

# Literary scholarship as mediation : an approach to cultures past and present

Autor(en): **Sell, Roger D.**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **19 (2007)**

PDF erstellt am: **07.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-100049>

## **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.

Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.

Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

## **Haftungsausschluss**

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

# Literary Scholarship as Mediation: An Approach to Cultures Past and Present<sup>1</sup>

Roger D. Sell

This paper suggests that one of the main roles of the literary scholar is as a mediator between different sociocultural positionalities, past and present. If literary scholars, together with scholars in other areas of the humanities, were to shoulder this task more boldly, and if its value were more broadly recognised within educational institutions at all levels, then conflicts between different groupings, both smaller and larger, might in the long run be easier to resolve. For this to happen, however, scholars will need to ground themselves on something like a distinction between distorted and genuine communication, and on an account of literature in particular as one among other forms of genuine communication. Some such view will make the ethical, hermeneutic, and evaluative dimensions of literary-scholarly mediation especially easy to grasp. So equipped, scholars will be well placed to promote a sense of the literary community as indefinitely large and indefinitely heterogeneous. The point being that, when duly mediated, a literary text is neither universal in the way suggested by Johnson, Arnold and Leavis, nor a site of inevitable cultural conflict in the way suggested by much postmodern theory.

## 1. Introduction

If the denizens of one cultural milieu are aware of some other cultural milieu, whether of the past or the present, they may borrow from it. The items which then cross borders can represent culture in the widest sense, including the domains of religion, folklore and custom, agriculture and horticulture, industrial practice, economic and financial arrangements, the arts and popular entertainment, communications and

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper belongs to an ongoing series of publications in which I am developing ideas first substantially put forward in my *Literature as Communication: The Foundations of Mediating Criticism* and *Mediating Criticism: Literary Education Humanized*.

information technology, clothing, and cuisine. And once an item becomes firmly established in some new environment, it will seem entirely at home and natural there, even in a case such as Indian food, now eaten and enjoyed all over the world, yet everywhere retaining distinctive markers of its sub-continent of origin.

But cultural cross-fertilization may be more difficult than the success stories seem to allow. Paradoxically, the wisdom of hindsight can blind us. Just because we now unthinkingly accept some long since borrowed practice, this does not mean that our culture's older way of doing things lost its attraction overnight. An innovation can run up against cautiousness, superstition, vested interest, downright laziness or simple lack of imagination, and such resistance can also be underscored by the suspicion and dislike that stem from racial prejudice. No matter how keenly eaters everywhere now relish Indian food, Jos Sedley in *Vanity Fair* (1847 – 1848), the elephantine Collector of Boggley Wallah, was perceived as rather eccentric in his taste for spicy sauces. Even in the Britain of today, the smell of curry-making can still be a factor in inter-ethnic tension.

In the face of opposition, alien cultural items may need effective explanation and advocacy if their border crossings are to prove irreversible. The peregrinations which interest me in the present paper are literary, and my starting-point is that some of the most valuable literary scholarship has always performed precisely this function of persuasively mediating between one cultural milieu and another.

Take Jonathan Bate's *The Genius of Shakespeare* (1997), for example, a book whose scope is not restricted to familiarizing Shakespeare himself. Especially for many native speakers of English, its most interesting eye-opener could well be Bate's sympathetic record of the French and German traditions of Shakespeare commentary. Here he offers his readers a sense of far-reaching fellowship, within a Shakespearian community which is actually world-wide, and which for generation after generation has been embracing ever more heterogeneity. It is a community within which scholars, critics, teachers, translators, performers, producers, filmmakers, as well as ordinary playgoers, readers and cinema-goers, have been making the attempt, from within their widely different positionalities, to empathize with characters in the plays, with Shakespeare himself, and with each other. As a result, their understanding of characters, of Shakespeare, and of each other has steadily expanded. Despite countless differences of opinion, some of them serious, the areas of common

ground have become so broad that even both sides of a serious difference of opinion can in one sense co-exist within the mind of a single member of the community. This amounts to a kind of genuinely social bonding across positional difference, yet a bonding which has never called on individuals to surrender their own identity or assessment. Like all true communities, the Shakespearian community presupposes an agreement to dis-agree when necessary.

## 2. Scholarly legitimization

Bate's kind of humanistic mediation between different positionalities is not something we scholars much boast about. Yet it represents one of the strongest legitimations for the work we do. Not only that, but it equips us to perform a service for the entire human species. If every literary scholar, if every student of culture and languages, if every historian, more audibly drew on their own expertise to mediate between human individuals or groups and their human others, and if the role of such humanistic mediation were fully recognized within primary, secondary and tertiary education systems the world over, then the world would probably be a happier and safer place.

