convictions, are part of our character. The character of of an idealist, for instance, is different from that of a cynic.

The moral significance of people's ways of thinking must be judged in the light of their actions. This includes the moral significance of their moral attitudes. A cynic may behave as only an idealist would demand: an idealist may behave as a only cynic would expect.

Every choice we make is a performance of character and therefore, in a sense, exemplary. We never put on an article of clothing merely for practical purposes without at the same time declaring that it is good to dress this way.

It is not only that "the apparel oft proclaims the man," as Polonius has it, but that, through his apparel, the man oft proclaims himself. Women too proclaim themselves, but in a different idiom.

Speech is only the most self-conscious dimension of self-presentation.

Everything we say says something about us, and that is often part of why we say it. Everything we do says something about us, and that is often part of why we do it. Psychologists call this "impression management."

Language, like clothing, expresses the impulses of modesty and display, concealment and revelation. Words help us both to reveal and to conceal our thoughts.

The harmony between what we do, the way we do it, and what both of them say about us comprises what we call style.

In real life, the hero and the coward may never be tested, the liar and the hypocrite never exposed, and a gun shown in the first act need not be fired in the third. Literature is clearer than life because it is fairer than life. It tends to paint everything, sooner or later, in its truest colors.

In literature, character almost always works by contrast: Antigone and Ismene, Quixote and Sancho, Elizabeth and Jane, Dedalus and Bloom.

Heroes and villains depend upon each other. The extremity of evil evokes the extremity of good.

The intellectual character also makes its pairings: the idealist and the cynic can depend upon each other as much as the bully and the coward.

“Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvelous, intoxicating. Therefore ‘imaginary literature’ is either boring or immoral (or a mixture of both). It only escapes from this alternative if in some way it passes over to the side of reality through the power of art—and only genius can do that.” –Simone Weil

Character can be composed of a single trait or habit; it can be what was known in the Renaissance as a humour character or, in E. M. Forster’s phrase, a flat character. Some of the greatest writers, such as Dickens and Ben Jonson, specialize in them.

Flat characters have more impact than round, multi-dimensional characters because we know more of what there is to know about them than we do with round characters, and we know it all at once. We know Mr. Micawber in Dickens’s David Copperfield better than we know Marcel in Remembrance of Things Past, even though Mr. Micawber only periodically “turns up” and always says the same things while Marcel tells us of his variegated thoughts, feelings, and experiences for three thousand pages.

It is not only their mechanical quality but the fact that we know them all the way through that makes flat characters intrinsically comic.

Flat characters are always real but, like real people, they can become tiresome. Round characters are less predictable, but this means we may not be sure why we should care about them.

Temperament is not the same as character. It refers to our naturally given endowment of socially significant traits of behavior. Along with experience, it is one of the raw materials from which character is made.

Personality is the way we present ourselves to others. The root of the word, persona, means mask. Personality is the mask or masks we assume in taking up our various roles; or, in the words of a highly self-conscious poet, it is “To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet.”

Personality lies between temperament and mere posing. It is that part of one's temperament one has learned to show. It is neither entirely natural nor entirely artificial.

As a certain Frenchman put it, "It is our desire to be natural that keeps us from being so." –Duc de la Rochefoucauld, Maxims

To know my personality is to know what it would be like to spend time with me in a room—to find me charming, irritating, lively, dull, witty, goofy, morose, soothing, menacing, engaging, or cantankerous.<sup>1</sup>

Character is adjectival, personality is adverbial. To be kind is a matter of character, to be kindly a matter of personality.

Immortality fixes character more firmly than mortality. The gods never change. At the same time, immortal life, at least among the Greeks, is less precious than human life because it cannot be destroyed.

Heracleitus tells us that "Character is fate." Or should it be "Fate is character"?

In literature, character is an element of the composition, part of a structure of words. To understand literary characters is to understand what the author meant in depicting them, to grasp his or her intent in the same way we grasp the intent of each word, paragraph, or scene of the work. As an aristocratic Russian novelist put it, characters are the author's "galley slaves" (Nabokov). How we would judge them in our own world or according to our own lights is not immediately important for interpreting the story.

The obstacles to knowing one's own character are not entirely the same as the obstacles to knowing other people's characters.

The most difficult character to fathom may be one's own.

It takes imagination to understand anybody's character.

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<sup>1</sup>. Modern psychologists also use *personality* to mean temperament. Personality as they describe it is partly about one's dispositions towards others (hostile or friendly, introverted or extraverted), partly about larger issues of what would normally be called character (neurotic or stable), and partly about other aspects of temperament (such as receptiveness to new experiences) that seem to be harder to plot in terms of personality or character. To talk in terms of personality in this sense is to see all of these things in pre-moral rather than in moral terms.

Some characters escape from the authors who invented them and from the worlds that originally held them—Hamlet, Don Juan, Don Quixote, Scrooge.

“Schopenhauer has analysed the pessimism that characterises modern thought, but Hamlet invented it. The world has become sad because a puppet was once melancholy.”

—Oscar Wilde, The Decay of Lying

Only entities that choose and act possess habits of choice and action. It belongs, therefore, properly to individuals to have a character. Groups defined by accidental similarities do not have a character in common unless they deliberately and habitually act in common.

Institutions can have a character; races and peoples do not except in the sense that their behavior may be shaped in a general way by the conditions under which they live. Members of an ethnic group or a people may share attitudes and opinions, practices and beliefs, but they will show a wide range of diversity in living them out.

Assigning a single character to a group of people is a common form of prejudice.

Whether or not collective entities like races or nations have a character in the proper sense, it is certain that they can be a character, which is to say, that they can become the protagonists of a collective narrative. As Renan, one of the most nineteenth-century of Frenchmen, made us aware, a nation is constituted by shared memory and forgetfulness, common truths and necessary errors.

One's identity is composed of the group of socially significant categories into which one falls.

Some identities are a matter of choice and some not. Some of them are permanent or unavoidable, others only last while we acknowledge them.

Some identities are broader than others. To be a woman or a member of the House of Windsor is more important, and in a wider range of circumstances, than to be an amateur bagpiper or cigar aficionado.

Some aspects of our identity are deeper, more definitive psychologically, than others. We can imagine it being said of someone

that “His identity as a stamp collector was more important to him than his status as the most influential politician of his day.”

Some identities correspond with roles in a larger narrative, a story of spiritual salvation or social progress, economic development, the overcoming of prejudice, or the triumph of the master race.

After many attempts, Freud invented a useful phrase—“the narcissism of small differences.” It suggests our eagerness to define ourselves and each other along the lines of trivial distinction—accent, style, shade of skin, social club, pedigree, or which end of the egg we break in the morning.

The self is a philosophical concept. Its use derives from the fact that, even though everything we know is “in” our minds, some of the things we know seem to belong to us more properly (more intimately, more indissolubly) than others.

The self is what stands out as ours in contrast with the external world, which is not ours in the same sense. The self looks out from the first-person point of view and feels its own possessions—my sensations, my emotions, my beliefs, my desires, my choices, my intentions, my moods.

It is possible to think, along with Hinduism and Buddhism, that the self is an illusion, a projection of our desires, or to believe, along with Hume and perhaps Wittgenstein, that the self is only a philosopher’s mistake.

Gilbert Ryle pointed out that, when we try to think of the self that is thinking of other things, we make it one of those things and lose sight of the self that is now doing the thinking. In this account, the self eludes our attempt to grasp it. It is always one step ahead of us.

