

# Value-Judgements and Literature\*

*David Brooks*

## The Issue

In our everyday life we are surrounded by value-judgements. Television advertisements inform us that the latest brand of commodity is better than all the others. Sports commentators enthusiastically claim that some football player is the greatest to emerge in the last so many years. Book reviewers, theatre reviewers, and concert reviewers continue to assume that it is their duty to appraise the products of contemporary art, and to give some sort of reasons for their appraisal, reasons connected with the nature of the works they are reviewing. But in the academic study of literature value-judgements have become suspect. They are commonly thought to be tainted with elitism or caprice. One frequently encounters the long-standing prejudice that value-judgements are a matter of personal taste, and that no-one should interfere with the tastes of others. In 1957 Northrop Frye excluded value-judgements from his system of literary criticism on the ground that they are subjective, and therefore not directly communicable. And in a more recent, popular text-book Catherine Belsey dismisses value-judgements as theoretically misconceived, and proposes instead that criticism should concern itself with the range of possible 'readings' of any literary text, readings which depend on a plurality of meanings which are not fixed or given.<sup>1</sup> My concern in this paper is to reaffirm the need for value-judgements, to explain how they are possible, why they are necessary, and what the implications of value-judgements are for the politics of literary study. In this examination I shall also have to consider to what extent literature, and the study of literature may be described as humanistic. The standpoint of this paper is that of Marxism.

## Values and Needs

The rejection of value-judgements is generally carried out from the standpoint of positivism. Positivism assumes a complete separation between facts and values. Facts are objective, while values are

\* Paper given to the Inaugural Colloquium of the Sydney society of Literature and Aesthetics, Oct. 4-5, 1990.

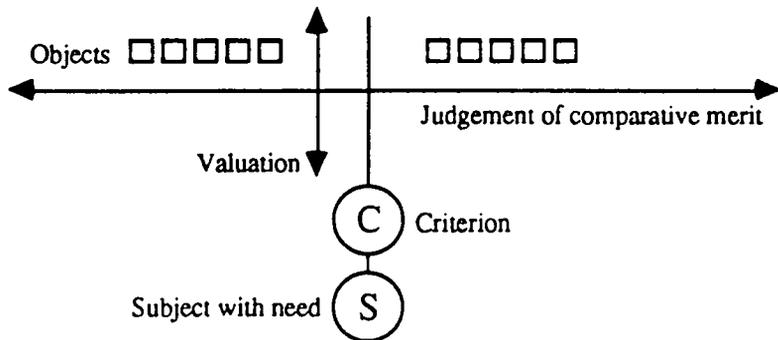
1 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, 1957, pp.18-29; Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, London and New York, 1980, pp.126-128, 20.

subjective. Facts are matters of judgement and truth, while values are only matters of feeling. Factual judgements are cognitive, whereas value-judgements are not. Value-judgements are not really judgements at all, but disguised expressions of feeling. Since individuals may have different feelings, value-judgements must be merely personal, and hence private. From this point-of-view there can be no rational discussion of value-judgements.

This account of value-judgements is too abstract. It abstracts from the actual situations in which valuations are made, and shared. And it makes no analysis of what valuation is, or what the relation is between the subject who values, and the object that is valued.

An adequate account of values must relate values to needs. Value is a relation between human needs and the objects which satisfy them. By 'needs' I do not mean only subjective desires, or, as they may be called, 'wants'. Needs are objective, and potentially subjective as well. That is to say, people may have needs without being aware of them. In a Marxist perspective 'need' is a broader category than 'interest', since Marxism uses 'interest' to mean only material needs.

The analysis of values involves two axes:-



The human subject has a need for an object of a certain sort with certain properties. The object must satisfy a criterion, or standard, if it is to satisfy the need. The criterion and the need are two facets of the same thing. If we look at the matter from the standpoint of the object and its quality, then the relationship is between the object and the criterion. If we look at the matter from the standpoint of the human subject who values, then the relationship is between the object and the subject's need. But it is the nature of the need which determines the criterion. Different objects have comparative merit, insofar as they differentially satisfy the criterion, and hence the need. We may, therefore, analyse the value-judgement into two aspects: there is the judgement of comparative merit which moves along the horizontal

axis in relation to the criterion; and there is the valuing which moves along the vertical axis in relation to the need.

It is essential to distinguish between objective needs and subjective wants, because otherwise it is impossible to make value-judgements *for other people*. If we refer valuation only to subjective want, then each individual can only make value-judgements for himself or herself (or uncritically endorse the value-judgements others make for themselves, of course). I shall argue below that objective needs are founded not only in the psycho-physical constitution of individuals, but also in the social and material conditions of their existence.

We must add two further ideas to our conceptual apparatus: firstly, that some needs have relations to other needs as conditions. That is to say, that one need may promote, or interfere with some other need. Secondly, needs may have relations with other needs as means to ends.