Situations where humanistic insight could be valuable constantly occur in every area of human life, both public and private. But for the sake of emphasis, let me take the field of international relations at the highest political level. If humanities scholars within both the Western world and the world of Islam had been able to do more to help people within their respective cultures understand each other's sensitivities, then the whole Rushdie affair could perhaps have been avoided, and we might even have been spared the recent war in Iraq. When George W. Bush began that war, he used a particular kind of language. What he said was that Iraq belonged to an axis of evil nations, and that other countries would now have to choose whether they wanted to be on the side of good, or on the side of evil. Here the most powerful man in the world was himself using the same rhetoric as the terrorists he was professedly targeting as his enemy. He was oversimplifying and diabolizing the "other," and thereby cutting himself off from genuine communication with it; he was refusing to respect the cultural memory of the "other," while remaining rigidly imprisoned in his own cultural memory; and he was discouraging neutral parties – Switzerland or Finland, for instance – from offering

assistance as mediators in the dispute. Within a world where scholarship and education in the humanities were truly functional, elected leaders would never behave in the Bush manner, or if they did, they would immediately fall from power. If the empathetic insights of linguists, of discourse analysts and philologists, of literary scholars, of students of history, cultures and religions, were more fully integrated into the thought-worlds of men and women in every walk of life, then the chances of genuine communication would be that much better; cultural memory, while remaining a source of justifiable pride, would be less likely to deteriorate into cultural blinkers; and the conditions for the resolution of conflicts between one grouping and another would be improved.

As things are, ever since the early eighteenth century, when mediation came to be thought of as special branch of diplomacy, it has not been seen as an undertaking calling for much understanding, creativity or forethought. Its perceived scope has rather lain in the sorting out of conflicts already well under way. As Kalevi J. Holsti so bluntly noted in his *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and the International Order* (1991), "there are no cases on record where formal mediation actually prevented a war" (12). True, Guy Olivier Faure and Jeffrey Z. Rubin's *Culture and Negotiation* (1993) did show how cultural understanding has offered unexpected opportunities for the resolution of water disputes. But this was an exception rather than the rule. At the end of the second millennium, textbooks for trainee international diplomats were still failing to see mediation as a preventative hermeneutic process in which a humanities mind-set could be of value. Although the title of Peter Marshall's *Positive Diplomacy* (1997) might have suggested otherwise, Marshall envisaged nothing more than a routine proffer of incentives, sops and threats, against a stable background of reciprocal incomprehension and *realpolitik*.

Why? Well, it is easy enough to blame leaders from George Bush downwards, parliaments, local authorities, universities, tax-payers, for simply not understanding scholarship in the humanities, for not putting enough money into it, for not listening to what it has to say, for deeming that their own best interests lie elsewhere. And we can easily point to wonderful humanistic scholarship and ask, with as much rage and indignation as we like, how anyone could miss its contribution to the understanding of human othernesses. Yet how well have we ourselves grasped this legitimation? And how able, let alone willing, have we been to help other people grasp it?

In part our half-hearted incapacity here stems, I suspect, from a fear that a legitimation may be coterminous with a usefulness. Sometimes we sound like pure scientists, or like a liberally educated Victorian gentleman, or a Victorian would-be gentleman, who would rather have died than be an engineer. Many of our number still hope that our goals will be perceived as very far removed from the crassly utilitarian. Yet when I say that the humanities disciplines help us to respond to many different kinds of human otherness, I am describing what for human beings is actually a self-sufficient goal. We live in a world inhabited by other people, and we cannot avoid having to negotiate with them. We are naturally interested in any knowledge which can enhance our understanding of them, just as we are naturally interested in what the hard sciences have to tell us about the physical and biological parameters within which we operate. When I then go on to claim that our humanistic feel for different cultural milieus could help to alleviate those misunderstandings and injustices which so systematically follow the contours of the world's major cultural divisions, and which offer such a fertile seedbed to terrorism, I am merely pointing to one of the many beneficial consequences of humanistic learning when its fundamental legitimation is fully embraced. I am not proposing some rationale that is narrower, more particular, and exclusively utilitarian. The humanities offer us a preparedness for real-life situations and activities that is altogether general, a preparedness for problems, challenges and pleasures which could take many different, often quite unforeseeable forms.

On the other hand, if our ambitions are too completely unworldly, if our scholarship seems too autonomously inapplicable or genteel, we lose credibility. Especially in the role of mediator between different positionalities, we shall get absolutely nowhere if we deny our own entirely earthbound positionality. Quite the reverse, we shall lay ourselves open to charges of irresponsibility or disingenuousness. There is no Archimedean point outside of history from which to assess the range of human cultures quite objectively. Even Finland and Switzerland, though neutral countries, are not without interests, and for some purposes it may well be important to stress that the positionality of a Swiss scholar is not the same as that of a Finnish scholar – not to speak of German or British or American positionalities. Yet in the twentieth century, some of the major scholarly paradigms positively encouraged the lay-person to take no notice of the humanities at all. The objects of humanistic study were defined as having so little to do with human life within any recog-

nizable positionality that their only suitable home really did seem to be an ivory tower. Literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture – the Arts with a capital “A” – were still often described as constituting an aesthetic heterocosm all of their own, and much linguistic scholarship was just as energetic in abstracting from reality, through a focus on *langue* which quite overlooked *parole*. Nor did it help that humanities scholarship, like twentieth century scholarship in general, was becoming fiercely professionalized. We may not agree with George Bernard Shaw that all professions are simply “conspiracies against the laity” (xxii). But if we over-indulge in jargon-ridden hyperspecialization, we shall never cut much ice outside the academy. That so few British and American publishers nowadays produce books on humanities topics for a general educated reader – books about literature which cover several different authors from several different periods, for instance – does not bode well for the humanities’ long-term survival, and we scholars should do everything we can to reverse the trend. Otherwise, taxpayers and the payers of university tuition fees will be less and less able to grasp the humanities’ *raison d’être*, and the likelihood of a more widely working yeast of humanistic mediation in the world at large will become steadily even smaller.