It may be only when we see ourselves as others see us that the self becomes definite.

The self is also what holds present and future together and makes me the same person tomorrow that I am today. When I explain myself, it is based upon the knowledge of my past self. When I promise, I commit my future self. When I act, I gather up what I have learned from my past into the present moment in order to determine my

future. Without a notion of the self, it is hard to make sense of concepts like rationality, freedom, and responsibility.

One of the clearest uses of self is in self-renunciation or self-restraint, the curbing of the desires that seem natural to us.

A role is an established way of accomplishing, taking part in, or being the occasion for the accomplishment of some purpose—to be a doctor, a patient, a mother, a child, a comedian, a priest, a host, a guest.

Roles constrain and make possible.

We judge people's characters and behavior based upon upon the roles they have assumed.

Status is the value that society assigns to the players of social roles. It can be apportioned according to how well one plays one's role and may determine whether or not one is entitled to play it at all.

We behave differently in the role of a judge than in the role of a friend, in the role of a doctor than in the role of a mourner. We also misbehave differently in those roles.

Roles are pragmatic but they also bear social significance. They convey status.

To be a good mother or a good friend, a good physician or a good athlete, requires in each case a specific set of virtues and talents. One can be a good biologist but a poor gardener, a good musician but a poor listener.

In sacred writings, the roles played by supernatural beings are more closely bound to their natures than among mortals.

The history of culture can be understood in terms of typical roles and their changing fortunes. Greco-Roman culture had a set of key characters: the warrior, the king, the queen, the priest, the poet, the philosopher, the slave. Medieval culture had a somewhat different cast: the saint, the bishop, the hermit, the monk, the abbess, the knight, the merchant, the alchemist, the peasant, the serf. Modern culture has been personified by the scientist, the politician, the lawyer, the gentleman, the minister of state, the businessman, the legislator,

the revolutionary, the bureaucrat, the professor, the engineer, the entrepreneur, the artist, the journalist, the doctor, the therapist.

Not everyone can play every role, but the choice of roles reveals character.

We talk about "playing a role" in life just as in the theater. The theatrical metaphor is helpful, for when we "take up" a role in life, so to speak, we frequently adapt our behavior in a more general way than the role pragmatically demands. We do this to help others understand the role we are playing and to suggest we have the qualities to play it. So friendship has its rituals, relations between the sexes a precise choreography, and every profession its costumes and props.

The most fundamental significance of role lies in its relation to purpose or function, so that we can ask, even of an inanimate object, what role did it play in a certain event or what role does it play in the functioning of a machine.

The play element of our roles depends ultimately upon the work they accomplish, the theatrical element upon the functional aspect of role.

To understand and judge Achilles we must understand what it means to be a warrior as Homer understood it; to understand and judge Frederick Henry, the hero of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, we must understand what it means to be a warrior as Ernest Hemingway understood it. Frederick Henry is no Achilles: Achilles is no Frederick Henry.

To understand the cowardice of the Cowardly Lion, we must know what is normally expected of lions.

It is not easy to say what makes a good person because it is not easy to say what a person is for. Outside the context of a specific role, the word good remains to be defined, leaving endless room for dispute. But is it easy to say what makes a good doctor or a good parent. Here we seem to enter the realm of simple fact. The difference is that now we have a role in view, a specific function, which can be accomplished well or ill.

Some of our moral descriptions, like good and evil, can be applied to people apart from their actions and seem to require theoretical

background. But if we have reason to call a person cruel, there is little further need to argue about whether he is good or bad.

One of the primary functions of didactic narrative is to show us how descriptions like good and evil connect with descriptions like kind and cruel.

It is revealing about some of our aesthetic terms that they are more like kind and cruel than they are like good and bad. It makes no sense to say that a joke was funny but not a good joke, or a play was tragic but not a good play.

### **Narrative and Story**

"Nothing happens to those  
who cannot tell stories."

--Henry James

A narrative is a verbally presented sequence of events showing human actions along with their intentions and results.

Actions without intentions are meaningless. Intentions without actions are pointless. Both meaning and point are required.

Narratives are a universal part of everyday life. Their value is practical, and they affect us largely through the consequences of the events they relate.

Most everyday narratives tell how events took their normal course, their chief use being to convey information. Things become more interesting, though, as soon as something goes wrong. Information that violates our normal expectations forces us to alter those expectations.

That which departs from the ordinary can be more important for understanding the ordinary than that which does not.

Narratives answer the questions Who? did What? to Whom? When? Where? Why? and How? The brevity of these simple interrogatives indicates how frequent and indispensable they are.

All languages have special forms (grammatical case) for marking out the doer of an action, its object, the recipient, and the instrument. The

telling of stories has shaped the formation of language itself. It is a storytelling instrument.

Not all narratives deserve to be called stories.

A story is a narrative that engages us whether or not we are practically affected by the results.

The question mark is a sign of interest, and all stories can be considered the answer to some question, even if it is a question that emerges from within the frame of the narrative itself.

A small number of subjects tend to hold our attention in stories:

the doings of the great (heroes, saints, or gods)—their excellence, force, fortune, and glory;

the pursuit, attainment of, or loss of love;

the endurance of disaster—plague, slaughter, defeat, conquest, upheaval, apocalypse;

crime and punishment;

sin and redemption.

When the setting of a story reaches a cosmic or national scale, we call it a myth.

Myths make a claim to historical truth, whereas literary art need not.

To understand the history of literature is to understand its changing relation to other forms of narrative.

Storytelling is about the consequences of human error. What engages our attention in stories is how and why things went wrong and what resulted.

In comedy, we laugh at the amusing effects of more-or-less harmless error upon people like ourselves or worse.

In tragedy, we enjoy watching the most painful possible effects of error upon the best people.

In epic, we see the effects of error among great events.

In satire, we see people being treated the way they deserve on account of their foibles and errors.

Closure is the way a narrative achieves completeness by satisfying the interest it aroused.

Closure in narrative often occurs by means of a repetition or restoration of an earlier state of affairs that allows us to measure the distance traversed by the plot. Or closure can be achieved when it is shown that an earlier state of affairs will never be restored. Finally, closure can arrive when the problems that motivated the beginning of the story are resolved.

The internal consistency of the work of art is more important to its success than the plausibility of the vision it portrays.

In the world of the play, "Denmark's a prison" and Hamlet's death is almost unbearable, but in the theater his survival would be an embarrassment. We do not want Hamlet to die and we do not want him to live. (This is not true of Cordelia. Cordelia could have been spared.)

In tragedy, our wishes as ethical beings diverge from our wishes as spectators, whereas in comedy they eventually coincide.

Some narratives—fairy tales, for instance—can be utterly implausible yet sustain our interest. They ask us for a special leap of imagination, but they ask for it all at once. Once we have made the leap, we find ourselves in a consistent world, with the constraints of logic most rigorously in force.

The logic of fairy tales is simpler and more rigorous than that of realistic fiction. Like games, fairy tales depend upon their self-established rules. Both fairy tales and games begin with a gesture of freedom from the ordinary world and end with a demonstration of internal necessity.

Realism in narrative applies to stories that aim not only to be internally consistent but plausible. They appeal to our everyday sense of what is plausible and what it not. They are “like” the truth, have “verisimilitude.” But our everyday sense of what is plausible is always changing.

Concepts like “realism” depend upon a contrast with “imagination” that became possible only when imagination had been devalued. Homer is neither a realist nor a fantasist, but a poet who sings of the truth.