Before we leave this abstract analysis of value, we must get rid of a red herring: this is the issue whether value-judgements are matters of feeling or reflection. This is a red-herring, because in respect of value-judgements, feeling and reflection are convertible. A valuation may begin as a feeling of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, but one can 'rationalise' this feeling: i.e., bring to consciousness, to the level of conscious thought, the causes of one's feeling by examining the object. Conversely, one may scan an unfamiliar object in order to become familiar with its properties, and as a result of this process of reflection produce a feeling of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. (Both these movements occur in the criticism of literary works.) Of course, value-judgements can occur with reflection or feeling separately. I can learn from medical evidence that smoking is bad for me, and make a value-judgement against it as the terminus of that movement of thought. By contrast, I can take delight in a new flavour of ice-cream, and the 'thought' involved in the feeling never gets beyond the level of sensation. Where a value-judgement involves reflection, even if it is connected with feeling, we tend to talk of 'judgement'. Where a value-judgement involves feeling connected only with sensation, or at most perception, we tend to talk of 'taste'. But even at the level of taste there is the more or less accurate recognition that a criterion has been satisfied.

## Human Nature

An adequate theory of the real needs of human beings (as opposed to an abstract analysis of valuation) must be founded in a theory of

human nature. And an adequate theory of human nature must recognise the two dimensions of what is general to the human species ('general human nature'), and what is specific to actually existing human societies, or human nature as modified by determinate social and material conditions of life. This issue has been confused ever since the Romantic period by the common belief that there is no such thing as 'general human nature'. It has been widely held that Marx rejected the concept of a general human nature. But Norman Geras has shown that this is not so. Marx explicitly recognised the concept, and such a concept is presupposed by his mature work.<sup>2</sup>

An account of general human nature must begin with the fact that human capacities are generalised in their nature, and not determined to fixed patterns of behaviour. Human beings have physical and mental powers that may be directed to an unlimited variety of activities. The biological foundation of this is, as is well known, the evolutionary acquisition by our hominid ancestors of upright posture, stereoscopic vision, an enlarged brain, a hand with an opposable thumb, a lengthened period of maturation, and a vocal apparatus which makes possible language, and thereby thought. The acquisition of these characteristics was determined by the evolutionary value of social labour: i.e., the deliberate production of the means of subsistence with the use of tools, as a social, and not merely individual activity.<sup>3</sup>

With this biological constitution human beings are able to manipulate objects, think about the world, and communicate with each other. Because human capacities are general in scope, they may be redirected away from the immediate ends of material life to higher ends: the creation of art, the worship of God, the contemplation of the universe, or perhaps just the improvement of ways to pursue the ends of material life. The general scope of human capacities is, therefore, the essence of human freedom. But, paradoxically, this essential feature of human life also brings into existence the possibility of domination: human beings can turn themselves into objects to serve their own ends, and they can also turn other human beings into objects to serve their ends.

Human beings not only have capacities, they have liabilities: i.e., liabilities to feel, and to suffer. They are liable to feel joy and sorrow,

2 Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*, London, 1983.

3 See George Novack, *Humanism and Socialism*, New York, 1973, pp.19-24. The classical Marxist discussion is Engels' 'The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man'. See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, Moscow, 1970, vol. 3, pp.66-77.

love and hate, hope and fear, desire and aversion, pleasure and pain, etc. In the fluctuations of these feelings there are certain constant patterns, or measures: A loves B; A loses B; A feels grief.

Human beings are, therefore, essentially contradictory creatures: they are blessed with the capacity to act in an infinite variety of ways, to think an infinite variety of thoughts, to believe an infinite variety of beliefs, and at the same time are condemned to suffer in quite determinate ways. They are the reality of Hegel's identical subject-object, but this identity is a contradictory unity.

Insofar as human beings are essentially social and material beings, we must posit certain basic needs. Material needs will include food, shelter, clothing (where necessary) and health. Psycho-physical needs will include sleep, play, exercise, and sexual satisfaction. Psychological and social needs depend on the fact that human beings are social individuals, both social beings and individuals at the same time. Psychological and social needs, therefore, will include:

1. the individual's need for self-realization, and the achievement of well-being: i.e., the fullest possible development of the individual's powers, and the achievement of well-being that is both psychological and physical.
2. mutuality in personal relationships, which moves from enlightened self-interest to love.
3. the recognition of the necessities and possibilities in reproducing, or transforming the social order.

The psychological and social needs will subsume (in principle) the material, and psycho-physical needs.

We can posit, also, basic moral and political needs. Human life, both individually and collectively, requires courage, and self-control, loyalty and benevolence, truth and rationality, and some sort of justice.<sup>4</sup>

I am not arguing that all these needs are compatible with each other in any given circumstances, either for an individual, or for all individuals, or for society collectively. Generally, human history has proceeded so far on the basis that they are not. I am not even arguing that all these needs are recognised. They commonly are not. I am merely arguing that they are objectively real needs, which exist whether anyone recognises them or not, and that to the extent that

4 This is not the place to argue a theory of justice, Marxist or otherwise. But it is clear that no human society can be stable over the long-term without at least an ideal of justice. For a Marxist discussion, see Norman Geras, 'The Controversy about Marx and Justice' in *Marxist Theory*, ed. Alex Callinicos, Oxford, 1989, pp.211-267.

they are not satisfied, human life is diminished.