### 3. Communicational theory

If we can only solve our own basic attitude problem, if we can truly summon up the will to engage in humanistic mediation as a scholarly task that is neither crassly utilitarian nor irresponsibly unworldly, then our next step must be to establish that task’s intellectual foundations, for here, too, the dominant twentieth century paradigms were not exactly what is needed now. We have all along been blessed with wonderful humanistic scholarship, with literary biographers and critics like Jonathan Bate, whose work mediates as an instinctive matter of course. But for some eight or nine decades such work has received no endorsement from orthodox theory and methodology. The plain fact is that, when Victorian comparative philology lost ground to Saussurian linguistics, when Victorian biographical criticism gave way to Modernist literary formalism, interpretations of the past and the alien came to receive a lower priority.

From that point onwards and right up until 1968, in linguistic and literary analysis alike, there was a strong implication that scholarly mediation between different positionalities was not even *necessary*. The great achievement of Saussurian and Bloomfieldian linguistics was to map out the formal structure of decontextualized *langue*. Deliberately or not, the impression was given that for a human being to have internalized this was tantamount to being able to communicate. In literary scholarship, likewise, language was seen as functioning in one and the same way for all readers. New Criticism spoke of universally accessible formal properties, psychoanalytical criticism of universal complexes and archetypes, and when Leavis, the leading evaluative critic, declared that Fielding was lamentably deficient in “marked moral intensity” (11-12), the implication was that mature readers of any time and place would agree with this verdict, and that even Fielding himself ought to have known better.

After 1968, which saw the publication of Barthes’s seminal essay, “The Death of the Author,” there was an implication, no less strong, that scholarly mediation between many different positionalities was not even *possible*. In throwing the pre-1968 universalist approaches into question, Barthes stressed the extent to which literary activity is shaped by the particular sociocultural contexts within which it takes place, a point which feminist, gay, lesbian, religious, ethnic, post-Marxist and postcolonial critics also developed, each with their own kind of exemplification. As for late-twentieth-century linguistic thought, attention was now firmly transferred from *langue* to *parole*, as a concern for context also began to affect the work of sociolinguists, anthropological linguists, pragmaticists, and critical discourse analysts. In literary and linguistic thought alike, an interest in the extent of a human individual’s imaginative or moral autonomy was not much in evidence. For the sake of emphasis, Barthes had decentred the human self altogether, and many others followed suit. Both the identity and behaviour of human beings were now seen as very much defined by their particular sociocultural positionality. They could be so boxed in by it, indeed, that the identity and behaviour of human beings representing some other positionality could figure, by implication, as beyond their ken. The world could even be thought of as consisting of different factions ranged in unassuageable conflict – the scenario of the culture wars which raged in the 1990s.

The stalemate was merely confirmed by the model of communication deriving from semiotics, which underlay much linguistic and literary thought throughout the twentieth century. Here communication was

seen as the transmission of a message from a sender to a receiver, from a speaker to a listener, from a writer or author to a reader, from a narrator to a narratee, in other words as a uni-directional process in which one party was active and the other more passive. The great merit of this model was that communication in the real world often does take this form. But in all such cases we can speak, with Jürgen Habermas, of distorted communication, i.e. of communication which is not genuine, because it is not truly dialogic in spirit but skewed by some disparity between the participants. Whenever individuals fail to respect each other's common humanity and right to an opinion, communication is inevitably going to turn out this way. But communication does not have to be like this, and it was unfortunate that twentieth century communicational theory did not also develop a model of communication at its most genuine. One of the few alternative models that did emerge was within literary scholarship, in varieties of reader response criticism and deconstructive criticism which sought to decentre the sender-author by empowering either the reader or language itself, conceived as a kind of animistic force in its own right. Either way, the author was said to have no final control. Which was excellent as far as it went. The only snag was that this account overthrew the semiotic model either by merely inverting its imbalance so as to favour the receiver, or by removing communication from the sphere of human responsibility altogether. The possibility of a human reciprocity in communication was still excluded, and so too, obviously, was the possibility of some third party's attempt to make a helpful intervention between two parties unsuccessful in understanding each other.

One way out from this impasse, I would suggest, is to see communication as, at its best, *communication in the etymological sense of the term*. It is "community-making". Throughout the twentieth century, one of the more particular shortcomings of much linguistic and literary theory was an unproblematized assumption that communication takes place within a single, unitary context. In point of fact, any two communicants, no matter how similar they may seem in terms of sociocultural background, will always come to the communicational process from within a life-world that is not only shaped by a particular phase of history but which is to some extent uniquely their own, by virtue of their particular range of past experience and personal preferences. So much so, that every communicant can be thought of as interpreting and responding within a different context. Granted, to some degree the two

contexts do have to overlap. At the very least, communicants have to share a semiotic system and some knowledge of human life's existential basics: birth, death, primary and secondary needs, and relationships with individuals and within society. But the contextual overlap is never total, and in cultures which are far apart from each other the existential basics are of course manifested in very different forms, which means that intercultural communication may be problematic. On the other hand, positionality need not rigidly determine a human being's powers of understanding, and the difference between one positionality and another can be a strong stimulus to communication in the first place, and positively beneficial as the process continues. The mental precondition for such enriching negotiation of otherness is a degree of moral and imaginative autonomy that is well within our reach as human beings. We are nothing if not social animals; our positionalities do differentiate us. But we are actually social *individuals*, capable of mentally distancing ourselves from our own positionality and of empathizing with a different one. Thanks to our powers of empathetic imagination, the area of contextual overlap – the common ground between one communicant and another – can actually increase.

