



OUTSIDE

LITERATURE

.....
TONY BENNETT

ROUTLEDGE


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OUTSIDE LITERATURE

Tony Bennett



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To Sue, with all my
love and thanks

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PREFACE

This book has been a long time in the making. I first began work on it in 1983. Owing to other pressures, however, I have rarely been able to devote more than a few days at a time to this work and, on occasions, have been obliged to put it to one side—festered malignantly in my filing cabinet—for several months.

These remarks have a bearing on the form of the book. When it became clear that I should have to accommodate the book's conception to these circumstances of working or abandon the project entirely, I determined on an episodic principle of organisation. Thus, rather than offering a continuing argument which develops cumulatively from chapter to chapter, I have sought, in each chapter, to deal with a relatively discrete problem. While chapters 1 and 2 constitute necessary starting points in situating the concerns of the book as a whole, the reader will find that, thereafter, each chapter can be read relatively independently of those adjacent to it. On the whole, however, I think that the chapters are best read in the order in which I have placed them.

For there is a consistency of purpose running through the book: to contribute to the development of a logic for literary analysis that will be adequately social and historical in its orientations. While I have assumed that the commitment to such a project is now sufficiently shared for this purpose to require no extensive elaboration or defence, my study is also premised on the conviction that this intention is not so easily realised as is commonly supposed. Even where a socialising and historicising logic is espoused, it is often incompletely sustained owing to the inherited weight of formalist and idealist categories and procedures which, when they are not carefully scrutinised, insinuate their way into the analysis, deflecting it from its objectives.

It is partly for this reason that the book takes the form of a critical dialogue with the concerns of Marxist literary theory. Whatever its shortcomings, this remains the most fully developed and sustained tradition of theorising concerned with literary practices in their social and historical connections. Indeed, I had originally envisaged my intention as that of offering a revised version of Marxist literary theory, one which would better equip it to realise its socialising and historicising aspirations. In the course of writing, however, it became increasingly clear that Marxism's claim to provide a framework for the development of a comprehensive social and historical theory of literature can no longer be sustained. While, in thus rejecting Marxism's totalising pretensions, my arguments are post-Marxist in conception, they are certainly not intended as anti-Marxist—although I have no doubt some die-hards will see them that way—but rather aim for a more selective and localised use of Marxist concepts and categories.

However, little purpose is served by my seeking to anticipate the reader's judgement on these matters. It will perhaps be more helpful if, instead, I outline the organising principles of the book. [Part I](#) offers a general review of a range of connected problems within Marxist literary theory viewed in the light of their relations to some of the more generally problematic aspects of Marxist thought as a whole. Each of the following sections then focuses on a particular region of Marxist literary-theoretical debate. The chapters comprising [part II](#) thus deal with difficulties associated with Marxist conceptions of the social determination of literary forms. [Part III](#) then addresses the problems associated with Marxist theories of the specificity of literature and of the aesthetic, while the chapters comprising [part IV](#) focus on Marxist conceptions of criticism, and the reasons for considering these incapable of supporting much beyond a politics of grand gestures.

I do not, in developing these concerns, offer a comprehensive history of Marxist literary theory or attempt to differentiate its various sub-branches in any detail. While not denying the importance of either consideration, my purpose has rather been to identify those difficulties which subtend the main schools of Marxist literary theory in spite of their differences in other respects. Nor have I attempted an overall assessment of Marxist contributions to literary theory considered in their relations to contending bodies of literary theory. Rather, I have drawn on these

where relevant to the point under discussion, and usually as a means of providing a critical perspective on, or alternative to, Marxist formulations. While the reader will find that my arguments are informed by perspectives culled (often opportunistically) from post-structuralism, deconstruction and Foucaultian theory, there is no attempt to buy in to these positions as totalities or to oppose, and prefer them, to Marxist thought in some holistic way. For reasons outlined as the study develops, there are good grounds for resisting this type of theorising.

The period of writing this book coincided with a major change in my working circumstances. The early stages of research and drafting were begun while I worked at the Open University in Britain. The bulk of the writing, however, was completed while working at Griffith University in Australia. My work, for better or worse, has undoubtedly been influenced by these changed circumstances, and particularly by the (in my experience) uniquely invigorating climate of literary—theoretical debate which prevails at Griffith. Although I have not explicitly discussed the contents of this book as a whole with any of my Griffith colleagues, it has, in part, been shaped as a result of conversations on the topics it addresses as well as by the practical experience of working together in planning and designing courses. I have learned much from David Saunders's developing work on the relations between law and literature, as also from Colin Mercer's work on the cultural technologies of popular entertainment. I am especially grateful to Dugald Williamson whose scrupulous criticisms of Lacan helped convince me that, at least for my purposes, I could leave this body of theory by the wayside. I am also indebted to Jeffrey Minson and Ian Hunter whose work has obliged me to approach Foucault's work and its implications for literary scholarship more seriously and open-mindedly than I was previously wont to.