Of course, human beings can deny not only the needs of others, but their own needs. An individual can choose to lead a celibate life. What the effect of this will be on her physical and mental well-being will depend on the nature of the rest of her life. One individual can murder another, and the same individual can also commit suicide. There is nothing problematical here for this account of needs, because needs are objective, and not just subjective desires. Being objective, if a need is denied, *there will be consequences*, even if those consequences are only dimly apprehended, and the cause of the consequences altogether ignored.

In insisting on the objective character of human needs, I am pursuing one of the themes of Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach', viz. that the subjectivity of human beings is objectively conditioned.<sup>5</sup> This is the only way out of subjectivism and relativism in values.

So much for general human nature, which has to be considered in terms of capacities, liabilities, and needs.

Specific human natures come into being through the determinate social and material conditions of life of any actual, historical society with its relations to other societies with which it comes in contact. Here I follow Marx. The social relationships into which people enter in order to produce, and reproduce their material life depend on the state of development of their productive forces. These social production relations in turn necessitate other social and/or political institutions to organise the reproduction of the life of the society. And the social consciousness of the society, including not only the mentality of the people, but its customs and moral codes, and its formal systems of thought and belief are conditioned by the totality of the social and material conditions of its life. The whole system is kept in being in pre-class societies by the agency of the people as a whole working relatively in co-operation; while in class societies the agency is that of the ruling class acting in its own interests, and exploiting the various forms of compulsion to which the ruled classes are subjected.<sup>6</sup> The net result of this specification for general human

5 Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, pp.13-15.

6 The above account is a conflation based on different passages from Marx. See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology: Part One*, ed. C.J. Arthur, London, 2nd ed., 1974, pp.42-48; Marx, 'Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*' in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, pp.503-504; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, in association with New Left Review, 1981, pp.927-928.

nature will be that some needs will be recognised, and others ignored, or suppressed. Some capacities will be promoted, while others will be discouraged. In some circumstances human feeling will be considered, and in other circumstances not. There will be conflicts and contradictions within individuals, between individuals, and between social groups. The patterns in which general human nature is specified will be registered in the customs, laws, moral codes, philosophical and religious beliefs, and scientific theories, etc. of the society.

Human nature must forever move within this domain of needs, capacities and liabilities specified by the actual social and material conditions of life. The only general aim that the human species can set itself is the removal of contradictions in the satisfaction of its needs by the development of its individual and collective powers.

### Literature and Human Nature

Literature (and within 'literature' I include, for the sake of convenience, the oral compositions of pre-literate society) is, then, concerned with specific human natures, the specific patterns of needs, capacities, and liabilities of people in definite, historical societies. It is concerned with the actual and the possible, the real and the ideal, the necessary and the free, insofar as these are manifested in activities, feelings, relationships, values, and beliefs. Literature concerns itself with 'the good life' and its conditions, from the collective work-songs of pre-literate societies to *War and Peace*. To this extent, it may be said that literature is humanistic. But this is wholly abstract. It has nothing to do with Renaissance humanism, Christian humanism, liberal humanism, Marxist humanism, or any other historical humanism, for these are all specific ideologies serving specific needs.

Literature cannot depict the 'good life' purely objectively. Not only is the subject-matter of literature some specific human nature, but it is always produced from the standpoint of some specific human nature. This standpoint is always social, even when not apparently so. Novels of alienation presuppose the social life from which the characters are alienated. Romantic lyrics mediate between alienated human subjects and a Nature invested with human powers and qualities. In this way, also, literature may be described as humanistic, if 'humanistic' means to do with the interdependence of human beings. But again, this is wholly abstract.

Through literary works, then, human beings produce, and discover their own specific human natures (i.e., the specific human natures of their society, not their individual personalities). Insofar as

they read the literatures of other societies (or of their own society in the past), their awareness of the general possibilities of human life is extended. These practices are also usually described as humanistic, but, as before, the description is quite abstract.

It follows from the above account that literary works are, or ought to be, valued in general for serving the above purpose: viz. the production and discovery of specific human natures, for this satisfies the need of human beings to develop social self-knowledge. This in turn is part of the general project to increase the satisfaction of human needs by the development of individual and collective powers. Judgements of comparative merit amongst literary works will be concerned with the degree of their truthfulness to the specific human nature they take as their material.

However, this general account of literary valuation does not deny the fact that in particular historical societies the production of literature will serve specific social needs peculiar to those societies. This distinction between the general and the particular is essential to understanding the relationship between value-judgements, and the historical character of literary works.

### Literature as Expression and/or Imitation

The account which I have given of literature implies that literary works express or imitate human reality. But these concepts of expression and imitation have been called in question by what Catherine Belsey calls 'post-Saussurian' thought. She dismisses 'the theory that literature reflects the *reality* of experience as it is perceived by one (especially gifted) individual, who *expresses* it in a discourse which enables other individuals to recognise it as true.' This theory she calls 'expressive realism'.<sup>7</sup>

### Expression

To take the concept of expression first. Belsey does not just restate the doctrine of the 'biographical fallacy': viz. that it is erroneous to interpret literary works in accordance with what is known of their author's life. Nor does she just restate the doctrine of the 'intentional fallacy': viz. that it is wrong to think that literary works are not, in some sense, independent of their author's intentions.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Belsey, p.7.

