

Literature and the Social Sciences: Towards the Reintegration of Education*

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I begin with a premise : human experience is rooted in and affected by the material and transient reality surrounding it, Similarly, art is determined by that objective, material, temporal reality. Therefore to respond to art fully - whether to a given work or to a whole tradition - one must place it in that known moment in which it was shaped. This is as true of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as of the Tahitian religio-erotic *arioi* theatre. (Oliver 1974, Vol. 3, pp. 913-64; Pearson 1984, pp. 12-13).

But, over the past four centuries of western life, the overall integration of experience has been increasingly ignored. Human thought, like human life and labour, have been divided and subdivided into what are now considered separate 'disciplines'.

Noting this process, Christopher Caudwell (1973s p.89) pioneering literary critic of the 1930s, pointed out that the remarkable power of Renaissance writing in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was due to an all-embracing use of these different spheres of thought. He argued that:

all is fluid and homogeneous. Bourgeois society has not created its elaborate division of labour, to which the elaborate complexity of culture corresponds. Today psychology, biology, logic, philosophy, law, poetry, history, economics, novel-writing, the essay, are all separate spheres of thought, each requiring specialisation for their exploration and each using a specialised vocabulary. But men like Bacon and Galileo and da Vinci did not specialise, and their language reflects this lack of differentiation. Elizabethan tragedy speaks a language of great range and compass, from the colloquial to the sublime, from the technical to the narrative, because language itself is as yet undifferentiated.

One of the central tasks which the Third World university should set itself is the reintegration of human experience. This can only be done by taking down the

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rapidly increasing number of 'fences' which have been erected around what are claimed to be discrete areas of thought and action.

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My father's studies in psychology at Columbia University in the 1920's, were undertaken within the School of Philosophy. Forty years later, when I studied literature at the same university, I too found myself in Philosophy Hall. But the Department of Psychology was no longer there. It had expanded, migrated and become both physically and intellectually distant from its former neighbours. As a 'science', it was no longer seen to be 'speculative', as were those apparently softer and less empirical areas of study, philosophy and literature.¹ Surprisingly, many scholars of the arts welcomed this dissociation from what had become known, in the intervening two generations, as the social sciences. Under the sway of the New Criticism, and especially *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (I.A. Richards's 1924, 1929) and Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's later, *Understanding Poetry*, (Brooks and Warren, 1960, Wellek and Warren, 1956) literary scholars had turned their backs on the critical tradition of Mme de Staël (1800) and Hippolyte Taine (1857), who had stressed social context as the central determinant in a work of imagination, and veered off into the cul-de-sac of aestheticism and formalism, preoccupied with the art object itself, isolated from the conjuncture of the personal and shared experience which precipitated its composition. From across the barricades, the social scientist and the literary scholar sneered disdainfully at one another. But in the traumatic intellectual reawakening experienced by European and North American universities in the late 1960s--and by many Third World universities shortly thereafter--there was a reappraisal of what came to be seen as the artificial segregation of the arts from the social sciences. Academic conferences, university courses and degree programmes in literature became increasingly interdisciplinary.

One of the greatest difficulties in the development of integrated cultural studies in South Pacific education--both tertiary and secondary--has, unhappily, been a significant neglect of these academic liaisons. Most of the undergraduates majoring in the University of the South Pacific's Department of Literature and Language are also majoring in a social science. But one is often surprised--and distressed--to see how few such students are able to connect the issues which arise in their history or sociology or economics courses with the texts they confront in the literature course which meets at the very next hour. When students are asked, for example, to write an essay discussing Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in terms of rise of individualism in the Renaissance, or to examine

the problems of African nationalism in a novel by Sembène Ousmane, or to trace post-World War I malaise as a source of the existentialist novel, even history majors seem rarely able to meld effectively what they see as the two discrete disciplines which are evoked in the assignment topics. In the end, essays are produced on either history or the literary text, but seldom on both.

