

Literary into cultural studies

A reply to Martin Ryle

Antony Easthope

To parody a well-known saying, I shall say that a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings one back to it.

Roland Barthes

In 'Long Live Literature?' (*RP* 67) Martin Ryle explores the implications of the outcome of the crisis in 'English', saluting the development of a cultural studies committed to the reading of texts in a historical context but proposing nevertheless that a separate place should be maintained for a different, literary reading of literary texts (or 'literary' texts). Ryle further develops in suggestive outline an account of such literary reading as based in a 'humanist identification' (p. 26) of the reader with the text from which may ensue a sense of what he terms the 'complex interplay between discursive construction of identity and refusal of that construction' (p. 26).

While welcoming this intervention by *RP* into the arena of literary/textual theory I am a bit disappointed that it has taken the expression it does, and some of that disappointment returns in what may be an over-harsh close reading of 'Long Live Literature?' (though the title alone bodes ill). Despite important qualifications and refinements, and, I think, a certain amount of denegation (it's not enough to put some words in scare quotes), Ryle's argument tends to privilege an abstracted notion of 'the literary text', to be apprehended, he says, 'at once in itself' (p. 23), so that he ends up with a conservative legitimization of the aesthetic in textual studies of just the kind he – and others beside him – have hoped to avoid. To hold his position in place Ryle relies upon a series of oppositions: between literary and cultural studies; between the aesthetic and the historical; between form and content. I shall aim to show that none of these oppositions is stable in the way Ryle's main argument presumes, and that his position is seriously damaged by the degree of its adherence to an older paradigm of 'the text', a view which has insufficiently taken on board the

recent shift to a more radical notion of the text as always in a relation to its reader, implying a text/reader dialectic.

Ryle identifies cultural studies very much with a version of reading the text as historical, 'as instances of discourse in a given social and historical conjuncture' (p. 21). Although cultural studies must be concerned with ideology and the historical conjuncture of the text, I would argue that this is not and should not be its exclusive and defining concern, and certainly not as Ryle describes it. His account of the historical takes up a number of positions which don't properly cohere. In writing of Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* Ryle says that our sense of the versions of feminine identity the book proposes must be rejected because of 'our conviction that real women, at the time of the book's writing, could not be reduced to one or other of the available positions' (p. 26). This humanist and essentialist appeal to 'real women' disregards the fact that we only have access to this reality on the basis of a historical narrative, a narrative which necessarily implicates and finds a point of address in the reader of that narrative in the present. I don't want (and for present purposes don't think I need) to get further into the complex questions around metahistory in order to register the point that here as elsewhere Ryle's argument is not firmly and unequivocally dedicated to an acknowledgement that all texts are read in a continuous present.

Ryle rightly warns against the 'high theoretical discussion of literature and ideology' in which an elite, 'possessed of the master-discourse of the ideological' and the 'benefit of hindsight' carried out 'forensic procedures' on the dead body of the text (p. 25). What I would call British Cultural Studies Phase 2 and date 1970–1980, the Althusserian-semiological moment in cultural studies, did assume it spoke from the position of a worldless subject situated outside the text within a metadiscourse which allowed it to assess precisely the degree to which a given text was – simultaneously – progressive and conservative in effect. Yet at the same

time as distancing himself from it Ryle seems to wish to return to this moment, for he writes that ‘an overarching theorisation of the literary in relation to the social/historical is not within our grasp *at present*’ (p. 22, my italics). Well, I would say that the lonely hour when we achieve a totalising theory of the literary in relation to the social/historical will never come because the subject as master of a historical narrative and the subject as he or she now experiences the text to be defined by that narrative can never be in the same place.