The conventions of realism, such as the omniscient narrator, are often the most implausible ones.

Philosophers and linguists have argued that “fiction” is a particular kind of “speech act.” They set fiction-making among the other typical conversational gestures—asserting, questioning, demanding, promising, and so on. The fictive speech act differs from others, according to this view, in that the speaker is not bound by the commitments to truth, appropriateness, or sincerity that allow other speech acts to function.

The problem with the speech-act theory applied to fiction is that it is plausible to think of asserting, questioning, demanding, and promising as universal, specially marked gestures of conversation. Every language permits them. Each has clear conditions of satisfaction—an assertion is satisfied by the facts that make it true, a question by an attempt to answer the question, a demand by an action demanded, a promise by a commitment that will constrain future behavior. But we do not find a single, universal notion of storytelling that absolves the teller of all the constraints of sincerity or provides conditions of satisfaction. Most storytelling is constrained by the need for accuracy, sincerity, truth, and so on. Fiction-making as a notion has much narrower cultural coordinates than questioning, promising, or storytelling in general.

Different genres have different degrees of density for their effects. Satire must work minute by minute to keep up amused, while tragedy can work slowly and inevitably toward its end.

### **Content and Form**

In premodern art, the various literary forms were developed to be the vehicles of their characteristic content. The forms of epic, for instance,

was developed as a literary expression of heroic culture. The general question of the relationship between form and content could not seriously arise, only how well the form had succeeded in doing justice to the content of a particular work.

When the original content of a literary genre has been historically superceded, its form seems to make a problematic demand for content.

Insofar as literary practice involves the imitation of existing literary forms, form seems to precede subject matter.

### **Tone**

To recognize the tone of a person's speech is often to relate it to the role or setting with which it is associated: an avuncular tone, a clinical tone, a gentlemanly tone, a patronizing tone, a preacherly tone, a tone of maternal solicitude or professional detachment.

### **Class/Race/Gender**

"A man's character is his gift to himself, but his status is assigned to him by chance."

--Macrobius, Saturnalia 1.11.10

Class, gender, and race have an important effect upon the range of roles that are available to individuals, the meaning of those roles, and often the way they are performed. They are always significant in shaping and understanding character, and each of them has an effect upon the meaning of the others.

Because it is typically in question as to who should be entitled to play each role that society offers, literary characters often become representative of their race, gender, or class.

### **Literary Criticism**

Literary criticism confronts three essential and often interlocking tasks: interpretation, evaluation, and explanation.

Philosophy deals with what is general, history with what is particular, while poetry, Aristotle tells us, stands in between. It is more speculative and general, and therefore more meaningful, than history; it is more concrete and immediate, and therefore more alive, than philosophy. We must remember, of course, that the meaningfulness of poetry depends upon the vision of the poet and its liveliness is partly borrowed from life.

Nature delivers a “brazen” world, Sir Philip Sidney says, “the Poets only deliver a golden.”

All schemes of literary interpretation succeed in producing coherent readings. No text can resist them. Interpretive schemes must be judged, therefore, not on the plausibility of the readings they provide but on the plausibility of their theoretical premises.

Understanding a literary work involves the understanding of five aspects—the type of work, the maker, the materials of which it is made, its meaning, and its purpose.

The type of work is its genre—tragedy, comedy, epic, lyric, satire, novel, and so on. Each of these aims at distinctive effects, makes different demands upon the author and the audience, and evokes different expectations. All forms of criticism take account of genre, not merely formalist approaches, because genre provides a global set of signals for the interpretation of the work.

The maker is the person who brings the work into being, but this can be done in a myriad of ways—with the help of a muse or a word processor. The purpose of authorship varies similarly, from divine instruction to les plaisirs du texte. Authorship is a social role, and it differs radically from culture to culture and epoch to epoch. The history of literature is in large part the history of changing conceptions of writing and the author.

The material of the literary work is, of course, language, not language considered in the whole but in the substance of a particular utterance. The text is the prompt that allows us to reconstruct that utterance and comprehend it in its original context. Since texts from the premodern era rarely come to us perfectly intact, we are often left to reconstruct them, at least in part, on the basis of what the author should have meant in the context he should have had in mind.

Great literary critics are fewer than great poets, and most of them are drawn from the ranks of the latter.

### **Genre**

Every genre has its day, a day in which its generic requirements seem natural and true. When the world is full of dragons and demons, or escaped Nazis and Soviet spies, the romance and the thriller can flourish. When a people believes in the power of its gods and the greatness of its heroes, the epic is possible. When a people is throwing off gods and heroes, satire will have its day.

Romance requires a hero—and a hero requires an enemy or obstacle to be overcome.

Tragedy requires a principle of necessity—not an external enemy but an external organizing force.

Comedy requires a principle of closure—a secure relation between an external state of society and an inner state of happiness.

Lyric demands a motive, a reason to speak passionately.

It is impossible to ignore the ethical dimension of art, for what is art but the spectacle of happiness and unhappiness, good and evil?

Melville, having written a “wicked book,” wrote that he felt as “spotless a lamb.” *Moby-Dick* is evil, but this evil is the mask of a secret wish—that there be supernatural things. The terror and destructiveness of the whale mask its character as the fulfillment of a wish.

Genetic

Linguistic

Moral

The evaluation of a literary work depends upon achieving a balanced view of its intellectual substance and its imaginative value. No matter how important the ideas a work may express, without imaginative force it will fail to engage. But no quantity of imaginative force can animate ideas that are implausible, shallow, or repugnant.

## Truth and Knowledge

Of the everyday words we use with confidence, truth is one of the most difficult to define. Some philosophers have even claimed we should not try to define it, that it is simple and primitive—that we can no more define truth than we can lift up the foundation stone of a building to see what is underneath it without bringing the whole structure down.

We cannot say that there is no truth, for the moment we say so, we assert a truth and therefore contradict ourselves. As Quine said of relativism, which is one form of truth-denial, "If you state it you rise above it. If you rise above it you must give it up."

The sentence "There is no truth" cannot be considered true any more than the sentence "What you are reading is not a sentence" can be considered true, or if you were to turn to the person next to you and say "I am not speaking now." In all of these cases, the sentence in question provides an invalidating counter-example to its own assertion.

The fact that we cannot say there is no truth does not mean that we have the truth or that there is any such thing as truth. All it means is that we cannot say there is no truth without contradicting ourselves.

Without the truth we cannot talk, nor can we remain significantly silent, indicating that we do not know, for that would only be another way of being faithful to the truth. And if we try just going on our merry way. . . .

Reasoning works by moving from premises to conclusions, and the certainty with which we affirm conclusions depends upon the certainty with which we affirm their premises. But our first premises, our most primitive assumptions, cannot be proven, for to prove them would mean to show that they are based upon earlier premises, and then they would no longer be primitive. New first premises would come into being and the whole problem would recur to infinity. We cannot prove our first premises. They rest upon a sense of probability or plausibility for which there is no context or standard of comparison.

The ancient skeptics expressed the same thought in a different way. To recognize the truth requires a criterion. But if we have a criterion of truth, what is its criterion? Again we have an infinite regress.

We cannot say that there is no truth, and we cannot know for certain that we have it.

As Blaise Pascal put it, "We have an incapacity for proof, insurmountable by all dogmatism. We have an idea of truth, invincible to all skepticism."<sup>2</sup> The difference between the believer and the skeptic may amount to nothing more than the decision as to which of these two sentences should be saved for the end.