Working in Australia has also allowed me to come to know and share ideas with John Frow, a rewarding experience on both counts. Special mention should also be made of Anne Freadman, whose work on genre I draw on substantially in [chapter 4](#), and of Noel King, whose critical comments and encouraging support I have greatly valued. I am especially grateful to both Frow and King for obliging me to be more circumspect in interpreting my title.

Many of the chapters which follow were first presented in draft form at more places than I can remember. As is always the case, I have learned much from these occasions. Particular thanks, however, are due to Stephen Knight and Ken Ruthven, both for their comments on two such occasions as well as for their help and support in other matters. Special thanks, also, to those who commented on an early version of [chapter 4](#) as a result of its presentation at the 1988 conference of the Australian and South Pacific Association of Comparative Literary Studies.

There are some longer-term debts which should be acknowledged, too. To Graham Martin, a special thanks for his interest, help, encouragement and friendship over the years. And, to Terry Eagleton, a tribute to his unending ability to keep the doors of debate and communication open in spite of disagreements. I should also like to thank James Donald for his editorial input to [chapter 9](#) which—although I resisted his suggestions at the time—is considerably improved as a consequence.

I should like, finally, to express my deep appreciation of Raymond Williams's work. His death, in early 1988, was an incalculable loss. Although, now, their limitations are apparent, his early studies still rank as pioneering in the work they have subsequently made possible. Just as important, he was always prepared to respond positively to new intellectual and political challenges, and, in doing so, played a crucial role in helping prevent debate polarise around entrenched positions. Along with many of my generation, my debt to Williams is inestimable—all the more so for the fact that, at times, his help took a personal rather than just theoretical form. His ability to dismantle himself of the robes of his prestige and to show, to all who came into contact with him, an unflinching democratic consideration and kindness is as worthy of commemoration as his writings.

Some of the chapters published here have appeared elsewhere. [Chapter 6](#) was first published in *Thesis Eleven*, no. 12, 1985. [Chapter 8](#) first appeared in a special issue of *Poetics on Literary Theory in Australia*, published in 1988, while [chapter 9](#) was first published in *New Formations*, no. 2, summer, 1987. I am grateful to the editors and publishers of these journals for their permission to reprint these materials here. While I have avoided the temptation to modify these articles for the occasion of their publication in this volume I should perhaps indicate that the

opening tone of [chapter 6](#) now strikes me as regrettably iconoclastic.

The process of writing, of course, accounts for only a part of the work involved in making a book. My special thanks, therefore, to Judith Davies, Robyn Skaar and Karen Yarrow in the Division of Humanities at Griffith University for translating my initial scribbles and subsequent revisions into a presentable form. Thanks, also, to the administrative staff of the Division for making this kind of support possible. And books need publishers. Thanks, therefore, to Janice Price for her work in creating a publishing context which has promoted the concerns of literary theory so well, and for her patience in waiting for this book to be produced.

There are, finally, some debts which can never be properly acknowledged. I owe Sue far more than a note of thanks for supporting and encouraging me in completing this book. But she knows that. So it will be enough, here, to record that without her help and understanding, there would have been nothing to write a preface for.

And, to Tanya, Oliver and James: thanks for *not* staying out of the study and for making life infinitely richer and more rewarding than it would otherwise be.

*Tony Bennett
Brisbane, 1989*

Part I

1

OUTSIDE 'LITERATURE'

Racine lends himself to several languages: psychoanalytic, existential, tragic, psychological (others can be invented, others will be invented); none is innocent. But to acknowledge this incapacity to *tell the truth* about Racine is precisely to acknowledge, at last, the special status of literature. It lies in a paradox: literature is that ensemble of objects and rules, techniques and works, whose function in the general economy of our society is precisely to *institutionalise subjectivity*. To follow this movement, the critic must himself become paradoxical, must lay the fatal bet and talk about Racine in one way and not in another: he too belongs to literature.¹

In this passage, which occurs toward the end of his essay 'History or literature?', Barthes prepares the ground for finally specifying the distinction between two approaches to literature which it had been his concern, in the preceding pages, to disentangle: the history of literature, concerned with literature as an institution, and criticism, concerned with literature as a creation.