In 1975 with great enthusiasm I began teaching a quite new combined English/History degree, combined in that history students took history courses and literature students literature courses (each syllabus, though, followed roughly the same historical chronology) and then brought their separate concerns together in a core syllabus of ‘Common Courses’ taught by both historians and literature teachers together. What I rapidly learned was that the perspectives and interests of the two disciplines were radically disjunct. While literary students became engaged with Chartist hymns, chapters of Dickens and passages from Samuel Smiles in terms of their meanings and effects (including fantasy effects) in the *present*, now, to the group sitting in the room, the history people, though they would listen politely, really thought that all that mattered – to them – was connecting any such insights with their grasp of a historical narrative, the texts *then*. (I don’t think this problem can be simply deposited at the door of the crushing empiricism still prevalent in historical studies in England.)

Ryle also acknowledges this disjunction between the literary and the historical but goes on to try to make it a foundation for his opposition between a historically conceived cultural studies and an aesthetic study of literature which is ‘in principle (or in part) transcultural’ (p. 22). In support of the other side of his imposed split he claims that ‘literary works’ have ‘qualities (“aesthetic qualities”) that cannot be replicated in any account or paraphrase of their discursive and denotative aspect (their “content” and “meaning”)’ (p. 22). I would ask what text – philosophic, legal, literary or whatever – can ever be ‘replicated’ by paraphrase?

Recently, having asked students to choose a text to discuss in a graduate seminar, I was delighted when Anita played us Marilyn Monroe singing ‘River of No Return’ from the film *The River of No Return*. To replicate its content: she has lost her heart to a man on the river of no return and nothing will ever be the same. Yet seminar discussion showed this ‘trivial’ and non-literary text to be replete with unparaphrasable meanings and effects. What *is* a river of no return? If there was a river so immediate and present that time stopped, there was no

before and no after, a sameness absolutely without repetition, how would we ever know about it? What should we make of the way the last two words of Monroe’s assertion (‘I lost my heart on the river of no return’) are *themselves* in the chorus repeated twice by male voices (‘No return! No return!’)? And by *male* voices (Echo and Narcissus in reverse)? How would we replicate the grain of Monroe’s voice, the indelible husky tones of someone who can’t ‘really’ sing? If every text has qualities that cannot be replicated in a paraphrase of their content, every text is aesthetic and the attempt to police a frontier between aesthetic and non-aesthetic begins to come unstuck.



Later, in a fairly traditional way, Ryle tries to retrieve this situation by redefining the aesthetic, but as far as I’m concerned the attempt fails. Such texts, it’s said, have ‘the power of exceeding our predetermined interrogative framework’ (p. 23). So does Monroe’s song. Leaning on Mukavovsky and the Prague school with their notion of the aesthetic as foregrounding, Ryle marks off the merely historical text from ‘another kind of work, which foregrounds the text in order to engage with its internal and contradictory play of meaning in and establish its detailed relations with other cultural practices’ (p. 25). As Terry Eagleton explains in the first chapter of *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), the trouble is that what foregrounds today for one set of readers may not foreground tomorrow or in ten years’ time for another collective. Foregrounding is less a matter of texts than reading (text *and* reading again!).

Crucially, and again following a well-marked path, Ryle affirms that “‘aesthetic’ valuation’ will focus on texts in terms of ‘their formal properties – narrative organisation, descriptive density and precision, vigour of language and so on’ (p. 23). But all texts have formal

properties, all narrative texts have narrative organisation, all texts are dense, precise and vigorous in certain ways. The traditional formalist Kantian aesthetic drawn on to underwrite this position surfaces explicitly when Ryle says that the aesthetic text, 'indissolubly both "form" and "content"', is to be apprehended at once and in itself' (p. 23), whereas in the non-aesthetic 'cultural' text 'it will be above all and in principle ... their content/meaning' which 'engages us' (p. 23).

Now Ryle might well reply that my citations are unfair because at certain points he does distinguish between what the text is said to be in itself and the kind of reading in which the text is taken up. My complaint then is that he has sanctioned my misreading because he has failed to assert, clearly and consistently, that he is talking about aesthetic and cultural as different contexts or procedures for reading within which the reader takes up the text, perhaps even the same text (the 'same' text).