<sup>8</sup> For both fallacies, see W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy' in W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, London, 1970, pp.3-18.

Her rejection of the concept of expression of experience by an individual involves a denial of the autonomy of human subjectivity; it depends on the claim that 'the subject is constructed in language and in discourse and, since the symbolic order in its discursive use is closely related to ideology, in ideology.'<sup>9</sup> In other words, the subjectivity of individual human beings does not exist prior to, or independent of, language; and since language, as discourse, inscribes the ideology of human society, human subjectivity does not exist prior to, or independent of, ideology.

This is an ambiguous half-truth. Does the statement mean that the human subject is constructed *by* language, discourse, and ideology? Or, does it mean that human subjects construct themselves socially by means of language, discourse, and ideology (leaving open the possibility that other means may be used as well)? The former of these statements is false, whereas the latter is true.

The objection to the former interpretation is that it reifies these abstractions, language, discourse, and ideology. In this view human beings become the passive objects of these transcendental powers, while having no powers of their own. But how could language, or anything else, turn human beings as essentially passive objects into active subjects?

There is a confusion here between the idea of language as a condition, and the idea of it as an efficient cause. Language is certainly a condition of thought, such that language can be the instrument of human subjects. But, a condition is not necessarily an efficient cause, and so need not be considered as a hidden pseudo-agent.

Ideology should not be considered in abstraction, but in its definite social connections. An ideology may be defined as the ideas, beliefs, and value-systems which reflect the needs and interests of a social group. But the aspect that an ideology presents to human beings depends on whether it is the ideology of one's own group, or that of another group with which one's own group is in opposition. The ideology of one's own group is the articulation of shared activities and experiences, shared identities, values, aims, purposes, and any beliefs about the world that bear on the life of the group. This is not to say that the ideology will not on occasion appear as an adverse power. It will impose duties on the members of the group. By contrast, the ideology of an opposing group will present itself not merely as an adverse power, but as a hostile power. This group may

9 Belsey, p.61.

try to impose its ideology on its enemies. But empirical evidence suggests that social groups tend to resist their opponents' ideology.<sup>10</sup>

The only issue of theoretical interest in this connection concerns ideologies that are universal in form, such as Christianity. Such universal ideologies articulate in thought, in an ideal way, the relations between different social groups in a social order, and thus become a site for the contestation of different needs and interests. Thus, in the class conflicts in England in the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries different variants of Christianity appeared to express the needs, and justify the actions of the opposing sides.

Ideology, therefore, remains the creation of active human subjects. And the relationship between subjectivity, and ideology cannot be considered a sufficient ground for dismissing the idea of the expression of experience by an individual human subject. The claim that it is is another red herring.

Belsey denies that the individual human subject can be the origin of meaning.<sup>11</sup> But this is mere confusion. If I use the English language to state that I am weary of the academic year, and am longing for Christmas, it is certainly true that the meaning of my statement depends on the social institutions of the academic year and Christmas, and on the social existence of the English language, from which I select items to make my statement. But the statement is, nonetheless, mine, and expresses my feelings. Speech-acts have both individual and social aspects. Whoever doubted it? At this level, the issue is utterly trivial.

But, at the level of literary works, the issue is important. It is true that literary works are produced from a social standpoint, but they are, nonetheless, produced by individuals with a particular personal history and experience, and therefore with particular powers and interests. To regard a literary work as only the articulation of a social standpoint is to ignore what is most distinctive in the work. There can be no justification in dismissing the individuality of a literary work for the sake of its social character, any more than there can be a justification for the reverse.

## Imitation

We must now consider the other side of the theory of 'expressive realism', the idea that literary works reflect, or imitate human reality.

10 See, for example, Alex Callinicos, *Making History: Agency, Structure and Change in Social Theory*, Cambridge, 1987, pp.140-147.

11 Belsey, p.3.

Belsey is concerned to deny this idea as well. She states:

The claim that a literary form reflects the world is simply tautological. If by 'the world' we understand the world we experience, the world differentiated by language, then the claim that realism reflects the world means that realism reflects the world constructed in language. This is a tautology. If discourses articulate concepts through a system of signs which signify by means of their relationship to each other rather than to entities in the world, and if literature is a signifying practice, all it can reflect is the order inscribed in particular discourses, not the nature of the world. Thus, what is intelligible as realism is the conventional and therefore familiar, 'recognizable' articulation and distribution of concepts. It is intelligible as 'realistic' precisely because it reproduces what we already seem to know.<sup>12</sup>

This claim depends on two assumptions: firstly, that the world we experience is constructed in language; and secondly, that signs signify by means of their relationship to each other rather than to entities in the world.

The first assumption may be glossed by two other statements of Belsey:

[Saussure] argued that far from providing a set of labels for entities which exist independently in the world, *language precedes the existence of independent entities*, making the world intelligible by differentiating between concepts.<sup>13</sup>

The world, which without signification *would be experienced as a continuum*, is divided up by language into entities which then readily come to be experienced as essentially distinct.<sup>14</sup>

Belsey attributes to Saussure a kind of linguistic Kantianism, in which language is the structuring principle of the phenomenal world. It not only singles out the entities in the world, and provides conceptual equivalents of them. It actually brings into existence the material bodies of the world we experience.