The student of literature is, or should be, a student of culture and society, of history and economics, of psychology and even biology, as well as of aesthetics. He or she should be able to discuss not only the formal elements of a given text, but the relationships between that text and both the author's original readership and that audience which the text addresses today; must be able to tease out the mediating factors which transmute reality into art and art into the responses of the receiver. The student must be able to analyse not only the technical devices of Pope's Augustan satire, but the continuity of thought which connects the heroic couplet and the debate over the Corn Laws; not only the image of fog, but also the fundamental causes of urban poverty in Dickens's *Bleak House*; not only the realistic stage conventions employed by Chekhov, but the foreshadowing of the 1905 revolution in *The Cherry Orchard*; not only the use of phatic statements in Athol Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*, but the psychological distortions created by South African apartheid; not only the traditional Samoan symbolism, but the roles of gender and social hierarchy in the novels of Albert Wendt.

And the problem is not one which faces the student and teacher of literature alone. How often will a secondary school student of social studies use a literary text to explore a theme in geography or history? How many novels, plays or poems appear in the reading lists of Pacific university courses on contemporary, regional or world history; development; nationalism; or women's studies? They do elsewhere, in increasing numbers.²

Why, then, has an effective integration of social science and arts studies failed to occur both at the University of the South Pacific and in the region's secondary schools? The reasons for the present situation are various, but probably the strongest--and the least acknowledged--is the dead hand of an approach to the arts, mentioned earlier, which dominated Western academic life for several generations. It is a view with its origins in the late nineteenth-century reaction against what was seen as the positivism, materialism and commercialism of the industrialised world. It came to be known as aestheticism and its rallying cry was *L'Art pour l'art*, or, Art for Art's Sake. It argues that the sole role of the artist is to create beauty, itself seen in fundamentally Platonic idealist terms, as spiritual, mystical and detached from the concerns of the world (except,

interestingly, for a neo-classical concern for moral values [Leavis 1948]). It also puts forward a view of the history of the arts which prizes only the products of social elites--the so called 'high art' (Michaelangelo, Beethoven, Milton, the Japanese *No* theatre, Indian classical music)--and holds in disdain the work of artists whose appeal is more popular. Thus, not only have popular music and popular painting been scorned as unworthy of serious study, but even a writer as insightful and influential as Dickens has been dismissed by this school as a mere commercial best-seller. Indeed, Leavis pointedly omits Dickens from *The Great Tradition* with this patronising assessment: 'That Dickens was a great genius and is permanently among the classics is certain. But the genius was that of a great entertainer, and he had for the most part no profounder responsibility as a creative artist than this description suggests....The adult mind doesn't as a rule find in Dickens a challenge to an unusual and sustained seriousness.' (Leavis 1948, p.19).

This approach, in its several manifestations, led to a widespread perception of literature as little more than a leisure pastime, essentially escapist in its appeal and largely unrelated to the more valuable academic tasks involved in natural and social scientific scholarship. As if to encourage this perception, courses in literature, even when I was an undergraduate in the late 1950s and early 1960s, were preoccupied with the technical machinery--the formal qualities--of writing (the rhythms and rhyme schemes of poetry, the image and symbol patterns of fiction, the architecture and linguistic varieties of drama), and actively concerned to dissociate the content of any text from its historical moment. One should, I was told, be able intelligently to respond to a text without knowing anything at all about the circumstances of its author, the time or place of its composition, or the social forces which engendered it. Indeed, it was argued, it is immaterial whether *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599) was actually written by Richard Barnfield or, as had been supposed by some, Shakespeare.

And so, for the natural and social scientists, literature came to be seen (as it had not until our century) as a 'soft' study, inferior in its achievements to the 'hard' quantitative methodologies which were quickly developing in the areas of social enquiry. It is this tradition which has dominated thinking in Pacific education.

But there is another tradition--indeed, a longer tradition--in literary studies which argues that all the activities of mankind follow the same fundamental laws and patterns; that the production of a poem is, in fact, very similar to the production of a table or a motor car or, indeed, of a book on crustaceans; and that all of these productive activities are determined, in important ways, by the specific situation of both the maker and the receiver of the product.