Before returning to that central issue let me indicate two further difficulties ensuing from Ryle's tendency to equate the ideological with content (the signified) and the aesthetic with form (or the signifier). One is that it sidesteps some important ways of addressing literary/non-literary distinctions without relying on the category of the aesthetic. Semiology has a number of reasonable and useful if not conclusive ways of differentiating texts merely in terms of their specific formal, generic and linguistic features before and apart from the notion of aesthetic value. Any Victorian text written in heroic couplets, whether by Tennyson or an anonymous Chartist poet, is by that fact situating itself on the terrain of the literary. A cultural studies which refuses to deploy semiology to make necessary specific distinctions between a Milton sonnet and a Civil War prose pamphlet, a Wordsworth lyric and a song from Madonna, a Hollywood movie and a story about Oliver Reed in 'The Sun', does not in my account merit the name cultural studies.

Ideology as content?

The reason for Ryle's blindness here is both familiar and instructive. With Alan Sinfield he believes that progressive developments in textual studies in Britain have been facilitated by a 'move away from formalism' (Sinfield, cited p. 24). Insofar as this is the case it is a matter for regret because, for instance, it encourages Ryle to identify the cultural reading with a reading for ideology defined exclusively as content. I would argue that, since all texts depend upon the operation of the signifier, their formal properties are always ideological and historical, are in fact more deeply and intractably historical than anything they say. The English poetic

canon's post-Renaissance use of iambic pentameter is profoundly historical, as is the deployment of the now conventional lyric-confessional mode in Monroe's song. Formal questions, if pursued (as my epigraph from Barthes states), turn out in the end to be ideological questions; a progressive textual studies should not consign them, forgotten, to the enclave of the literary. Ryle's opposition between literary and cultural is becoming widely breached.

In the final and most engagingly suggestive part of his essay, Ryle unequivocally opens up the issue of the text in its reading, the text as address to its reader (though even here a number of formulations seem still to hanker after the inherent aesthetic qualities of the text allowing it to be apprehended at once in itself). The cultural studies reading, on this showing, seeks 'to analyse as a problem (rather than to expound as a truth) the social and discursive construction of identity' (p. 26), whereas the literary reading requires an act of 'humanist identification' defined as an 'authentic subjective being ... created within the text itself' when we are faced with it not as construction but enjoy it as lived, given, real.

I find this invocation of humanism unnecessary and unnerving. Ryle cites in support Coleridge's phrase about the 'willing suspension of disbelief' prerequisite to literary experience, a line I have never understood and still don't. A much better theoretical account would apply Lacan's domains of the imaginary and the symbolic, particularly as these have been developed in an English context with reference to film by the work of the journal *Screen*. To summarise: insofar as the reader finds a point of coherent identification in and with the text, that reading takes place within the imaginary, but it can only do so because it is an effect of the symbolic order, the operation of the signifiers promoting that effect of identification. There is no need, then, for recourse to the dubious ally of humanist common sense (still less the even more dubious Coleridge) to support the view that a cultural studies reading can carry forward from literary studies a main aspect of its claims to experiential – as against merely cognitive – engagement of the reader. A context for reading can be set up in which the reader discovers in relation to the text how far their 'immediate', 'direct' and familiar experience is the effect of social, semiological and historical construction. I concur entirely with Ryle (though do not myself find his argument for this very original) that a cultural studies reading may thus afford a 'complex interplay between discursive construction of identity and refusal of that construction' (p. 26). Except that this is not exactly what Ryle says, since he actually concludes that this 'complex interplay' is offered by 'many literary texts', so sailing

back up the river of no return towards the aesthetic.