Saussure, of course, does not say anything of the sort. What he claims is that language is the condition for distinct thought. Without language there would be no concepts. He states:

Psychologically our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and

12 Belsey, pp.46-47.

13 Belsey, p.38. My italics.

14 Belsey, p.40. My italics.

*The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics*

nothing is distinct before the appearance of language.<sup>15</sup>

Belsey's misinterpretation of Saussure is perhaps influenced by a common misunderstanding of the theory of Edward Sapir. Sapir writes:

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached ... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.<sup>16</sup>

Terence Hawkes, who quotes this passage, glosses it by saying:

There is therefore, concluded Sapir in a classic statement, no such thing as an objective, unchanging 'real world'.... The assumption fundamental to this conception is that the world of space and time is in fact a continuum, without firm and irrevocable boundaries or divisions, which each language divides up and encodes in accordance with its own particular structure.<sup>17</sup>

Contrary to Hawkes, Sapir begins, in the quoted passage, by assuming that there is an objective world, and that it may be distinguished from the 'real world' in quotation marks of social consciousness inscribed in language. Whatever the validity of Sapir's view of language's capacity to victimise human beings, he did not assume that the material world is constituted by language. Hawkes' misunderstanding of Sapir is analogous to Belsey's misunderstanding of Saussure.

If all this only means that a human community will view the world from the standpoint of their own needs and interests, then this

15 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in collaboration with Albert Reidlinger; translated from the French by Wade Baskin; introduced by Jonathan Culler, London, rev. ed. 1974, pp.111-112.

16 Edward Sapir, *Selected Writings in Language, Culture, and Personality*, ed. David G. Mandelbaum, Berkeley, 1949, p.162.

17 Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics*, London, 1977, pp.31-32.

is true. But this is quite compatible with there being a real, objective world, and therefore with the possibility that discourse, of whatever kind, may reflect it more or less accurately, or fail to do so.

Belsey's second assumption that signs signify by means of their relationship to each other rather than to entities in the world does correspond to Saussure's thinking. But on this issue it is Saussure who is misleading.

In his doctrine of the sign Saussure dispenses with any concept of reference: i.e. a relation between the sign and an object in the real world. The signification of signs is a relationship between the two aspects of the sign, the sound-image (or signifier), and the concept (or signified). The sound-image signifies the concept. As elements in language, the sound-images have no distinct character in themselves; their distinct character depends on their relations with each other, and on their relations with their concepts. Similarly, the concepts also have no distinct character in themselves, but depend for their distinct character on their relations with each other, and their relations with their sound-images. When a sound-image and a concept come together, there is constituted a sign. But the relation between the sound-image, and the concept is arbitrary or, to be more exact, is conventional.<sup>18</sup>

This is a very useful doctrine, as it allows Saussure to investigate the relations between the sound-images of language (signifiers), and the changes that occur in the relation between the sound-images and the concepts (signifieds) in the history of the language. For example, the idea that sound-images, insofar as they are elements of language, have no distinct character in themselves illuminates the fact that a whole group of different sounds may all be recognised as the same word by speakers of the language. The differences amongst the positive characters of the sounds are suppressed.<sup>19</sup> The idea of the arbitrary nature of the sign explains the contradiction of both the inertia, and the facility of linguistic change.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, with respect to the idea of reference Saussure's doctrine of the sign is incoherent. In a traditional theory of reference a sign is a sign in virtue of a relation to an object in the real world. A sign must be a sign *of* something, otherwise it cannot be a sign. A sign is essentially relational. But Saussure denies this relationship of sign and object. Instead, he substitutes 'signification', which is the

18 Saussure, pp.65-70, 111-14.

19 Saussure, pp.118-119.

20 Saussure, pp.143-179.

relationship between the two parts of the sign, the sound-image and its concept.<sup>21</sup> And Saussure claims that concepts do not pre-exist language.<sup>22</sup> A concept only comes into existence in language. But a concept is also a relational term: a concept must be a concept *of* something, otherwise it is not a concept. Since concepts do not pre-exist language, they cannot have their conceptuality in themselves. Either they must get it from their sound-image, which is impossible (since the sound-image only acquires its meaningfulness from its relation to the concept); or, they must get it from a reference to an object in the real world, which Saussure denies. Saussure's doctrine of the sign is, therefore, incoherent.

What happens in language is that a hitherto meaningless sound is associated by human beings with an object in the real world. This association is then displaced into the sound-image, and suppressed, so that when the human beings hear the sound-image, they no longer perceive it as a sound image, but think it as a concept. Concepts are the result of this process of association, displacement, and suppression. It is impossible to theorise language without the notions of human intentionality, and reference.

Saussure's procedure is valid as a methodological abstraction in order to isolate an area of study: viz. the arbitrary relation between signifiers and signifieds. But as a claim in semantics, it is false.