This is not to say that successful community-making of this kind leaves all participants in complete agreement. Sometimes the only agreement will be an agreement to disagree. Communicational empathy is not at all the same thing as sympathy, and community-making is not the cementing of some glorious consensus. When communication extends the area of contextual overlap, this happens first and foremost in terms of mutual understanding. Community-making is not a forging of allegiances, but is often an attempt to live with several different allegiances that remain in conflict with each other. Seen this way, a community is potentially very large indeed, and potentially very heterogeneous indeed. Within the community, opposite and discordant values, and opposite and discordant interpretations, are always in simultaneous circulation, and are under constant re-negotiation.

I mention interpretations, because community-making is always communication *about* something. The two participants are comparing notes about some third entity as they see it from within their different life-worlds. This triangularity of the communicational situation is actually replicated in the texts that people generate within it. That the third entity under discussion needs to be verbalized is obvious enough. How else could it *be* discussed? But as stepping-stones to community-making,

communicants also textualize, or textually imply, images of themselves and of each other. The three apexes of the communicational situation correspond to the three persons found in a language's systems for verbs and pronouns, even if, when we are talking about ourselves or each other, the first and second person forms also have to do service at the apex of the third entity under discussion. You and I can talk about you and me.

New Critics who detected the presence of implied authors and implied readers in literary texts were well ahead of that period's linguists. But their literary formalist beliefs prevented them, too, from seeing that such communicative personae had counterparts in communication of other kinds. In their concern to move away from biographical criticism, they were unwilling to recognize that the communicative personae of a literary text can help to render it genuinely community-making within the real world. My own claim has been that even texts which contain an element of fictionality, even texts which are written with an eye to literary style and form, even texts which come to us as the work of somebody long since dead and buried and/or belonging to a cultural tradition quite alien to our own, can bring widely different people into dialogue. In fact they have always done this very notably, and with all those benefits of fellowship and stimulus to change of which I was speaking in connection with the Shakespearian community. The Shakespearian community is merely the most significant among numerous such communities, all interwoven with each other within the larger community which we can think of as that of literature.

A literary text's stylistic and formal qualities will sometimes be distinctive in ways which Romantic-Symbolist-Modernist accounts of the uniquely organic form of every new work can valuably highlight. But style and form will always have a crucially communal dimension as well. Successful communication of any kind, including literary communication, is co-adaptational. No matter how original literary writers are in their innovations, their starting point is actually the range of genre possibilities as inherited. When they succeed in making their own mark, when the world adapts to them, so to speak, this will be partly because they themselves have first adapted to the world. As they have done so, they will have invited readers to bond with them. Most obviously, perhaps, a recognizable metre in poetry is a rhythm to be widely and pleasurably shared, even when the poem's subject matter is of the saddest or

the strangest. In fact, the shared rhythm makes a reader's empathy with the sadness or the strangeness that much more likely.

Reader empathy does become less straightforward when the reader no longer belongs to the communicational situation in which the text was originally written and distributed. Here a new communicational situation arises. One apex of the situational triangle changes, while the other two, the author and the entities under negotiation, remain the same. This in turn will mean that the text, as a replica of the current communicational situation, is no longer accurate. There may be significant differences between the particular current reader and the reader as imagined by the writer in writing. And even though the author and the entities under negotiation have not changed, the way in which they, too, are replicated in the text will not have been brought about with an eye to this new particular reader. The new reader's knowledge and assessments of the writer's context, and of the original prospective reader's context, will not be the same as that of those two first parties themselves, and the new reader's sense of the contextual overlap between them will be correspondingly different as well. No matter how much new readers try empathetically to re-position themselves back into the original communicative situation, they still cannot actually become a real person in that there-and-then, but continue to be the person they already are in their own here-and-now. There is an important sense in which the text was simply not written for them. Even though some literary writers have had the ambition to write for human beings in all places and all future times, their texts nevertheless carry, in their most intimate communicational arrangements, the marks of a particular historical milieu.

But even when the differences between the original and current communicational situation are very sharp, communication is still possible. In terms of addressivity, such an instance is not actually so unusual. One of the relatively few kinds of cases where the match between a text's current real reader and its implied reader is going to be very close is that of the private letter when read by its addressee. And even with a private letter, the real person actually addressed may not be able to identify in every way with the letter's implied reader persona, yet will be able to read the letter even so. In a very large number of other kinds of case, the implied reader persona is going to have to cater for, and be pro-cessed by, many more than just one individual, even in the text's original communicational situation. These individuals may often differ

widely from each other, and very many of them may not recognize themselves in various aspects of the text's implied reader. But here again, this does not make reading impossible. For the purposes and duration of reading, readers are imaginatively able to position themselves as a text's implied reader, while actually remaining a different sort of person. With however little agreement or pleasure, a male chauvinist pig is perfectly able to read a text that is written as from one feminist to another.

For the purposes and duration of communication, we do have the ability to empathize both with the other person and with the other person's conception of who his or her respondent is going to be. Yet having done so, we have the right to an opinion of our own. Because, as Kant insisted, all human beings share the same rights and dignity, we have an obligation to try to understand the other, and the right to try to make ourselves understood. Because the other could have something which may be of benefit to us, trying to understand it is also in our own interest. And because we could have something which may be of benefit to the other, trying to make ourselves understood is also a duty.