Georgi Plekhanov, the late nineteenth-century Russian theorist, for example, turned his attention to the cave paintings of the so-called 'Bushmen', the Khoi-Khoi and San of southern Africa, and asked why they only showed people and animals but almost never plants. Several mystical and aestheticist interpretations had been offered regarding the nature of these animal images; yet little had been said about the absence of vegetative images. Plekhanov looked carefully at the material reality of the Khoi-Khoi/San, nomadic hunter-gatherers, for whom the pursuit of game was the primary individual and collective activity and cultivation simply did not exist. It is hardly surprising, he argued, that the predominant concern--the experience of hunting and all the beliefs and community patterns which grow out of this activity--would dominate the art of the Khoi-Khoi/San: 'The state of his productive forces, his hunter's mode of life,... leads to his acquiring particular aesthetic tastes and concepts, and not others' (Plekhanov 1981, Vol. 5, p.285). 'Thus', Plekhanov concluded, 'in different periods of social development man receives different impressions from nature, because he looks at it from different viewpoints' (1981, p.283). In this way, Plekhanov went beyond the artificially imposed confines of art criticism, into history, economics and anthropology, to find both richer and more accurate methods with which to approach the interpretation of art.

When it came to the concept of beauty, so pivotal in the aestheticists' argument and so often put forward as an absolute, Plekhanov noted that it was so heavily contingent on other temporal conditions that it could not be valuably employed as a universal measure: 'The ideal of beauty prevailing at any time in any society or class of society is rooted partly in the biological conditions of mankind's development...and partly in the historical conditions in which the given society or class arose and exists'. (Plekhanov 1981, p. 651).

So, while literature may be seen to have its own semi-autonomous history--a history of forms and techniques--it is firmly situated within the same set of material conditions that determines any phenomenon in human life and, thus, needs to be studied within an understanding of those formative variables.

What, then, about the student of the social sciences? In what way can literature be seen not only as an adjunct but as a central body of information of value to social enquiry? One quality of literature, or at least of effective literature, which is absent from most empirical studies is a vividness, a sense of felt reality, a roundness of representation. The literary text--and related theatre genres³--offers a wholly different set of experiences from those presented by sociological, econometric, human-geographical or even historiographical accounts of human

conditions in any given place or period. What these latter texts rarely provide is the texture, the sense of life as it is actually confronted in the environments and times discussed. It is this simulation--and, thus, generation--of active experience⁴ which is what the writers of fiction, poetry and drama are mandated to provide. Because literature, as a consequence of its being a perceived recreation of segments of the human condition, is able to deal with the abstract and the concrete simultaneously, it can, using its unique qualities of implication and indirection (often misconstrued as obscurity), give both a luminous impression of life as lived (physically, intellectually, emotionally) and, at the same time, imply broader patterns. It is this conjunction of the particular and the general, the experiential and the metaphysical, which attracts the layman to read a novel about the past in preference to a study of history, or a novel about the workings of the stock exchange rather than the findings of economic research. It is the reason for the immense and lucrative popularity of such contemporary documentary fictionalists as James Michener, Aurther Hailey, Alex Haley and Paul Erdman.

Some examples here should serve to animate this point:-

- I have read dozens of books--by political scientists and journalists--about the war in Vietnam. But my felt, experienced images of that war come entirely from art--from the films *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter* and *Platoon*. Similarly, I have read numerous accounts of life in General Pinochet's Chile, but none so enduring as that of *Missing*.
- *Tales of the Tikongs* (Hau'ofa 1983) tells me things about the Pacific which no scholarly work of the finest quality could provide.
- Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1600) contains insights into and warnings about the psychological and political complexities of personal ambition which the admirable work *Coup d'Etat* (Luttwak 1969) with all its charts, diagrams and maps cannot approach.
- *Kongi's Harvest* (Soyinka, 1974) is invaluable to the study not only of dictatorships in the Third World but of autocracies in those other two worlds as well. For Kongi (and his followers) resembles not only Idi Amin, General Stroessner, 'Papa Doc' Duvalier and Kim II Sung, but also Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, the Greek Colonels and the thousands of proto-demagogues who at this moment aspire to the kind of power which these people have held.

But, one may reply, *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* may be valid and valuable figurations of the Vietnam war, but what about Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo* series or Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propoganda films of the 1930s? What about the portraits of Pacific islanders in the stories of Jack London, or of Africans in the novels of Robert Ruark, or of American Indians in the cowboy stories of Louis L'Amour, or of women in Ian Fleming's James Bond thrillers? Is all art reliable? Indeed, is art reliable at all? Or is it, as Plato argued, a process of distortion so dangerous that the poet must be banished from the ideal republic (1941, pp. 68-85, 324-40)?