The result of this excursion into linguistics is that Belsey's claim that literary forms cannot reflect the world will not hold up. It is based on two assumptions: the first—that the world we experience is constructed in language—is misconceived; the second—that signs signify by means of their relationship to each other rather than to entities in the world—is incoherent.

It should be added that Saussure's linguistics concern *langue*, or a language-system, rather than *parole*, or individual utterances.<sup>23</sup> Now literary works are individual utterances, not language-systems. It is misguided, therefore, to transfer to literary works the attributes of language-systems. There is nothing in Saussure's linguistics to suggest that he thought that individual utterances were incapable of truth and falsehood. There is no ground, therefore, in Saussure's work to call in question the capacity of literary works to reflect reality. Admittedly, the way in which a work of fiction reflects reality is quite different from the way a statement asserts a fact. But this difference

21 Saussure, pp.65-67, 114.

22 Saussure, pp.111-112.

23 Saussure, pp.7-11.

belongs to a completely different problematic.<sup>24</sup>

Post-Saussureans seem to think that the whole of language-use falls under the headings of semantics and grammar. They silently abolish those features of language-use that belong to logic and rhetoric. There is no justification in Saussure's work for this wanton destruction.

## Althusser

For her account of ideology Belsey depends on Louis Althusser, the French structuralist Marxist. Belsey agrees with Althusser against the Marx of *The German Ideology* that ideology is not just false consciousness; and appropriating Althusser's definition of ideology, she says:

...what is represented in ideology is 'not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live' (Althusser, 1971, p.155)<sup>25</sup>

Whatever one may think of Althusser's definition of ideology, it is bizarre that Belsey should adopt it, since Althusser, as a philosophical materialist, assumes the existence of a real world independent of human thought. How this is compatible with Belsey's philosophical idealism, which constitutes the objective world through language remains mysterious.

Althusser counterposes ideology to science. Ideology is the sphere of sensing, perceiving, feeling, and imagination, while science is the production of knowledge.<sup>26</sup> Sensing, perceiving, feeling, and imagination do not count as knowledge. In its strict unqualified form, this theory is self-subverting. For, science can only produce knowledge on the basis of data partly supplied by ideology (and partly supplied by previous scientific production).<sup>27</sup> But the data of ideology are tainted with non-scientificity, as they do not count as knowledge. Since a science can only be as good as its data, the resulting scientific 'knowledge' produced must also be tainted. The

24 See, for example, John Hospers, *Meaning and Truth in the Arts*, Chapel Hill, 1946, pp.141-207.

25 Belsey, p.57, citing Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, London, 1971. For Marx's view, see Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology: Part One*, pp.37, 47, 50-52.

26 Louis Althusser, 'A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre' in *Essays on Ideology*, London, 1984, p.175.

27 Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969, pp.183-184.

distinction, therefore, between science as knowledge, and other forms of awareness is artificial, and impossible to sustain.

Althusser's theory of science and ideology is connected with his theory of art, a theory which, in its developed form produced by Pierre Macherey, is also appropriated by Belsey.<sup>28</sup>

Althusser writes:

*I do not rank real art among the ideologies, although art does have a quite particular and specific relationship with ideology ... Art (I mean authentic art, not works of an average or mediocre level) does not give us a knowledge in the strict sense, it therefore does not replace knowledge (in the modern sense: scientific knowledge), but what it gives us does nevertheless maintain a certain specific relationship with knowledge. This relationship is not one of identity but one of difference. Let me explain. I believe that the peculiarity of art is to 'make us see' (*nous donner à voir*), 'make us perceive', 'make us feel' something which alludes to reality...*

*What art makes us see, and therefore gives to us in the form of 'seeing', 'perceiving' and 'feeling' (which is not the form of knowing) is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes.... Balzac and Solzhenitsyn give us a 'view' of the ideology to which their work alludes and with which it is constantly fed, a view which presupposes a retreat, an internal distantiation from the very ideology from which their novels emerged. They make us 'perceive' (but not know) in some sense from the inside, by an internal distance, the very ideology in which they are held.<sup>29</sup>*

What is remarkable in Althusser's theory of art from the standpoint of Belsey's appropriation of it is that Althusser's view presupposes the very conception of art as 'felt life' or 'lived experience', that belongs to the hermeneutic tradition, which Belsey wishes to reject. To put it bluntly, Althusser presupposes the methods of reading of I.A. Richards, and F.R. Leavis.<sup>30</sup> What Althusser is offering is a theoretical reinterpretation, from a Marxist point-of-view, of the hermeneutic conception of 'lived experience'. This becomes obvious in what he later says:

28 Belsey, pp.106-109, 135-139, 143-144. See Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, translated from the French by Geoffrey Wall, London, 1978.

29 Althusser, 'A Letter on Art' in *Essays on Ideology*, pp.173-175.

30 See I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*, London, 1929, pp.179-234; F.R. Leavis, 'Literary Criticism and Philosophy' in *The Common Pursuit*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with Chatto and Windus, 1976, pp.211-222.