#### 4. Mediation

##### *4.1. The ethical dimension*

So the ethical dimension of mediating literary scholarship, as of any other kind of mediation, is in trying to safeguard the autonomy and interests of all parties. The aim is to ensure that literary communication is genuine and not distorted, that it is bidirectional and not unidirectional in temper. To state this in a negative way, on the one hand, the scholar tries to prevent both the arrogant presentism by which here-and-now readers may silence there-and-then authors by re-writing them in their own image or imposing their own values; on the other hand, the scholar also tries to combat the historical or cultural purism by which readers undervalue their own response in the belief that the significance of an instance of language use or cultural production is to be defined by, and confined to, the exact circumstances of the original communicational situation. More positively stated, mediating scholars can really help their fellow-humans imagine their way into otherness, an experience which can be genuinely dialogic, as understanding moves through a kind of

self-alienation towards a fuller self-discovery. In Gadamer's words: "To recognize one's own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of spirit, whose being consists only in returning to itself from what is other" (14). Mediating literary scholarship can make it easier for readers in some particular here-and-now to read their way into author- and reader personae created in a different there-and-then, personae whose continuing human potential will in this way be re-released.

#### 4.2. *The hermeneutic dimension*

What calls for the main effort of research in mediating scholarship is of course its hermeneutic dimension. The mediating scholar does everything possible to improve the chances of reader empathy by supplying those kinds of knowledge, and by explaining those ideas, value judgments, presuppositions, and prejudices which, though taken for granted by the writer in the original communicational situation, are not readily extant within the current reader's new one. This is where mediating scholarship will be doing much to rehabilitate and revise methodologies which in the twentieth century were sometimes blamed as too Victorian.

##### 4.2.1. *Biography and history*

Take, for instance, the use of biographical and historical information. Carefully guarding against the Victorian tendency to *reduce* literary works to biography or history, a mediating critic can use these kinds of knowledge so as to pick up things from the text which, in the new communicational situation, would otherwise remain silent.

Henry Vaughan, in his poem "I walked the other day to spend my hour," tells how, on his meditational walk through a wintry field, he at one point picked up a stick to dig about for the bulb of a "gallant flower" that he remembered having seen there in the spring. Having found the bulb, he thought how the flower would one day reappear with spring's return, and happily buried it again. This made him think that the dead, and one dead person in particular, sleep a peaceful sleep, though at the end of the poem his thoughts ascend to God in a prayer for further help in understanding life's dark mysteries.

And from this cave where dreams and sorrows reign  
 Lead me above  
 Where light, joy, leisure, and true comforts move  
 Without all pain,  
 There, hid in thee, show me his life again  
 At whose dumb urn  
 Thus all the year I mourn. (*Poems* 242)

This sudden juxtaposition of his thoughts of an eternal life of joy in heaven with his apparently endless life of solitary mourning by the loved one's urn will be beautiful, surprising, poignant for any reader at all, I would imagine. But if a helpful scholar tells you that Vaughan was a Welsh Anglican writing during the Commonwealth Period, when the Puritan rulers declared the Book of Common Prayer illegal, executed the Archbishop of Canterbury, and passed an Act for better Propagation and Preaching the Gospel in Wales, whose rigid enforcement entailed the ejection of Vaughan's own brother Thomas from his living at St Bride's Church, Llansantffraed, the replacement of him and his ilk by preachers more to Roundhead taste, the total suppression of Anglican forms of worship, and the closure and devastation of many church buildings, then you suddenly get a whole new take on Vaughan's trajectory as a writer.

His prose work *The Mount of Olives* (1652) was clearly offered as a kind of devotional substitute for the forbidden Book of Common Prayer. It clearly channelled Anglicans' communal distress.

The wayes of *Zion* do mourne, our beautiful gates are shut up, and the Comforter that should relieve our souls is gone far from us. Thy Service and thy Sabbaths, thy own sacred Institutions and the pledges of thy love are denied unto us; Thy Ministers are trodden down, and the basest of the people are set up in thy holy place. . . . [R]eturn and restore us, that joy and gladness may be heard in our dwellings, and the voyce of the Turtle in all our land. (*Works* 166)

As for his devotional poetry, its frequent echoes of Herbert's *The Temple*, so often written off by twentieth century critics as a slavish derivative-ness, originally very much served as part of the outlawed Anglican community's spiritual cement. Here was a reminder of those happier and more orderly days of the early 1630s, and in poem after poem Vaughan was offering forms of joy and grief, within a give-and-take of

fellowship, to co-religionists rudely deprived of other public modes of communion.

In fact, this was a very clear case of something we find in genuine communication of any kind at all: an underlying hopefulness. When human beings are really trying to make a community, they believe in its possibility. Even an extremely bleak writer will be hopeful in this sense, since the difference between a publishing pessimist and a solipsistic suicide is absolute. To publish a very sad or disturbing text is to encourage understanding and fellow-feeling in suffering, and it is even to lay oneself open to the possibility of refutation, or at least of consolation.