### Truth and Ideology

"Reason itself is true and just, but the Reason of every particular Man is weak and wavering, perpetually swayed and turned by his Interests, his Passions, and his Vices."<sup>3</sup>

--Swift

Ideology is a term of Marxian analysis. It refers to the worldview of a person or class of persons considered as an expression of their needs and interests. Ideologies present beliefs that appear to support the contingent interests of a particular class as if they were natural, necessary, good, and true for everyone.

Ideology may be erroneous, but it need not be entirely so. The application of the term points not toward the truth-value of an idea but toward its function.

Ideology is always someone else's way of thinking.

As Paul Ricoeur pointed out, since the term ideology was invented in the eighteenth century, it has constantly expanded its scope. First it stood in opposition to science, but then science came to be viewed by some as an ideology. When ideology becomes a synonym for thought, a general alienation has been reached.

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<sup>2</sup>. "395—Instinct, reason." *Pensées*, #.

<sup>3</sup>. Herbert Davis, ed., *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1939), 9: 166.

Ideology is meaningful only in contrast with truth. Its critical value is to juxtapose what is accepted as true for the benefit of those in power with what is actually true. For this reason, authors like Michel Foucault who want to get rid of the concept of truth throw out ideology as well, in favor of an undifferentiating notion of power.

If asked Why do you hold a certain belief, X ? you might give the following answers. You might say you believe X because

- 1) everyone you know believes X; or
- 2) your parents believe Y, the contrary of X; or
- 3) your politico-socio-sexual profile makes belief of X irresistible; or
- 4) if you didn't believe X, you wouldn't be able to continue in your profession; or, finally,
- 5) other beliefs you hold true, A, B, C, Q, R, & S, taken together entail X or at least make X much more probable than other competing beliefs you might hold about the subject addressed by X.

These are all answers to the question "Why do you believe X?" taking it to mean "What are the causes of your belief in X?" It is important to see that these explanations of the cause of your belief in X do not exclude one another. In fact, it may take more than one of these causes to sustain your belief in X.

To say that you believe X only because of "(2) your parents believed Y" is to say that your belief is accidental. If your parents had believed X, you would presumably have believed Y instead, so the content of the beliefs makes no difference. The same is true of "(1) everyone you know believes X." There may be a substantial reason why everyone you know believes X, but you haven't offered it as the reason you believe X. Your reason is that they believe it, whatever their reasons may be.

To say that you believe X only because of (3) or (4), sustaining your personality or your professional outlook, is to appeal, in the first case, to psychology or, in the second, to ideology. You are explaining your belief on the grounds of its usefulness, not on account of its truth.

Numbers 1-4 tell us only about why you happen to believe X. They do not tell us anything about whether or not we—that is to say, anyone else but you—should believe it.

How we regard number (5), the list of other beliefs that entail X or make it a likely candidate for belief, depends upon how we evaluate the other beliefs upon which X depends. If we agree that A, B, C, Q, R, & S are true, and that together they entail X or make it probable, then we must accept X as true or probable. They not only tell us the causes of your belief in X but give us reasons for believing it. If they are untrue, either innocent mistakes or ideologically motivated, then we have no reason to believe X.

Reasons for belief are also causes of belief, but not all causes of belief are reasons for belief. Accidental and ideological causes (1-4) do not offer reasons for belief, only explanations of it.

The question “Why do you believe X?” is, we can now see, ambiguous. It can be taken to mean “What are the causes of your believing X?” In that case all the answers, 1-5, will have explanatory value. Or it can be taken to mean “What are the reasons for your belief of X?” In that case only (5) will suffice. Both questions can be answered successfully, only they are different questions.

To explain beliefs and the behavior that stems from them entirely in terms of accidental and ideological causes (1-4) is to see the people who hold them as nothing more than whimsical automatons or passive beings deluded by self-interest. To explain beliefs and the behavior that stems from them entirely in terms of reasons (5) is to make the people who hold them into perfectly free and rational agents, uninfluenced by their social surroundings or psychological needs. Both ways of thinking are exaggerations. Real understanding of the thinking of others and of our own demands that we avoid both the cynicism of the first and the naiveté of the second.

### **Author and Work**

“The words of a dead man are modified  
In the guts of the living.”

—W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W.  
B. Yeats”

Communication always involves guesswork. The speaker makes a guess as to how the audience will interpret the words being spoken, and the audience makes a guess as to what the speaker expects it to understand. Anticipation works from both sides, and because both sides are aiming at convergence upon a single meaning or set of meanings, they largely succeed.

To understand the meaning of a literary work, or any other act of communication, is to recover what the author or speaker intended the audience to understand. It is to experience a meeting of minds.

The interplay of anticipations could be thought to constitute a vicious regress—my guess about your guess about my guess about your guess ad infinitum. The fact, however, that the speaker has been able to make an actual utterance, rather than stalling in hypothetical regress, guarantees that the process of interpretation that he or she anticipates will also be limited. And the levels of meta-consciousness beyond the speaker's and listener's awareness of each other's intention, the consciousness that they are aiming to understand the anticipation of an anticipation, add no further elements to the context. The listener applies to the speaker's words his notion of what context the speaker is assuming he will apply: the speaker anticipates the listener's guess about what the context will be and tries to satisfy it.

Even when we are writing for ourselves, as in a diary, we must do everything we can to anticipate how, in the future, we will construe the words we are choosing now. We can talk to ourselves as ourselves, but we are always writing for another.

It is not the instability of the signifying system that produces the uncertainties of interpretation, but the fact that there is no signifying system, only guesses about guesses.

Communication is uncertain, but it is not indeterminate. There is a fact of the matter about what the author expected his audience to understand.

By virtue of an old metaphor, we put our thoughts into words and we get meaning out of words. This metaphor regards LANGUAGE AS A CONTAINER. It has its value, but it is often more appropriate to view language as a set of clues, nudges, or hints because the speaker is so often assuming a wide range of tacit or background knowledge that the audience will bring into play to interpret the message.

Lying demands a successful act of communication. The speaker must succeed in conveying a meaningful assertion to the listener, correctly anticipating how he or she will understand it, only the assertion is false. The liar's mind is elsewhere.

A community of liars could not communicate with each other because they would lose the confidence to anticipate each other's intentions. Even their power to lie would be undermined.

A competent author understands both subject he writes about and the audience for which he writes.

The farther we get from the original scene of an utterance or the original presentation of a literary work, the more difficult our guesswork becomes.

Authors can also communicate with their audiences by surprising them—by disconfirming their expectations and making them aware of them. It must be done, however, in a way that the audience can recognize as being intended by the author. An unintentional surprise is the mark of incompetence.

Words derive their meanings from the roles they play in sentences. Dictionaries list the meanings words tend to have in the standard usage of a language. These meanings are multiple because they have been detached from sentences and the sense-fixing intentions of speakers. The number of meanings a word can have in a language is theoretically unlimited; the number it can have in a sentence is fixed by the intention of the speaker.

In the infinite library imagined by Borges (in "The Library of Babel"), all possible books exist, including everyone's biography, the book of all books, and the book that gives the truth about the Library, which is the world. This library is the physical incarnation of the total potential of language. But it is only potential. To find the truth in any book of the Library, one must be able to exclude every other book that differs from it by one letter, by two, by three, and so on to the last page. In other words, to read a book in this library is the same as to write one, only the physical task is far more demanding, each difference of a letter being represented by an entire book that must be located among the infinite supply. Choosing one's own letters is easier, and so the epigraph: "By this art you may contemplate the variations of the 23 letters. . . ."