Neither Balzac nor Solzhenitsyn gives us any *knowledge* of the world they describe, they only make us 'see', 'perceive', or 'feel' the reality of the ideology of that world. When we speak of ideology we should know that ideology slides into all human activity, that it is identical with the 'lived' experience of human existence itself: that is why the form in which we are 'made to see' ideology in great novels has as its content the 'lived' experience of individuals. This 'lived' experience is not a *given*, given by a pure 'reality', but the spontaneous 'lived experience' of ideology in its peculiar relationship to the real. This is an important comment, for it enables us to understand that art does not deal with a reality *peculiar to itself*, with a *peculiar domain* of reality in which it has a monopoly (as you tend to imply when you write that 'with art, knowledge becomes human', that the object of art is 'the individual'), whereas science deals with a *different domain* of reality (say, in opposition to 'lived experience' and the 'individual', the abstraction of structures). Ideology is also an object of science, the 'lived experience' is also an object of science, the 'individual' is also an object of science. The real difference between art and science lies in the *specific form* in which they give us the same object in quite different ways: art in the form of 'seeing' and 'perceiving' or 'feeling', science in the form of *knowledge* (in the strict sense, by concepts).<sup>31</sup>

Althusser is clearly polemicising against the hermeneutic theory that the humanities and natural sciences have different objects, and consequently must use different methods: nature presents us with non-human, repeatable occurrences which must be investigated by observation, deduction, induction, and so forth in order to discover general laws under which events can be subsumed as instances. Human life presents us with the unique lived experience of human individuals, which can only be known 'from the inside' by empathy, imagination, and understanding.<sup>32</sup> Althusser is re-introducing a quasi-Hegelian theory that art and science are concerned about the same sorts of object, but at different levels of awareness. Art never rises beyond sensation, perception, and feeling, whereas science attains to the only true form of knowledge in conceptual thought.<sup>33</sup>

As we have seen, Althusser's distinction between scientific knowledge, and ideology is artificial, and collapses. But his theory of art is valuable in two ways: it offers to integrate the object of

31 Althusser, 'A Letter on Art' in *Essays on Ideology*, p.175.

32 See, for example, Roy J. Howard, *Three Faces of Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Current Theories of Understanding*, Berkeley, 1982, pp.1-23.

33 See Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind*, being *Part Three of The Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, Translated by William Wallace, *Together with the Zusätze in Boumann's Text (1845)* Translated by A. V. Miller, with Foreword by J. N. Findlay, F.B.A., Oxford, 1971, pp.292-315.

hermeneutics—'felt life', 'lived experience'—into Marxist social theory, and so contribute to a Marxist account of human subjectivity. Secondly, the conception of the internal distantiation that art achieves in relation to ideology draws attention to the ideological contradictions that can occur in works of art, contradictions that can become palpable, because works of art present their objects at the levels of sensation, perception, and feeling. The internal distantiation of art is precisely the palpability of the contradictions.

With this view of art, it is not surprising to see that Althusser assumes that works of art have comparative merit ['Art (I mean authentic art, not works of an average or mediocre level)']. This assumption is necessary to the theory: *only* good works of art can have the power to present their 'lived experience' with such palpability that the internal distantiation is achieved.<sup>34</sup>

What Belsey does not seem to realise is that before Althusser's critical method can be applied, Leavis' method of criticism, the method of hermeneutics, must be applied first. Leavis says:

The critic's aim is, first, to realize as sensitively and completely as possible this or that which claims his attention; and a certain valuing is implicit in the realizing. As he matures in experience of the new thing he asks, explicitly and implicitly: 'Where does this come? How does it stand in relation to...? How relatively important does it seem?'<sup>35</sup>

As Leavis says on another occasion:

[My hints] all involve the principle that literature will yield to the sociologist, or anyone else, what it has to give only if it is approached as literature. For what I have in mind is no mere industrious searching for 'evidence', and collecting examples, in whatever happens to have been printed and preserved. The 'literature' in question is something in the definition of which terms of value-judgement figure essentially, and something accessible only to the reader capable of intelligent and sensitive criticism.<sup>36</sup>

It may be that Leavis' method by itself is inadequate, and needs to be supplemented. But to try to use Althusser's method without Leavis's foundation is attempting to build a castle in the air.

34 For an adverse judgment on Althusser's remarks, see Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*, London, 1978, pp.82-86.

35 Leavis, 'Literary Criticism and Philosophy' in *The Common Pursuit*, p.213.

36 F. R. Leavis, 'Literature and Society' in *The Common Pursuit*, p.193.

## Literary Criticism and Politics

It is true that Macherey, and other post-Althusserians have moved away from this position, but in this I think they are mistaken. Macherey argues that there is no such thing as Literature, only pieces of writing that may become 'literary' to the extent that they are used ideologically in definite cultural practices. In this view, it is the constitution of writing as Literature that should be studied.<sup>37</sup>

The obvious, and in my view valid objection to this is that literary study ceases to be the study of literature, and becomes the study of the history of cultural politics. Macherey would no doubt reply, 'Exactly so. That's all there is.' But, in this case, Marxist critics have a problem with value. Either they can abandon value altogether, and so revert to positivism, in which case it is possible that a telegram might one day become constituted as Literature. Thus, what may count as Literature becomes wholly indeterminate, and the passive reflection of external ideological interests. Or, the critics must privilege their own values, while turning them loose, ungrounded, to the contingent play of capricious desire. In which case, they revert to subjectivism. The only way out of this dilemma is to recognize the existence of objective needs. But the assumption of objective needs reinstates the objective character of literature.