With regard to the former, Barthes argues that literary history, properly conceived and executed, should concern itself with the examination of literary functions—of production, communication, consumption—and their determining institutional conditions. 'In other words,' as he puts it, 'literary history is possible only if it becomes sociological, if it is concerned with activities and institutions, not with individuals.'² When posed in this way—historically, institutionally, functionally—the question of

literature's being is radically transformed. For a historical ontology literature, Barthes contends, dissolves its object. 'Now literature very being,' he writes, 'when restored to history, is no longer a being.'³ Its place is occupied by a series of dispersed and historically variable functions which exceed the compass of any and all conceptions of literature as an eternity imbued with an unchanging being of its own. From the point of view of these concerns, the study of literature becomes 'the study of techniques, rules, rites and collective mentalities'.⁴

If, however, one takes up the position of the critic inside literature—if, as Barthes puts it, 'one wants to install oneself inside Racine...to speak, even if only a word, about the Racinian *self*'—then one must expect to see 'the most prudent critic reveal himself as an utterly subjective, utterly historical being'.⁵ For the critic who takes up such a position, there is no truth of literature to be said but merely different ways of speaking about literature within the regimes for the institutionalisation of subjectivity of which criticism forms a part.

Two approaches to literature, then: one which occupies a place within the space of the literary and which works with it as a terrain of practices implicated in the formation of subjectivities, and a second, adopting a position outside literature in order to write its history as a history of functions, rules, techniques and institutions—in short, a history like any other, a history of surfaces without any hidden depths or secreted interiors to fathom.

Perhaps, however, the delineation of these two approaches is not—cannot be—quite so clear as Barthes pretends, and not least because it has a discomfotingly familiar ring about it. For Barthes's formulation bears a striking resemblance to the mutually tolerable division of labour that is often proposed for the relations between criticism and the sociology of literature. The latter is often freely granted sovereignty over what criticism typically construes as the sociological penumbra of literary production (the organisation of literary markets, the structure of the literary profession, and so forth). Yet this is usually at the price of being called on to concede that such considerations bear only tangentially on the 'real stuff' of literature where, accordingly, criticism retains an undisputed monopoly.

The more compelling difficulty, however, is that any construction of an inside/outside polarity in relation to literature

can too easily be deconstructed. For what else can such a polarity mark but an impossible boundary between two spaces which, in being posited as interdependent, must seep into and contaminate one another, thus undoing their separateness? Indeed: what can be its purpose but to establish a zone of mutual transgressions? Just as, to bend Derrida, *'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte'*, then so there is no outside of literature—no way of writing about it that can be external to it in the sense of being unaffected by, or without consequences for, the way in which the field of literature is currently constituted. Nor, even supposing one could be fashioned, would there be any point in writing from such a position. For if, as Barthes contends, literature is 'that ensemble of objects and rules, techniques and works' whose function is to 'institutionalise subjectivity', what purpose could there be to writing about literature except to contribute to or modify its functioning in this regard? And how could this be done from anywhere else except within, or in some productive relation to, the institutions and discourses which currently comprise the field of literature? Stephen Heath thus notes that while Terry Eagleton 'continually inscribes an "outside" into his work, appealing to political reality, class struggle, as a necessary limit and focus on what he has to say,' his 'gestures away from literature and literary theory, the professional field,...are themselves in the field'.⁶ Although denying the existence of literature, Eagleton cannot, Heath argues, avoid the contradiction that that very denial is 'a contribution to literary studies' which operates 'in support of those studies and their institution, which are after all the very basis of his intervention, the very condition of its possibility'.⁷ There are, of course, many fields of politics outside literature; but no literary politics. And so, of course, no literary theory either; not even of a historical or sociological kind. If literature has no political outside, so it also lacks a theoretical outside, a position from which the history of its functions might be written that is not implicated in the theoretical and political constitution of the prevailing field of literary institutions, practices and debates.

Let me be clear, then, that the literature which, in this study, I seek to distance myself from is not the whole of the existing field of literary practices, institutions and discourses. For these do not add up to a single and unified 'inside' in relation to which an 'outside' might be constituted. Rather, it is the particular *way of thinking* about these which proceeds from the assumption that

literature comprises a special kind of writing that is to be understood aesthetically. The distinction is not, of course, a clear one. For this sense of literature—'literature', that is, as a category of aesthetic discourse—forms a part of the existing constitution and functioning of literary practices, institutions and discourses. None the less, it has a certain strategic and polemical value, suggesting the respects in which—as it is my purpose to argue—an approach which distances itself from 'literature' in this second sense may be better able to understand the organisation of the existing field of literary practices, institutions and discourses and therefore be better equipped, politically, to take advantage of the contradictions within and between these.