To utter a sentence is to exclude all the other possible sentences one could have uttered, and this requires a speaker. To write a book is to exclude all the other possible books one could have written, and this requires an author.

Detached from a speaker, any word or sentence can mean anything, and so it means nothing. It is the individual utterances of speakers and authors that confer meaning.

In a physical sense, literary works are composed of sounds in air, marks on paper, pixels on a screen, bytes on a disk, etc., but the fundamental unit of a work's structure of meaning is the sentence.

To understand the structure of a thing is to identify its parts and how they are related. A literary work is a complex structure built out of meanings.

We learn nothing about the meaning or effect of a literary sentence by being told that the author used a certain word without reference to its function in a sentence. It is misleading, for example, to say the fact that an author uses the word gloom shows her intention to produce gloom in the reader, when she might just as well have used the word gloom to mark the end of series of gloomy days, or merely mentioned gloom as being irrelevant to the day in question—"No one could have called this a day of gloom."

To characterize the meaning or effect of a word one must identify the role it plays in the sentence in question—to say that the author calls this a day of gloom, that she describes it as such, that she implies or hints it is gloomy, or rules out the possibility that it is so.

A literary work is not a single meaning or message, but a structure of meanings.

To understand a literary work is not to grasp a single meaning but to understand the whole in a way that does justice to its parts, and the parts in a way that does justice to the whole.

The movement from part to whole and back again is sometimes called the hermeneutic circle, with the implication that it may never end; but it does end, at least for an individual reader at a particular time. It ends when the movement ceases to produce further understanding, when all the guesswork that the author has provided for the reader seems, for now, to be done.

Grasping the intention of the author does not mean getting in touch with his total psychology. This is the so-called "intentional fallacy." It should be called the biographical or psychological fallacy.

The storyteller can also be a character, a part of the performance that is a literary work.

We may love or hate the characters in a literary work, but it is the author with whom we agree or disagree.

The farther away we stand from authors in cultural terms, the more our differences with them become matters of worldview and less of individual choice, the more of thought and less of character.

Like his original audience, we have to guess what Homer expected that audience to grasp. It was easier for them to do so than it is for us because they were the precisely the audience he had in mind, whereas we have to imagine ourselves into their point of view.

Homer's gods were an inescapable reality of his life, whereas for us they are imaginary characters. Reading The Iliad is thus different for us from what hearing it must have been for its original audience, but the meaning we seek from The Iliad is still precisely the one Homer meant to convey to his contemporaries.

The meaning of a literary work never changes because it depends upon what the author anticipated as the reaction of an original audience. Works as a whole, however, do in a manner of speaking change their meaning in the sense that they come to mean different things for later audiences. More properly, their significance or relevance changes depending upon the audience's changing relations with the work, its creator, and the world that produced them. (Cf. Hirsch)

Grasping meaning is a matter of comprehension, whereas grasping significance is a matter of reflection and criticism.

The fact that a work from a distant culture continues to engage our emotions furnishes the best proof that we more or less understand it.

It is not only changes in thinking that separate us from literary works of the past but changes in all the ways we can relate to their original production. When The Iliad was first sung, it was one epic poem

among others, perhaps one of many that a particular poet, rendering a long tradition, had the capacity to sing on a particular occasion or set of occasions. It provided a magnificent evocation of events in what was already a lost world. At some point, it was written down and eventually became one of two surviving archaic Greek epics, replacing all others and outlasting the culture whose character it originally expressed. One person's rendition of the story became the single token of a world now doubly lost—beyond living and beyond singing. Possession of The Iliad fell to the rhapsode, a mere actor reciting from memory. For the Greeks of the classical period, it became, along with The Odyssey, the canonical source of information about the Olympian gods and about everything distinctively Greek. Then it survived the Olympians to be taken over by worshippers of new gods who used it for new purposes. Imitations transformed it into the canonical example of a literary genre. In our century, more than two and a half millennia after its original invention, The Iliad appears in literature classes among the monuments of other past cultures—a great range of fixed, untouchable, ever-receding peaks. In order to do it justice, we must attempt to grasp the contingent quality it must have had in the minds of those original listeners for whom it was neither monumental nor inevitable but only one particular, fragile, and surprising expression of what its maker thought and felt.

Time can imperil the intended meaning of a work but enhance its significance.

The separation of a work from the sphere of its original contingencies lends the impression of necessity. So it is odd to think of Virgil's last wish, "Burn The Aeneid," which at that point could almost have existed as a single physical object.

Time can enhance the artistic necessity of a work but undermine its intellectual authority.

The further away things get from us in cultural terms, the wider becomes the category of the aesthetic, the narrower and more abstract the category of truth.

The change in the significance of literary works over time is only a special case of the way time alters the significance of all human actions and, sometimes, of the intentions behind them.

Books suffer a fate as various as that of human beings, and we have a vocabulary to describe their afterlife and ethical substance nearly as

rich as the one we use to express the fates of human agents. Books spring from the coils of individual minds, are transcribed by single hands, only later to be compiled, copied, composited, redacted, revised, retracted, inscribed on papyrus or vellum, memorized, canonized, circulated, published, bound in hard-back or in soft-cover, bought and sold, interpreted, contested, protested, reinterpreted, allegorized, annotated, illustrated, applied, attacked and defended, quoted and misquoted (in and out of context), bowdlerized, abridged, expunged, vilified, anathematized, demystified, Indexed, fatwa'd, burnt, assigned to students, forgotten, retrieved, down-loaded, googled....

Vulgarity is the conception of class status marked by differences in understanding or consciousness. It is a rare work that does not divide its proper audience from the vulgar.

Vulgarity is a phenomenon of urban culture. We do not see it in the Hebrew Bible or in Homer. Thersites, for example, is inferior to the heroes in the Greek army but he is not vulgar. He speaks as well as Achilles, which is one of the reasons Odysseus must beat him down with a scepter. In Homer, the warrior has the same mental culture as his slave.

The structure of intended meanings invested in the work by its author provides us with an object of contemplation, and the set of intended effects invested in the work gives us an experience to go with it. Once we have acquired this object and experienced these effects, there is no reason why we may not come to understand them differently from the author. It is even possible that we understand them better than the author, in the same way that, in some situations, we think we understand other people better than they understand themselves.

In the course of a conversation or a lecture, we can pause and say, Now this is my main point. In doing so, we stand aside from the flow of our utterances to establish a hierarchy among them. We set this one above the others and make it the key. This hierarchy is revisable, since later we may stand aside again and revoke our earlier word, but for now it is fixed. A work of literature, by contrast, is one long utterance, no matter how many sentences or other divisions it contains. Its author can make a show of standing aside and offering a key word, but this gesture cannot stand outside the work.

The need to interpret a literary work as a whole provides special difficulties of interpretation.

## **Diction and Word Choice**

Aristotle is profound when he observes that style is a battle between clarity and meanness. In all phases of art, we choose constantly between the accessible and the impressive, between the matter and the manner.

Diction is character and attitude expressed in the choice of words. When we analyze diction, we consider what this choice of words accomplishes or reveals as opposed to others that might have expressed roughly the same thing.