The reply is fairly simple. Art is as reliable as any other form of human reporting--as reliable as a sociologist's research findings, or an economist's data analysis, or a demographer's survey, or a journalist's investigation--no more, no less. The degree of reliability depends upon the qualities of perception of the observer and commentator, on the conscious and unconscious biases which have been conditioned into that observer, on the complex matrix of self- and social-interests which shape any reporter's account of anything. The scientist, like the journalist and the novelist, selects elements out of the infinite variety of phenomena in the universe and identifies patterns within that selection. The results of an enquiry are determined as much by the questions which are asked (and those which are not asked), by the areas about which they are asked (and the areas which are ignored) and by the manner in which the questions are posed as upon the sector of experience which they are intended to test. In other words, the reliability of any narrative depends on how much that account is founded in objective reality--however subjectively received--and how much it is functioning as ideology, here used in the Althusserian sense of a misrepresentation--intentional or not--of reality. (Althusser 1969, 252; Rancière 1955; and Williams 1976, pp. 126-30).

But how does one distinguish the ideological from the reliable, or what Lukács (1937) calls the 'realistic'? One of the measures which Lukács offers is what he terms 'totality'. 'The true artistic totality of a literary work', says Lukács, 'depends on the completeness of the picture it presents of the essential social factors that determine the world depicted' (1950, p. 217). Pierre Macherey (1978), in his *Theory of Literary Production*, extends Luckacs point and suggests that the literary text is characterized as much by what it omits as by what it includes. He builds up a typography of a work in which the absences and the presences cohere into a profile of the author's response to experience. *Rambo*, in other words, leaves out a great deal. Primarily, it leaves out those 'essential social factors' which Lukács maintains are requisite for any text to be

valid (1950, p.218). It is, in short, ideological, a distortion of reality which promotes in its audience the adoption of a set of invalid conclusions. Such art, like the comparable journalism or academic scholarship, may even be quite destructive, the more persuasive it is. Certainly a great deal of the popular art naively consumed by millions around the world as 'only entertainment' may be seen as very effective ideological vehicles (see Dorfman and Matlehart 1975): the Mills and Boon romances (and those of Victoria Holt, Georgette Heyer, Danielle Steele and Barbara Cartland), which sustain a fiercely patriarchal construct of the world while appearing to be no more than idle, escapist daydreams; the songs of Madonna ('Material Girl') and those of most country-and-western singers; and the social Darwinism of Clint Eastwood and Arnold Swartzenegger films. Myriad additional examples may easily be identified in both the 'high art' of the west and the traditional arts of the Third World.

These comments may seem to be reducing literature to nothing more than research data, to be ignoring the aesthetic questions of beauty and pleasure and those forceful attractions which draw people to the arts. If I have done this it is only in order to compensate for what I see as an imbalance in the response to literature in South Pacific formal education. What I would wish to establish is a sense of literature--and art in general--as one of the central manifestations of human experience; one of the fundamental ways in which people attempt to sort out the real from the illusory, to identify the causal structure of their lives, to probe the significance of both the everyday and the extraordinary. In this way, literature is, like the *other* social studies, an investigation into the nature of human reality, one which provides material virtually unavailable through any other source.

Notes

- 1 As late as 1903, the word 'science' was 'applied to the portions of ancient and modern philosophy, logic, etc. included in the course of study for a degree in the School of Literæ Humaniores' at Oxford University. C.T. Onions, ed., *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 3rd ed. rev., 2 vols, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973) 2: 1904.
- 2 Several accessible examples may be found amongst Foundation courses published by Britain's Open University.
- 3 Theatrical enactments--including those on stage, film, video/television and radio--are not strictly literary, as their primary manifestation is not in print but in performance.

- 4 Note that the response to art is here characterised as an active, rather than a passive, process. Even the most undemanding art--the soap opera, the advertising jingle, the primitive anatomical graffito scrawled on the wall of a public toilet--does require the active involvement of the reciever's faculties. This process is better explained by the Gestalt theories of Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Kohler than by the notion of 'hot' and 'cool' media put forward by Marshall McLuhan. See McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964).

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