Yet the production of a position outside 'literature' is not a matter of mere say-so. There is no ready-made theoretical position outside aesthetic discourse which can simply be taken up and occupied. Such a space requires a degree of fashioning; it must be organised and, above all, won—won from the preponderant cultural weight of aesthetic conceptions of the literary. And won not just for its own sake. The prospect must also be entertained that such a position, when properly fashioned, would significantly modify our understanding as to precisely how literary discourses and practices function as instruments for the formation of subjectivities. This may also engender a clearer understanding of the conditions which must be taken into account in attempts to change the political contexts in which these instruments are deployed. The result may well be, so to speak, to dismantle 'the space of Racine' so that no practice might install itself there while organising new conceptions of the literary in relation to which new practices—of commentary, use and articulation—might be formed and developed. Such, at any rate, is my purpose to argue and, in so doing, to contribute to the formation of a set of positions outside 'literature' which would allow the theoretical, political and critical concerns prompted by aesthetic conceptions to be significantly recast—or, in some cases, just abandoned.

If such a project is possible today—indeed, is already well underway—it is because the space of literature, its functioning as an institution, is itself undergoing profound transformation. Far from being a natural horizon, the aesthetic conception of 'literature' is now clearly visible as one whose social and historical co-ordinates and institutional and discursive rims are becoming ever more readily perceptible. As customary contrasts—between the

'literary' and the non-literary, for example—lose their purchase, it is now possible to see not merely their edges but beyond their edges and, in realising the full implications of their historicity, to glimpse the possibility of a situation in which they may no longer order and organise the terms of literary production and reception. This is not merely to query the effect of a category ('literature') but concerns its functioning within and across an array of institutions and, accordingly, the challenge of organising positions—discursive and institutional—which will be not just outside 'literature' but beyond it in the sense of opening up new fields of knowledge and action.

Yet such positions cannot be produced *ex nihilo*, as if by magic. They must be worked for and this, like any practice, requires that use be made of the resources to hand—resources which, for the most part, have been shaped and fashioned by and within aesthetic discourse. There can be no question, then, of proceeding as if it were a matter of laying entirely new foundations capable of supporting a brand new theoretical edifice sculpted out of pristine raw materials. Rather, such positions can be organised only by *prising* them away from aesthetic conceptions of literature. Their construction is dependent on a process of extrication through which concepts and methods formed in the sphere of aesthetic discourse are drawn forth from that sphere in order that they might be re-assembled in new theoretical configurations.

It is to this process of extricating—wresting—from aesthetic discourse materials which might be of service in constructing a discursive space external to it that this study addresses itself. It does so via a series of critical engagements with the ways in which literature has been theorised and organised as a site of political intervention within Marxist critical and literary—theoretical writings. However, if this tradition provides the starting point for my discussion, my aim is *not* to elaborate a Marxist literary theory, nor even a Marxist anti-literary theory. For reasons outlined in the next chapter, it no longer seems to me fruitful to regard Marxism as providing a system of concepts adequate to the theorisation of any and all social phenomena, including literary phenomena. Whatever Marxist thought has to contribute to re-theorising literature must be regarded as just that: a contribution, and one which must be co-ordinated with inputs from other theoretical positions in ways which respect their differences rather than organising them in a relation of subordination to Marxism.

That said, a critical interrogation of Marxist literary theory does provide one of the more productive routes through which a set of theoretical positions might be extricated from the sphere of aesthetic discourse. This is less because Marxist literary theory offers a ready-made alternative and opposition to such discourse than, to the contrary, because many of its preoccupations and procedures have become all too clearly ensnared within those of aesthetics. Viewed in their wider aspects, of course, many of the concepts which define the Marxist tradition—the concepts of class, of relations of production and social formation, for example—have a history of use and application which has had little bearing on, and been little affected by, the concerns of literary theory.⁸ However, in functioning as the point of mediation between this wider body of theory and aesthetic discourse, Marxist literary theory has worked largely to forge points of accommodation between the former and the latter. The result is a corpus of writings characterised by a tension between, on the one hand, sets of concepts and procedures which have an existence independently of aesthetic discourse but which, on the other, have become entangled with aesthetics through the attempt to construe Marxism as capable of providing an alternative theorisation of literature on the terms established by aesthetic discourse. My purpose, in examining some of the ways in which this entanglement of Marxist thought with aesthetic discourse has been effected, is to disentangle it again; to write a way out of aesthetic discourse by means of a critique of the ways in which Marxist categories have been written into that discourse and, in some cases, have formed a part of it from their very inception.

However, this is not to suggest that the task can be limited to one of purifying Marxist categories, scaling away the effects of their ensnarement within the concerns of conventional literary and aesthetic theory, so that, once set free of such encrustations, all will be well. This was the chief contention of an earlier study, *Formalism and Marxism*, where I argued that the idealist concerns of aesthetics sit so uncomfortably with the historical and materialist orientation of Marxist categories that the attempt to align the two should be abandoned. As I put it then:

The inheritance of the conceptual equipment which goes with the concerns of aesthetics constitutes the single most effective