Diction can be poetic or technical, formal or informal, elevated or colloquial or vulgar. To characterize diction is to identify the setting in which a given choice of words would be at home. When Don Quixote admonishes Sancho to say "eruct" instead of "belch," he is attempting to give him a lesson in diction. What he is saying is that "belch" is at home among humble peasants but not among the squires of distinguished knights-errant, who should show their breeding by confining themselves to a more refined vocabulary.

## **Metaphor and Simile**

What would we be without the sexual myth,  
the human reverie, or poem of death?  
Castratos of moonmash. Life consists  
of propositions about life.  
—Wallace Stevens, "Men Made Out of Words"

Our language is a great coral reef made of the skeletons of dead metaphors.

We take our major metaphors from areas of experience that are intense, richly structured, dramatic, and given to the clear discrimination of values: the journey, the battle, ascent and decline, the storm, disease, the play, the game.

She got a slow start in life, but though she had to battle every step of the way, she was lucky in her most important moves and, even when knocked off course, she always kept her eye on the goal, so at the end

of the day she had outdistanced all of her rivals and found herself at the very top of the heap.

As Aristotle observes, we take a natural pleasure in imitation, mimesis. Metaphor and simile show this tendency in one of its purest forms.

Imitations of things we fear or hate give us as much pleasure as imitations of things we love, and so with metaphor.

Metaphor is a means of varying the surface of the text and merging imaginative terrains. The Iliad takes place on the windy plains of Troy, but its similes return us again and again to the thickly wooded mountain landscape of Greece.

Metaphor can be a way of focusing on the heart of the matter or a way of amplifying it, sustaining the reader's attention on a key point. It offers a strategic instrument of delay and can be used to obfuscate as well as to communicate. It can be used with Baconian precision or with Jamesian evasiveness.

"The Lord who owns the oracle at Delphi neither speaks nor hides the meaning, but indicates it by a sign." –Herakleitos (Diels-Kranz fragment 93).

Metaphor, along with its honest cousin, simile, is a signature of the author. In works where the author's activity is concealed in favor of a blank narration or a character's point of view, metaphor is modest and inconspicuous. In works where the author seeks display, metaphor becomes an open performance. *Robinson Crusoe* contains few metaphors, while *The Iliad* has many.

It has been argued that the novel depends upon metonymy rather than metaphor, but in fact the novel makes figures in general more difficult to introduce because of the self-effacement of the author in favor of experience.

Metaphor asks us implicitly to accept a judgment or interpretation or to ascribe a value. It directs us to perceive that something is like something else in a way that determines our attitude towards it—to see and feel, as well as think, that "War is hell," that "Life's a jest and all things show it," that "Tolstoy was a great moralizing infant," or that "Al-Queda is a cancer: we have to get all of it."

Sleeping metaphors can be dangerous.

It is easy to forget that we are thinking in metaphor.

Some people consider all our concepts to be metaphors, which means that “metaphor” must be a metaphor for itself. But that is pushing the metaphor too far.

Because my love is not a “red, red rose” in the same way a red, red rose is a red, red rose (a fact which would have come as no surprise to Robert Burns), it has been said that metaphors are technically false or even without propositional content. But it is possible to agree or disagree with a metaphor, to protest, for example, that Tolstoy was no moralizing infant—not even a great one—but a prescient observer of his time.

Some people consider similes to be trivially true because everything is like everything else in some way, but understanding a simile involves identifying the kind of likeness that is pertinent in each case. If we say that “Alexander wept like a child on the banks of the Indus,” we are not comparing Alexander and the child on account of their being physical objects or human beings but on account of their manner of weeping.

Though one can disagree with a metaphor or a simile, the most natural way to respond to one is by altering the figure—to reply, for example, that Alexander on the banks of the Indus did not weep like a child but that he wept like a lion.

“Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing.”<sup>4</sup> In this sentence, John Stuart Mill undermines one metaphor and replaces it with another, setting out the precise relevance of each.

In irony, the meaning of the utterance works against the meaning of the sentence. In metaphor, as with riddles, the strikingness of the utterance is often in proportion to the nonsense or strangeness of the sentence, though it can also be striking on account of its perfect aptness. In allegory, literal and figurative meaning move forward in parallel, as distinct but mutually enhancing registers. In symbolism, the higher meaning is reflected back into the work as a whole. And in

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<sup>4</sup>. *On Liberty*, ed Stephan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 60.

all literary works, sentence meanings have a tendency to acquire a further secondary meanings in the context of the whole work. They acquire style, express character, and so on.

“True symbolism is where the particular represents the more general, not as a dream or a shadow, but as a living momentary revelation of the Inscrutable.” –Goethe, Maximen und Reflexionen

## **Culture**

Culture is what we call the habits of a given group of people, their ways of thinking about and coping with the world, the organization of their life, and their forms of behavior toward each other.

Culture consists of everything we learn from each other, including distinctive ways of doing things that in themselves come naturally.

Walking and running are nature, but strutting and marching are culture.

The fact that we have the particular cultural endowment we do is a contingency of history, but the fact that we have a culture is not. Having a culture is an indispensable part of our nature.

The ancients were keenly aware of differences between peoples, but the concept of culture as I have defined it was only invented in the twentieth century. It is one of the crystallizing elements of advanced modernity.

## **Pre-Modern, Modern, and Postmodern**

In pre-modern western culture, the author, or maker, transmits a truth that pre-exists his acquisition of it, a truth for which he is not necessarily responsible. He retells a familiar story with an accepted religious, moral, or political significance.

Suspense is an avid curiosity attached to particular events. Because, for the pre-modern maker, the story pre-exists each telling of it, his work contains little element of suspense. What happens is already known. This is why Coleridge, a late defender of the maker's art, locates the mark of literary value in the satisfaction with which the

work can be reread. Before modernity, there is no essential difference between reading and rereading.

In the maker's art, the element of surprise lies entirely in the manner—how the story will unfold, how the maker will interpret it. The maker often flaunts his artistic performance, his mastery of rhetoric. The primacy of manner highlights the agency of the maker.

The sincerity or insincerity of the maker's feelings has little to do with the value of his work. He is no closer to the source of the tale's truth than his readers or hearers. He may have a deeper grasp of it than others or be profound in rendering it, but it is not specifically his truth. As Coleridge puts it, the story is the canvas on which, not by which, the maker expresses himself.

The identity of the maker is to be a master of his craft, giving life to old materials. He has the license to combine truths and stories in a new way. The truth may be unalterable, but stories are infinitely divisible, expandable, refashionable. Still, whatever he may invent or add, it is not novelty but mastery that distinguishes his contribution.

When makers compete, it is not for the materials, the content, of their stories, but only in the achievement of the telling. The truth, belonging to no one, is inexhaustible and infinitely divisible. It can never be in short supply.

For the maker, the truth is already a story. It is fictive without being a mere fiction.

For the modern author, or writer, truth has become a private commodity. It is the truth not of a type of man or woman but of an individual or individuals.

The truth of the maker is the truth of wisdom whereas the truth of the writer is the truth of experience.

The first modern character was Don Quixote, a man who read all the old stories but applied them to himself because he was mad.

Individual truth begins with mass circulation and the vulgar reader. Cervantes, satirizing the readers of his time, found in them a new subject. The values of these readers were incompatible with the old truths, and that is why Quixote must be mad.

The arrival of a private truth divided artists into two types: realists, who observe and gather the experience of others, and poets, who convey experience of their own.

The maker refines his experience into a product whose personal origins and motives can no longer be recognized. The origin is absorbed into the work of art, which is its end. In order to be presented to others, the irrelevances of individuality must be purged away. But the writer can only present himself as an individual. The writer's work is authorized by its origins in experience.