So yes, Vaughan's mourning beside the loved-one's urn was always intensely personal, was always a heart-rending appeal for commiseration with his own predicament. But it was also more than that. It tended to create a literary community which could come together around the poem itself, as one alternative to the Puritans' unsatisfying burial rites. It preserved and consolidated a group identity which can confront an appropriately informed reader today with a most remarkably powerful human otherness, and, at the same time, with a pattern of sheer human resilience that is universally inspiring. If the helpful scholar's mediation is only tactful enough, the literary community will continue to become ever larger and more heterogeneous.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4.2.2. *History of genres*

Another preoccupation of Victorian scholars that has a strong mediating potential is literary history, particularly when seen as the history of genres. When Yeats wanted to mark the death of a group of people inspired to bravery by a common cause, for instance, he was not starting from scratch. Whatever he wrote would be bound to enter into intertextual relationships with Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" of 1854, a poem still greatly admired by Mr Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927), for instance, which is mostly set before the First World War. Without thinking about it, Mr Ramsay and his contemporaries would have assumed that, give or take a few variations and optional features, Tennyson had given this genre its more or less definitive form. Most typically, such a poem would be either in a higher

---

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller attempt to mediate Vaughan's work along these lines, see Sell, *Mediating Criticism*, 139-64.

style reminiscent of epic, or in a lower style reminiscent of a ballad, except that Tennyson had already gone in for a kind of mixture of the two. It could either be fairly long or, like Tennyson's, fairly short. And the heroic action could either be particularized to the deeds of individuals or, as in Tennyson, treated in a more general way as the behaviour of an entire group of characters. As for the *sine qua non*, the heroic action itself would surely have to be clearly narrated, presumably as in Tennyson in the third person, and there would be little doubt about the heroism's value, which, after all, was surely such a poem's point. Any moral judgements would be likely to be straightforward in themselves and plainly stated, though not unemotionally. So much for precedents.

But how did Yeats's coadaptation with the genre actually turn out? Well, "Easter 1916" is not much longer than Tennyson's poem. But even stylistically, there is a marked difference, since it is still more varied than Tennyson's mixture of ballad and epic. The first ten lines or so ("counter or desk among grey / Eighteenth century houses") are certainly low key, and even realistic – *Dubliners* is not far away – , while the last ten lines or so do rise to a bardic chant ("Now and in time to be . . ."). But the intervening lines about the stone in the midst of the stream apparently belong to a third, Symbolist mode. Then a still bigger surprise is in the matter of narration. Not only are both the generalizing and individualizing alternatives rejected. There is actually no narration of the heroic action at all. A putatively obligatory feature is quite missing. The opening lines may well seem like the beginning of a story ("I have met them at close of day"), and the closing lines may well seem like a retrospective comment on a story. But there is no explicit narrative middle. All Yeats offers is the series of epitaphs, which are puzzling enough in themselves, being a good deal less than flattering ("A drunken vainglorious lout"). Not only that, but the narrative gap connects with another innovation: the pronouns of the story-like beginning and end include the first person singular and plural, since the strategy throughout is to foreground *responses* to events rather than the events themselves. Yeats's own response is troubled and ambivalent. The value of the heroism is questioned. The beauty is "terrible". So complex, in fact, are the feelings expressed that in the central passage of Symbolism even plain statement is set aside.

But whereas for the poem's first readers this unremitting sequence of surprises and difficulties must have been extremely unsettling, for a new reader today the radical shockingness may pass unnoticed. Precisely be-

cause poems such as "Easter 1916" itself and Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" are now probably more familiar than "The Charge of the Light Brigade," they may even be taken as the norm. Without the mediating assistance of a good annotated edition or a well-informed teacher, a new reader of Yeats's trimeters,

O when may it suffice?  
That is Heaven's part, our part  
To murmur name upon name . . .  
Was it needless death after all? (289)

simply may not catch the disturbing intertextuality with those trimeters of six decades earlier,

Some one had blunder'd:  
Their's not to make reply,  
Their's not to reason why,  
Their's but to do and die. (Tennyson 289)

What was going on in Yeats's poem was not so much a matter of a direct verbal allusion, echo or source, as of a positive difference in sentiment and tone. Both the passages just quoted discuss an obligation to unquestioning acceptance, but in Tennyson this belongs to the dead heroes, in Yeats to the surviving mourners, for whom, in line with Yeats's general drift, it is more problematic. For his earliest readers, this twentieth-century dissonance would have differentiated itself from harmonious Victorian certitudes of which their instant recall may even have been rather vague and general. But for readers whose sensitivities have now been deadened by two World Wars, by the Holocaust, by Hiroshima, and, even more to the point, by the daily suicide bomb attacks in today's Iraq, Yeats's anxiety and confusion may seem merely run-of-the-mill. Without the help of historical literary scholarship, all desire for a nobler and more inspiring human world may be beyond their powers of imagination.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller discussion of "Easter 1916," see Sell, *Literature as Communication*, 187-195.

### 4.2.3. *Cultural heterogeneity*

I am suggesting, then, that with the aid of mediating scholarship Vaughan with all his otherness, Yeats with all his otherness, can become part of our thought-world. Yeats and Vaughan's responses to their situations, their sense of the human, their hopes and fears for the human, become available to us. We can enter into dialogue with literary writers even when they represent a more or less vanished group identity with which few of us can have any direct line of contact.

Exactly the same would apply for a writer representing some alien group identity existing in our own time. In fact there can even come a point when we begin to wonder whether the past or the alien really are so past or alien after all, and when our own self-image may begin to change. The truth is that, by dividing our world up into different sociocultural epochs and groupings, we have merely tried to make sense of chaos. A culture is not real in the same way that Mount Everest is real, but is an intellectual category imposed on a very wide range of human characteristics and behaviour. It seems homogeneous, therefore, only if you describe it at a high level of abstraction. The lower your level of descriptive abstraction, the greater the amount of diversity and even contradictions you will notice.