Of course, it is true that in specific societies literary works may be put to any number of social purposes peculiar to the society. Dr Johnson blamed Shakespeare for writing without a conscious moral purpose, and held that the metaphysical poets could not write correct verse.<sup>38</sup> But, in these views Johnson was holding to false preconceptions. His own culture, and its socio-political imperatives encouraged him to privilege specific forms of writing, and discouraged him from paying attention to the actual principles of organisation of Shakespeare's plays, and the metaphysical poets' poems. (This does not imply that all metaphysical poems are good.) It is necessary to reaffirm what is valid in liberal humanism, and agree with Arnold that the duty of the critic is to see the object as it really is. 'Disinterestedness' has been unfavourably viewed by Marxist critics as some sort of bourgeois mystification, but quite unnecessarily so.

37 See Pierre Macherey, 'An Interview with Pierre Macherey', *Red Letters*, 5 (1977), pp.3-9, and 'Problems of Reflection' in *Literature, Society and the Sociology of Literature*, University of Essex, 1977, pp.41-54.

38 See Samuel Johnson, *Selected Writings*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Patrick Cruttwell, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1986, pp.270 (from 'Preface to Shakespeare') and 403 (from 'The Life of Cowley').

In bourgeois discourse 'disinterested' is systematically ambiguous. It can mean just 'honest', willing to examine evidence, and not distort or falsify it according to one's desires. It can also mean that human beings should, and can dissociate themselves from any social or ideological standpoint they may have. It is everybody's duty to try to be 'disinterested' in the first sense; and no one can possibly be disinterested in the second sense, even if they imagine they are. I may study literature from my own ideological standpoint, but I can still pay attention to the quality of work. If I read a socialist novel, I cannot automatically judge it to be good, merely because I am a socialist. If it is bad, I must say so, not only out of duty, but in the interests of socialism. To do otherwise would not only discredit me, but also the social movement I support. This assumes that it is possible to distinguish between particular political interests, and judgements of comparative merit, and it is. (I do not say this is always easy in practice.)

The other side of this issue is that there is a genuine political dimension to criticism. This can be illustrated from an episode in Homer's *Odyssey*. After Odysseus has returned home, and massacred the suitors, he punishes the goatherd, Melanthios, and the undutiful maidservants. Melanthios has previously insulted Odysseus without recognising him, and the maidservants have slept with the suitors. Odysseus hangs the maidservants in the courtyard, and then methodically mutilates Melanthios, cutting off his nose and ears, hands and feet, and his genitals.<sup>39</sup> There is no suggestion that the poem takes up a critical stance on this. On the contrary, it seems to be the just thing for a master to do to his slaves in the circumstances. On a Christian, or post-Christian sensibility, the effect can only be horrifying. The punishment seems so out-of-proportion to the offence. But one cannot say it is bad literature. For humanists, Christian, liberal, or Marxist, the only social purpose this episode can serve is to provide an occasion to affirm that whatever sort of society we might want to create in the future, it will not be like that. Humanists cannot assume that all literary works will serve their moral/political purposes.

But not everyone is a humanist. Contemporary militaristic disciples of Nietzsche might cry exultingly, 'That is exactly the sort of society we wish to create!' At the point where humanists and Nietzscheans divide, criticism becomes political. This is unavoidable.

Criticism must reject the positions of both the aesthete, and her

39 Homer, *The Odyssey*, xxii, 419-477.

counterpart, the consumer of mass culture. An aesthete is someone who restricts her interest in literary works to judgments of merit, and refuses to recognise the social, moral, and political needs that literary works exist to satisfy. This is not only irresponsible from an external point-of-view; it is to be in state of practical contradiction with the works themselves, since the essence of literary works is to present variants of 'the good life' to assist in the collective project of resolving the contradictions between human needs.

It is easy to condemn the aesthete for irresponsibility, and futility; it is harder to know what to do about the consumer of mass culture. It is easy to judge the merit of the commodities of mass culture. A 'Mills and Boone' romance omits, simplifies and distorts human material in such ways as to provide an escapist fantasy, which encourages its middle-aged readers to regress to a mental age of early adolescence. This is not liberating, or empowering. To defend mass culture on grounds of personal taste, or to blame the critic for elitism is bluff and bluster. The commodities of mass culture make vast profits for the owners of the mass-communications networks. To leave their products uncriticised is tacitly to support part of the most powerful and wealthy ruling class that has ever existed in the history of civilization. What is more elitist than that?

Criticism must be social; it must involve a critical dialogue, since it is easy to be led astray by personal preference, or ideological conviction. To engage in dialogue is difficult now because of the proliferation of critical languages, but the attempt must be made, if criticism is to have any social value. It will be most fruitful if it is recognised that value-judgements are founded in objective needs.

*David Brooks, B.A., B.Phil (Oxon.)* lectures in English at the University of Sydney with a particular interest in the eighteenth century, philosophy and Marxist theory.