Though the maker does not invent stories, his stance toward them is an active one. He is a figure of freedom. He gives the story its form. The writer, on the other hand, being authorized primarily by experience, remains passive in relation to his materials. He is a figure of necessity, who must observe or suffer.

For a long time, novelists in prefaces maintained the stance of the teacher, but that was largely a pretense to wholesomeness that was not implemented in practice.

Because choice is the essence of his role, the maker displays his craft. The heroic simile, the syncretic allegory, the peroration are his signatures. If he invokes the muse or defers to an authority, it is because the stage is his to disclaim. He must prove that he, with whatever assistance, is up to the task of performance.

Because choice is incompatible with his role, the writer must conceal his craft. The work must bear the necessity of the truth of experience.

The maker has access to all the resources of rhetoric, which correspond with the many ways a pre-existing message can be conveyed or a story told. The writer disclaims rhetoric. For the writer, invention and expression are the same.

The writer's truth need not stand up to the claims of universality, but it must be real—it must be plausible as someone's experience. Not the necessary but the possible.

Repeatability is a sign of the universal, whereas singularity is a sign of the particular. The art of experience defines itself against repetition and the universal.

The maker has no reason to conceal that he is a particular individual exercising choice in retelling a familiar story to which he attributes a general or universal significance. But for the writer, to repeat a familiar story would be to divorce the work from the uniqueness of his own experience. To admit choice in the shaping of materials would be to deprive the work of its authenticity, which derives from necessity. To let a general message shine through the particulars would be to detach the work from its origin in the truth of experience.

The writer's denial of the universal and willed dimension of art gives point to the ideological critique. For writers who deny the typical character of human experience, the hidden purposes and universalizing implications of their work become a hidden weakness.

Ideology critiques unmask the hidden universal and the moral beneath the writer's claim to be particular and unique. Suspicion looks beneath the surface of difference to discover the identity of the same.

Because the truth of experience is a private commodity, it can become subject to competition. It can even be exhausted when writers are no longer able to trace the origins of their experience to a private source. This is what is called postmodernism.

The writer must disclaim general truth or falsehood to preserve the purity of experience.

In heroic nostalgia, the great age of the world is past. This is the maker's pathos. In Romantic belatedness, the way of thinking of the great age of the world is past. This is the writer's pathos.

### **Irony**

Verbal irony is the effect we create by deliberately saying something pointedly different from what we mean.

By speaking the opposite, we express an attitude. "It's a lovely day," spoken in the midst of a downpour, not only means "It's not a lovely day" but also "It should have been one" and "I'm not happy that it isn't." The value of irony is to combine these implications in a single remark.

Verbal irony can work by understatement, in which the force of a proposition is strengthened by stating less than the case.

Ironic understatement shows self-mastery in discontent—"Not my lucky day" spoken at the foot of the gallows.

Understatement is strength, overstatement is weakness.

The exclamation point at the end of I love you! weakens the statement.

Irony need not be directed at anyone in particular. It can express or incite shared feelings.

Sarcasm is the aggressive form of verbal irony, with an explicit intent to hurt or degrade. Sarcasm is aimed at someone.

Irony implies intimacy because it takes for granted the listener's ability to follow the speaker in a shared deviation from ordinary meaning.

Irony brings about crucial problems of interpretation both in art and in life. On account of it, there are many sentences that can mean either what they seem to mean or just the opposite. Works of art as a whole can hang between straightforwardness and irony.

Irony never speaks as itself. It speaks through the imagined words and thoughts of others, words that say what they do not mean.

Irony is a parasite that takes over the healthy body of a statement and uses it for its own purpose. Part of the drama is seeing the form of sincerity struggle with its master.

But irony itself is always sincere. It separates words from their ordinary meanings, yet it means what it says through them. It is the only tone that cannot be set at a distance.

Detachment from detachment would not be detachment.

Every time we say now we are a little too late. Irony is like that. It cannot catch itself in the act.

In situational irony, we consider a state of affairs in the light of another one more typically expected or preferred. The two states are pointedly juxtaposed, with a sense of the breach of expectations that sets one in place of the other.

The sharpest form of situational irony is when the attempt to avoid some state of affairs inadvertently brings it about, as when Oedipus's attempt to flee from the city of his parents lands him home in Thebes.

In situational irony, it is the world that mocks our straightforward intentions, turning not our words but our actions against us. Oedipus, you cannot flee.

Dramatic irony occurs when a character's stance is undermined by facts or attitudes shared by the playwright and the audience but unknown to the character herself. Dramatic irony proper occurs when a character is acting upon factual assumptions that the audience knows to be untrue.

Simple dramatic irony is often enhanced by moral irony, in which the character violates moral assumptions that are held by the author and her intended audience.

Dramatic irony can be ideological in character, when author and audience see the character's stance as undermined by false intellectual assumptions, particularly ones that are motivated by self-interest.

Heroic irony is when an author sets himself above his audience on account of his superior ability to face the grim facts of existence. La Rochefoucauld, Nietzsche, Freud.

As with tragedy, the literary category of irony has become for modern people a means of identifying a general intellectual and moral state, one where the conditions of human existence threaten to undermine the assumptions that make life tolerable or rewarding.

## **Satire**

The effects of comedy and tragedy depend upon our ability to identify with the characters, to rejoice with them in their happiness or agonize with them in their grief. In satire, such events acquire an ironic distance, occasioning detached laughter or contempt. What is different is a global attitude toward the events depicted.

Satire differs from tragedy and comedy in a manner different from the one in which they differ from each other.

In comic and tragic writing, the authorial presence is not distinctly felt. The world of the work engages the author's moral expectations, either by confirming or negating them. The author stands among the spectators as a witness of gratifying or awesome events. In satire, on the other hand, the authorial presence is continuously felt. The author stands with the spectators above the deluded world of the work, which cannot comprehend the terms of its degradation.

The values of the satirist cannot be explicitly stated. Explicitness would deprive them of the self-evidence necessary for the freest and most abandoned ridicule. The claim they make upon the audience would limit the pleasures of contempt.

The satirist is neither a maker nor a writer. He can neither flourish his rhetoric nor suppress it, neither articulate his message nor disclaim it.

### **Tragedy**

Tragedy presents goodness of character more effectively than comedy. The ideal becomes more accessible to the imagination in the moment of its destruction than in its flourishing.

### **Lyric**

J. S. Mill tells us that "Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling: but . . . eloquence is heard; poetry is overheard. Eloquence," he continues, "supposes an audience. The peculiarity of poetry appears . . . to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling. . . . Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavoring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action. All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy." Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties

Mill's Romantic attempt to define poetry will not do for epic, romance, or satire, which depend upon eloquence, but it helps with lyric. It needs to be amended, however. It is not the poet who is unconscious of being heard but the imaginary speaker of the poem, the consciousness the poet has undertaken to represent.

The lyric speaker does not communicate her feelings to anyone in particular, but she may nevertheless be aware of how her thoughts and feelings lead from one to another, how they compare with common opinions and experience, and how they reflect upon her. This makes it different from soliloquy, which represents the unconscious and potentially uncensored expression of internal thought.

Lyric as self-quotation, self-recapitulation.

## **Writing**

Writing serves two chief needs, expression and communication. Writing for another person allows one not only to communicate with another mind but also to clarify one's own thoughts and feelings and give them outlet and form.