To sum up: the oppositions I have been trying to unsettle – literary/cultural studies, aesthetic/historical, form/content – should be shaken as hard as they can be because their effect is to retain willy-nilly a traditional place for art, the text in itself, beyond any use but that conferred on it by the aesthetic. The way forward, as I see it, is to go the whole hog, reclaiming (as I've outlined) much of the traditional territory of the aesthetic for the ideological while in the same move discovering in formal aspects of textuality much of what has come to be analysed as ideological. The best way to do this is to approach all the texts in question within a paradigmatic principle I would shorthand as: T <—> R (the reader within a context of reading reads the text as much as the text reads the reader). What we get then is not so much an opposition between literary studies and cultural studies as a transformation of literary *into* cultural studies.

Reply to Easthope

Martin Ryle

In some particular places, Antony Easthope misrepresents my argument: readers who turn to my original article will note, for instance, that he has strategically truncated several quoted sentences. Overall, he tends to present me as wanting to defend the distinctiveness of the literary text, whereas my argument (as he eventually concedes) has a rather different shape: I suggest distinctions between modes of reading, and only then consider how, within the 'cultural studies' mode, some (ex-)canonical texts – not all texts that can be called 'literary' – might be read.

Nonetheless, I welcome Easthope's rejoinder, and recognise that he identifies a number of points where my argument is unsatisfactory. I also welcome this opportunity to take the debate further. Sometimes, in this response to his remarks, I am insisting on a disagreement; sometimes I hope Easthope may find we are on the same ground. My underlying concern is to assert that after the decomposition of 'English' (which I charted in the first part of my article), we still need a language in which distinctions of kind and quality can be made, regarding both texts and ways of reading; and to provoke thought about the terms of such a language. I do not at all regret the eclipse of an exclusively aesthetic evaluation of literature, and I am far from urging that the academic

study of texts should be restricted to a literary canon, however defined. But I am equally far from believing that, whether as teachers or as critics and cultural historians, we can work with an undifferentiated notion of 'textuality' or 'cultural production'.

Form, content, aesthetics

Easthope argues that all texts ('philosophic, legal, literary or whatever') have non-discursive properties which disappear in paraphrase. This is true, but it does not follow that these properties are always equally prominent and important. I claim that non-discursive properties tend to be especially important in literary texts, where they are among the elements which constitute the work's aesthetic quality – or, if you prefer, which allow readers to experience an aesthetic effect. Easthope seeks to counter my claim by discussing 'River of No Return'. But this is a lyric; it is precisely the kind of text which on my own argument we should read, as he reads it, with a close eye on non-discursive elements. It may be 'trivial' – his word, his scarequotes – but it is manifestly literary. (Unfortunately, Easthope confuses the issue by introducing the quite distinct question of qualities which appear only in *performance*.)

I don't in any case seek to 'police a frontier' between texts, but to distinguish a reading ('Englit') which privileges aesthetic qualities and attends mainly to formal and non-denotative aspects, from a reading ('cultural studies') which attends mainly, I argue, to 'what the work is *about*'.

I am happy to agree with Easthope that this latter formulation is inadequate. Cultural studies does need to 'deploy semiology': questions about genre and form are necessarily engaged in textual analysis. I'm not sure how far we get by noting, in his very general terms, that 'the English poetic canon's use of iambic pentameter is profoundly historical', or that formal properties are 'always ideological'. But we do need an awareness of large generic conventions, in relation to long-run historical situations and audiences. Then we need a much more particular reading of texts in contexts, noting how the deployment of particular formal conventions interacts with what I would again, at this point, want to call the work's content and meaning.

The 'cultural studies reading', as I understand it, differs from 'Englit' first of all because it extends our sense of that content and its meaning. It invites us to consider how *this* text is situated with respect to many other texts (written and visual, formal and informal, literary and non-literary, high and low ...); and so also with respect to the larger cultural and historical moment. In my article I cited, as an instance of this kind of work,

Paul Brown's essay on *The Tempest* (in *Political Shakespeare*), which sets the play within a frame of colonial discourse.