Think only of the disagreements that arise within one and the same culture about one and the same literary writer. In Britain, from their first publication onwards, the novels of Fielding excited both blame and praise.<sup>4</sup> Lady Mary Wortley Montagu said that Fielding's happy endings "encourage young people to hope for impossible events to draw them out of the misery they chuse to plunge themselves into" (65). Other contemporaries accused Fielding of blatant immorality, Dr Johnson agreeing with Richardson that "the virtues of Fielding's heroes were the vices of a truly good man" (Boswell 343-344). In many such critics disapproval has always gone hand in hand with accusations of superficiality – Leavis's dismissal of Fielding was anticipated by Johnson's comment that the difference between Richardson and Fielding is that between "a man who knew how a watch was made, and a man who could tell the hour by looking on the dial-plate" (Boswell 344). A fair number of commentators have always clearly preferred novels that are more Puritan in seriousness, and perhaps also more tragic, novels which confront

---

<sup>4</sup> In *Mediating Criticism* (291-352) this reception history has a central place in my attempt to mediate Fielding for readers today.

their characters with moral choices more momentous, which regard sexual relations as more profoundly significant, and which advertise more openly their exploration of character: novels, in other words, as written by Richardson or Lawrence. Yet if, on any direct line from Richardson to Lawrence, Fielding has no obvious place, this has always won him many robust admirers. Boswell said that Fielding did not encourage a "strained and rarely possible virtue," but that he does favour honour, honesty, benevolence and generosity. "He who is as good as Fielding will make him, is an amiable member of society" (Boswell 344). For Coleridge, too, Fielding was delightful. "To take him after Richardson is like emerging from a sick room heated by stoves into an open lawn on a breezy day in May" (496). Chesterton suggested that those who shy away from Fielding's realism only do so because they have lost faith in a limitless goodness existing *outside* humanity; consequently everything bad *in* humanity seems to leave even less room for goodness in Creation as a whole; Fielding, however, merely gives us human nature as it really is (261-2, 266).

The more you become aware of such culture-internal disagreements, the more one cultural milieu can come to resemble some other milieu which, at a high level of abstraction, might seem to be very different from it. Still more to the point, you begin to realize that a culture's heterogeneity is not a matter of the society simply falling into two or more opposing camps. The diversity runs right through the society's individual members. Up until fairly recently, many of Fielding's readers found him not only boisterously entertaining and realistic but also rather immoral and unsearching as well. Thackeray described Tom Jones as "an ordinary young fellow, ruddy-cheeked, broad-shouldered, and fond of wine and pleasure. He would not rob a church, but that is all" (60). In which, said Thackeray, there is nothing surprising, and nothing that might not be dealt with in a novel. But to admire such a fellow so blatantly! There's the rub. Thackeray obviously found it difficult to make up his mind. And human beings do. They will be very sure about a large number of things. But within any culture there will also be issues that seem less clear-cut. If you had asked a group of mid-nineteenth century readers to write down their opinion of Fielding, they would often have tidied up their impressions and written something fairly coherent – would have opted either for the Johnson line or for the Boswell line. But in more genuine communication, there would often have come a

point where any such coherence broke down and they started to sound more like Thackeray.

#### 4.2.4. *Negative capability*

Genuine communication, as I have defined it, is the kind of undistorted, bi-directional comparing of notes which takes place when you respect the possibility of somebody else's having a different point of view from the one you are currently expressing yourself. But once you have got that far, why should you not internalize such genuineness? Why not honestly allow yourself the freedom to be in more than one mind at a time? This will greatly improve the chances of community-making, whereas if you are stubbornly opinionated, both you and everyone else have much to lose.

Literary writers are themselves being honest and unstubborn when we feel that they do not have a conscious design on us, but are giving us a chance to trust the tale (when there is one) rather than the teller. This kind of uncoerciveness is perhaps the most fundamental quality appreciated by that vast and heterogeneous community which has over the centuries grown up around Shakespeare. Stephen Orgel remarks of *The Tempest*, for instance, that it

looks different in different contexts, and it has been used to support radically differing claims about Shakespeare's allegiances. In recent years we have seen Prospero as a noble ruler and mage, a tyrant and megalomaniac, a necromancer, a Neoplatonic scientist, a colonial imperialist, a civilizer. Similarly, Caliban has been an ineducable brute, a sensitive savage, a European wild man, a New-World native, ugly, attractive, tragic, pathetic, comic, frightening, the rightful owner of the island, a natural slave. The . . . play will provide at least some evidence for all . . . [these readings], and its critical history is a good index to the ambivalences and ambiguities. (11)

To somewhat similar effect, Keats spoke of Shakespeare's negative capability, the capability to be "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (53). Granted, when he added that the negatively capable poet has no personality, he was going too far, as does Orgel, too, if his notion of *The Tempest's* openness claims that the play's meaning is *totally* open. About a great many things Shakespeare was very sure indeed, even if they were not of central interest to his plays but were, precisely, what the plays took for granted. But about

other things he certainly was curious and hesitant, and these issues became part of the third entity in the communicational triangle, about which he and his audience compared, and still compare notes.