In the midst of composition, it is difficult to distinguish what is due to each of these needs.

The task of revision consists largely of removing those elements that serve the needs of expression and self-clarification but not one's communicative or persuasive purpose.

To evoke the understanding of others through narrative is one of the consolations of life, for, as Laurence Sterne put it, "The history of a soldier's wound beguiles the pain of it." (Tristram Shandy)

## **The Novel**

### **Intertextuality**

### **Imagination**

Everything is connected to many other things, some hidden from sight and some right there in front of us.

Since we do not understand a thing unless we understand the things it is connected to, we need imagination to see what is right there in front of us.

What we cannot imagine, we do not understand, and what we do not understand, we do not see.

It is wrong to think of imagination as opposed to truth or reason. Without imagination, reason would not know where to look.

Imagination puts us in touch with the truth, allows us to take hold of it.

Imagination gives us a living relation to a small part of what is actual and a small part of what is possible. It allows us to escape from reality, but it also connects us with reality.

Counterfactuals.

### **Theory**

Every approach to the study of literature, or any other object, requires theoretical assumptions, whether they are stated or not. Historical empiricism and close reading are, in this sense, as theoretical as Lacanian psychoanalysis or deconstruction. Historical empiricism differs from deconstruction only in that its assumptions are so widely held that they can be taken for granted, whereas readers cannot be expected to know that the truth of deconstruction is being assumed unless they have been told.

It is a truism among literary critics that general methods of reading and readings of individual texts are validated by their results. An approach that yields an interesting or novel view of a work is thought to give insight of some kind. Unfortunately, the one thing all approaches to literature have in common is that they succeed in producing readings. The text never cries "Read me not!" The attractiveness of readings depends primarily upon the talent of the critic, not the validity of the method.

Because all literary theories and methods succeed in producing readings, they ought to be evaluated in competition with each other on the basis of whether or not they provide the best account of the facts at hand when compared with rival explanations for the same facts.

The language of politics versus the politics of language.

Modern criticism has tended to veer between an excess of emphasis on hermeneutics, the complexities of meaning, and an excess of emphasis on erotics, play in the absence of meaning.

## **Audience**

The first audience is the actual audience, the real set of people the author has in mind when he writes, with all of the kinds of knowledge and competence that will allow them to understand the work—a grasp of language, of a wide set of shared facts about the world, and of specifically literary conventions. Authors write for a contemporary audience, but they also attempt to write in such a way that future generations will be able to enjoy their work. They attempt to avoid ephemera.

The second audience is the virtual audience, the audience subtended by the text itself. This audience believes that “Once upon a time” and wonders what will happen next. “Realistic” works blur the difference between the actual audience and the virtual audience, whereas fairy tales demand a “willing suspension of disbelief,” to recall Coleridge’s phrase, to permit the realization of the text.

A work may have further, third or more internal or embedded audiences called forth by tales within tales. Works that are narrated by a character have an internal audience throughout, and sometimes it is possible to see how the embedded narrator’s projected audience does not live up to the actual audience’s expectations, so that an effect of irony is created.

## **Narrators**

A narrator is a person who tells a story. Simply speaking, then, authors are narrators. But when an author tells a story, he does not necessarily assume that he is known to his audience as a person. The story expresses his point of view, but that is not why it is important. Before all such considerations come into play, the story must be interesting in its own terms.

Stories can be told from many points of view. The narrator can be a character inside the story, an internal narrator. In that case we will be reading the story both for what it tells us about the world of the story and what it tells us about the narrator. We will bring a double perspective to bear, and that is part of the interest of the story itself.

Some stories have narrators who are not characters with a distinctive point of view but who do confine themselves to a single character’s point of view. I would call them restricted narrators. Henry James

almost always works in this way. Restricted narrators may shift from the point of view of one character to another, but they are always seeing from some point of view.

The narrator can also tell the story without being restricted to any point of view. He simply provides whatever information is necessary for the story to be told. This is often called an “omniscient narrator.” There is something misleading, though, about this term, because in narration it is not a matter of knowledge but of invention. The narrator does not necessarily know the things he does not tell; it’s just that his telling is not confined to any point of view. Unrestricted narrator, therefore, is a better term.

Traditional narrators—epic poets, authors of the Bible—have a claim to the audience’s attention based on a higher authority. It is the Muse or the Divine Author, who speaks or writes, and does so in the context of a deeper background of Truth. What is said explicitly is only the foreground of a fuller world. This background of Truth is more pronounced in sacred than in epic stories. But the fictional narrator has no such claim. His world is an invented, not a preexisting world, however much it may resemble the world we know. It engages us on an aesthetic basis.

A story begins, “There once was a boy with three heads. On his birthday his mother gave him three hats and three handkerchiefs to blow his three noses.” This is not a good way to begin a story, not because it’s implausible but because it’s silly. We don’t want to hear any more about what happens to boys with three heads. But we do want to learn more about men like Kafka’s Gregor Samsa who “wake one morning from uneasy dreams” to discover they have been “turned into a giant cockroach.” That opening gets our attention. We are willing to go on and contemplate the sequel.

Fiction begins not with a “Believe this” but a “Listen to this, hold this in your mind’s eye.”

Some critics (Wayne Booth in particular) think of the text as having, in addition to its narrators, an “implied author” whose presence is part of the meaning of the text. When we spend time in the company of Henry James or D. H. Lawrence or Virginia Woolf, we are learning to see and feel and judge the way they do, and this is element is intrinsic to the structure and meaning of the work. This seems to me a mistake. We do indeed learn, when reading Henry James, to think like Henry James, and indeed James, like all authors, is attempting to teach us to

see the way he does. He has a vision of the world he wants us to share. Understanding his work will demand an understanding of that vision. But all of this is the vocation of the real author. What purpose is served, then, by attributing an "implied author" to the text itself, or, to put it another way, how is the implied author different from the author per se? Do we have to reconstruct the author's point of view in order to understand the text just the way we do with an internal narrator?

Here's an analogy. I get up in the morning and decide to put on a certain garment. I do it because I think this garment is becoming and appropriate for the day. Now when people see me, they will know I've chosen this out of all possible garment for a reason. My choice implies that it is good to wear this kind of garment on this kind of a day. This is true of all my choices. Whenever I do something or say something I imply that it's good to do or say this kind of thing under the relevant circumstances. I am also aware of what others will conclude about me from my choices. With everything I do or say, I am aware of what it says about me. I am aware what others will make of it, and I may be able to divide those others into different audiences who will have different views.

So there are two elements here. One is the implication of rational consistency that accompanies all my actions. The other is the awareness of multiple audiences that will interpret all my actions. The first is generic to action itself. The second is uncontrollable. I can control what my novel means but I cannot control what people will make of my act of writing the novel and what it says about me—though I can certainly guess what the range of responses will be. The response to the novel can't become part of the meaning of the novel.

People can control the meaning of their sentences but not the meaning of their actions. The latter will always be open to interpretation. (To put it another way, sentences and works of art have meaning, semantic content, whereas actions have significance, pragmatic value. See "Author and Work" above.)

It is impossible to disagree with the narrator of *Vanity Fair* that Becky Sharp is a wicked person. To do so would be to misunderstand the story. But it is possible to disapprove of Thackeray's decision to make her the murderer of Jess Sedley. If the author's activity was "implied" as part of the meaning of the work, this latter judgment would also not make sense. But in fact, it is more than open to us to judge that Thackeray erred and hurt his novel by making Becky a murderer.