Given this extended knowledge of 'content', we can also turn (as Easthope and I agree we should, but as Brown tends not to) to questions involving form, genre, 'semiology': such a question, for instance, as 'How, exactly, does the use by Shakespeare, for Prospero's curtain speech, of an archaic couplet form, within the anachronistic and disingenuous convention of an actor's plea for praise, affect, at the close, our reading of Prospero's authority?' How, we can go on to consider, does that then work back into the meanings of *The Tempest* as a whole, and modify our sense of the confidence and the basis of the colonial, patriarchal and discursive authority whose problematic operation has been displayed? If we chose, we might then go on to make some judgements of quality, and pay some tribute to the playwright, by recognising that 'form', here, cannot be understood as the inert self-perpetuation of established convention, but must be seen as the choice, by Shakespeare, of an unexpected and significant option.

Ideally, I hope we can agree, cultural studies would pay that kind of 'semiological' attention, but it would not (as in some kinds of literary criticism) fetishise 'form' as the criterion of a purely aesthetic evaluation.

Reading and history

In some of his criticisms of my article, Easthope relies on a position defended at length in his *Literary into Cultural Studies*: that no reading can be presented as authoritative, because we have only a plurality of readings, deriving from the plurality of subject positions. For Easthope, the plurality of readings subverts the old idea of the 'unified text' (there is no text except 'the text ... in a relation to its reader'), and this marks the originary moment of Easthope's kind of 'cultural studies'. By the same token, he wants to reject claims we might make to historical understanding, and interpretations or arguments which rely on readerly identification. These in his view rely on ideas of a single meaning, accessible to an ideal humanist subject who would be at once outside the text in a position of mastery, and able to identify with the particular occasions and subjectivities which the text represents.

I agree that we cannot see the text as a self-sufficient object, and I do not suggest that we should pursue a single authoritative reading. Readers actively negotiate with texts' available meanings – a negotiation whose terms derive partly from readers' differing subjectivities. But it does not follow from this that just *any* reading will do. In *Literary into Cultural Studies*, Easthope offers an

entertaining diversity of readings of Hopkins's *The Windhover*. Most of these are very plausible: he does not, though, claim that the poem is about an old steam engine, or a donkey put out to grass. Teaching – discussion and argument about texts – involves attempts to arrive at a consensus, not about which is *the* reading, but about what readings are and are not possible, illuminating, valuable.

Some of the most interesting work in cultural and literary studies is concerned to explore who, across what frontiers of gender, class, geography, ethnicity, history, can read/speak the language of which texts, and how they read/speak it. But the text surely does not consist of the sum of its disparate readings, any more than a language consists of the sum of its individual speakers' idiolects. The text, like the language in which it is written, is the condition of common communication, even as it is the object in terms of which differences of meaning are registered.

Here we get into the argument about readerly identification. In my view, fictive texts oblige us, if we are to read at all, to read through a kind of provisional humanist identification: a particular form of a general 'willing suspension of disbelief', which invites and compels us to identify with subject positions which are not our own. Easthope quotes Lacan on this (with the implication, extraordinary to me, that Lacan is a safer guide than Coleridge on literary matters); but I think Lacan, in the passage quoted, says no more than 'I gotta use words when I talk to you'. Identification certainly is via the 'imaginary' of language, inevitably; it is also, with fictions, especially and explicitly illusory; but at one level its mechanisms are what make the text readable.

But even though we 'can read' the text, we can also refuse to read it. We can learn not to read (though this, it often seems, is the hardest skill to teach our students) – to deconstruct texts and show how in purporting to represent real subjects and real occasions, they represent something else. The presence/absence of that 'something else' is already implied by the notion of 'representation': the text is a version of something which is not the text, but which does not exist independently of the text either. I believe that the ways of reading which have been developed as 'literature' has been moving into the orbit of 'cultural studies' allow us to work towards a much more interesting and adequate sense of 'representation' and of this 'something else': more comprehensive (because it attends to more aspects of the text), more socially and historically grounded (because it is alert to intertextualities and contexts, both those in play when the text was written, and those in play when it is read). There are no isolated texts and no isolated readers, as I am sure Easthope would concur.