He has specially shaped the plays so as to bring them up, and is more than willing to leave scope for disagreement about them, since the disagreement is also internal to his own mind. Despite the claims which used to be made by New Critics, his ambivalences and ambiguities, as Orgel calls them, do not build up to an omni-synthesizing irony or paradox. As aesthetic creations, his plays do not exist in contradistinction from the fissilities of ordinary discourse but reflect, as deconstructionist and new-historicist analysis has sometimes shown, tensions which were very common within the early-Modern life-world as a whole, and which are often irresolvable even now. Which is not to say that the contradictions were merely latent in, or even positively masked by the plays until the deconstructionists and new historicists got to work on them. Even the most problematic issues immediately began to emerge precisely through Shakespeare's own use of language, in the way so typical of genuinely dialogic community-making in general.

This is what Empson so clearly saw: that ambiguity in literature can be un sinister and wholly constructive, as a lasting stimulus to sheer discussion. And the only caveat needed here is that literary texts are not more hospitable to inner contradiction than communication of other kinds. Negative capability is a psychological and ethical precondition for any genuine communication at all. By the same token, in order to ensure that the readers of a literary text really do compare notes with its author, the mediating scholar will seek to counteract any tendency to dogmatism, just as mediators do in general.

#### 4.3. *The evaluative dimension*

I have now spoken of mediating criticism's ethical dimension and, at much greater length, of its hermeneutic dimension. As to its evaluative dimension, its discussion of literary merit, my reception history of Fielding will already have hinted that here, too, a dogmatic tone would be counterproductive. Mediating critics, though acknowledging their own positionality and frankly stating their own current assessments, will not think of their task as a Johnsonian talking for victory. They will feel no strong need to say that, if *The Tempest* is the first play in the First Fo-

lio because the editors thought it was the greatest one, then they were absolutely right or absolutely wrong; or to say that its theme of reconciliation makes it clearly greater than the tragedies, or lamentably more soft-headed; or to say, as Orgel perhaps tends to, that its theme of reconciliation is undercut by other motifs which make it even more unsettling, and greater, than the tragedies. Value judgements all too patently vary, and mediating critics' role is to help a new reader try many different evaluations on the pulses, and themselves to remain for ever alert to the possibilities for re-assessment. This is the only way to keep the air within literary communities sufficiently fresh.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, then, when literary scholarship successfully mediates between different cultural milieus of the past and present it is offering fledgling readers a kind of initial life-support system which steadily makes itself redundant, as they gradually become more accustomed to the sameness that is difference, the difference that is sameness so strongly at work within literary communities, and in this way come to see that cultural differences are at once real and unreal, and under no circumstances a barrier to human enrichment. The mediating scholar can be sustained by a sense of literary writing and reading as one kind of genuine community-making among others, and of literary communities as potentially infinitely large yet totally uncoercive, embracing and positively fostering a potentially infinite heterogeneity. Literature is not a universal in the sense assumed by Johnson, Arnold or Leavis. But neither is it an inevitable site of conflict and tension between one cultural formation and another in the way much postmodern criticism of the late twentieth century was arguing. A literary writer certainly can be universal, but in a manner which does not gloss over the cultural specificities of either the writer or the writer's varying readerships. And literature certainly must be a site of cultural confrontation, but not threateningly so. The mediating scholar's aim is to ensure that the confrontation is positively enriching, by helping readers grasp that literary texts of any provenance, ancient or contemporary, can be both as exotic and as familiar, and also as thoroughly wholesome, as an Indian meal that is not cooked in India.

## References

- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Roland Barthes: Image-Music-Text: Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath*. Glasgow: Fontana, 1977. 142-148.
- Bate, Jonathan. *The Genius of Shakespeare*. London: Picador, 1997.
- Boswell, James. *Life of Johnson*. London: Dent, 1906.
- Chesterton, G.K. *All Things Considered*. New York: Lane, 1909.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Table Talk Recorded by Henry Nelson Coleridge and John Taylor Coleridge*, vol. I. Ed. Carl Woodring. London and Princeton: Routledge and Princeton University Press, 1960.
- Faure, Guy Olivier and Jeffrey Z. Rubin. *Culture and Negotiation*. Newbury Park: Sage, 1993.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. New York: Seabury Press, 1989.
- Habermas, Jürgen. "Systematically Distorted Communication." *Inquiry* 13 (1970): 205-18.
- Holsti, Kalevi J. *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and the International Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Keats, John. *Letters of John Keats*. Ed. Frederick Page. London: Oxford University Press, 1954.
- Leavis, F.R. *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962.
- Marshall, Peter. *Positive Diplomacy*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997.
- Montagu, Mary Wortley. *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, vol. 3. Ed. Robert Halsband. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.
- Orgel, Stephen. "Introduction." *Shakespeare: The Tempest*. Ed. Stephen Orgel. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Sell, Roger D. *Literature as Communication: The Foundations of Mediating Criticism*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2000.
- . *Mediating Criticism: Literary Education Humanized*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2001.
- Shaw, George Bernard. *The Doctor's Dilemma, Getting Married, & The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet*. London: Constable, 1921.
- Tennyson, Alfred Lord. *Selected Poems*. Ed. Aidan Day. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991.

- Thackeray, William Makepeace. *Henry Esmond; The English Humourists; The Four Georges*. Ed. George Saintsbury. London: Oxford University Press, n.d.
- Vaughan, Henry. *The Works of Henry Vaughan*. Ed. L.C. Martin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957.
- . *Henry Vaughan: The Complete Poems*. Ed. Alan Rudrum. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976.
- Yeats, W.B. *Yeats's Poems*. Ed. A. Norman Jeffares. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996.