



Literature and literalism

By Edward Said

It is one of the oldest debates and unresolved disputes in the history of culture: what does literature really mean? In many traditions (and specially within monotheism) literature and, more particularly poets and artists, are regarded with suspicion because they deal in what appear to be images of reality but do not seem to be bound by ordinary considerations either of truth or of moral behavior. In *The Republic*, which is Plato's attempt to construct an ideal state, poets are specifically banned as dangerous to the common good; they are moved by inspiration, what they recite or put into print is tremendously attractive to their audience but, Plato adds, they do not feel it is necessary always to represent the true and the good. Their primary consideration is beauty of form and expression, which because it is not principally responsible to concerns of good character and virtuous behavior Plato interprets as outright mischievous. There can be no place for poets in a republic whose main purpose is the education and maintenance of a law-abiding, truth-inspired and morally enlightened citizenry.

All classical literature and criticism is thereafter guided by what the Roman poet Horace considered the beautiful and the good together, for which the Latin phrase *dulce et utile* served as a formula for centuries. This was partly a way of taking account of Plato's influence of course, but the belief that literature ought to be beautiful as well as morally useful was strengthened and consolidated by generations of poets as well as teachers whose vision of their role always stipulated moral instruction in addition to novelty and delight. According to the great Renaissance English poet and courtier Sir Philip Sidney the poet was a prophet (*vates*), someone whose great powers of articulation and vision gave him a special insight into what was good, moral, virtuous. Until the middle of the 18th century this general view of poetry and morality largely prevailed, even though several great artists came dangerously close to subverting, if not altogether cancelling, literature's moral message.

There is the case of François Rabelais, the noted 16th century French writer, whose great series of books on Gargantua and Pantagruel narrate the riotous adventures of a pair of giants with enormous, unrestrained appetites; the style of the book is like its subject, unrestrained, extravagant, overwhelming, and it is this, despite Rabelais's overt commitment to Christianity, that has made the work problematic for future generations of readers.



Recently a celebrated American critic meditated on how difficult it was for him as a believer in women's rights to read Rabelais's enormously detailed assault against women, even though he concluded that as literature the attack had to be permitted. There was just no way one could censor or remove it as an offense either to women or to young readers who might get the wrong ideas

from it.

By the end of the 18th century a new confessional and subjective element crept into the realm of the aesthetic, an element that was justified as emanating not from nature itself but from the effects of nature on the imagination. From Rousseau to Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge, Novalis, Hugo, Chateaubriand and many others, literature's role was in effect to express the formerly inexpressible from the privacy of one's heart and mind to an audience both ready and eager to absorb a new style that knew virtually no restraints. Goethe's character Werther typified the emotionally intense extremes to which strong emotion might go, stripped of any obligation to represent the "objective" world or any morality or virtue. All across Europe young people read about Werther, suffered what he suffered, and in some cases committed suicide the way he did.

What mattered was authenticity of expression, fidelity to one's creative self rather than middle class virtue or common sense. And for at least 300 years this has generally been true not only of literature, but also of music and the figurative arts. No admirer of Beethoven, or of Picasso, Joyce and Ezra Pound could pretend to enjoy their work and at the same time complain that it violated all sorts of canons of good behavior as well as realistic representation. Art was supposed to be different from life; it was intended to subvert ordinary reality; it was created in order to be extreme, not to be "normal".

All of this is a summary of a great many complicated issues pertaining to the way literature, or indeed any written text, is interpreted. It is important nevertheless to insist that all written texts are themselves interpretations, just as all readings of texts are also interpretations. Language is not reality; words are not interchangeable with objects. The science of linguistics teaches us that, and thus we have come to realise that all written objects require interpretation, that is, the need to decipher a text's meaning so as to make clear the writer's intention. But about this there can be consensus but not absolute unanimity since every interpretation depends on the skill, circumstances and perspective of the interpreter.

Problems set in when one interpreter asserts unilaterally that a novel, for example, means something very specific and only that, or when a reader says that novels should mean x or y and not a,b or c. Many of the major cultural debates of recent years are about such issues, so I can neither pretend here to deal with all of them, nor to settle every question. All I want to demonstrate is that interpretation itself is and must always be, for the sake of culture and a decent coexistence for citizens within it, a many-sided and unending thing that can never be settled once and for all.

This is obviously true whenever sacred texts are concerned. If there were one simple reading there wouldn't be so many schools, orthodoxies, currents and tendencies: they would all be resolved and everyone would follow the same interpretation, and that would be the end of it. Part of what is now going through the Islamic, Jewish and Christian worlds is precisely the battle over interpretations and literalness, i.e. the literal meaning of a sacred text, which to the fundamentalist's chagrin can never be confined to a single meaning. The source of major controversy in Israel today is the contest over interpretation, and it is splitting that society apart as the orthodox Jews try to impose their will on the largely secular majority by saying that there is only one reading of orthodox law and only they have it: the rest (liberals, conservatives, etc) are really not

Jews because they do not accept this view. The same type of issue is being disputed in the United States, and also in the Islamic world.

When it comes to literary texts -- novels, poetry, and drama -- and how they are taught in schools and universities the whole question of what is "suitable" for the young is immediately engaged. Literalism in the interpretation of literature is simply and plainly out of place. Otherwise there is only dogmatism. I recall that when I first went to Poland in 1972 I was told by university colleagues of mine that it was very difficult to teach or write about Karl Marx in a critical way; the government imposed a ban on any deviation from the strict communist line. Thus only one reading of Marx was allowed, and only Marx was considered fit for teaching in philosophy classes. Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Bertrand Russell were all considered secondary, and barely tolerated at all.

Yet there can be no civilized society in which the life of the mind is ruled dogmatically by laws of what is forbidden and what cannot be read. This is especially urgent in the case of universities where it is precisely the role (and the rule) of academic training to teach the young that the mind has capacities for investigation, criticism and inquiry that it would be a crime to stifle, abridge or forbid. This is not to say that academic discipline neglects the training of young people in the arts of interpretation, discriminating reading and critical detachment: those are essential. But to say that certain books, ideas and authors should not be taught because they violate arbitrary definitions of what is proper and suitable is to violate the whole idea of the university, as John Henry Newman, Taha Hussein and a whole host of other thinkers saw it. For if a teacher or senior official rules as to what is proper and suitable, prescribes what should not be read, forbids or bans books from the classroom or the library the question to be asked is: who is going to control the controller, who sits in authority over him, who regulates who the most suitable person is for deciding what the young should or should not read? Such questions take us into an infinite regress because they cannot possibly be settled once and for all.

Moreover when it comes to literature in particular, and art in general, we must not forget that art is not religion, a novel is not philosophy, poetry does not provide models of good (or for that matter bad) behavior. At most the arts are representations or, as Aristotle said, imitations of reality, not reality itself, and the way reality gets into literature or music and painting is the subject of centuries of discussion, debate, controversy, scholarship and philosophical investigation. This is the case not just in the European tradition but also in the Indian, Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese traditions, among others. To say of a novel that it is immoral is to suggest that novels are supposed to be moral, which is almost pure nonsense, since the only morality or good behavior that literature is really about directly is either good or bad writing. To treat fiction as if it were a religious or moral sermon is about as far from the actuality of literature as it is possible to get and indeed it is, in my opinion, the purest form of intellectual barbarism.

Anyone who mistakes literature for reality, thereby treating it literally, has a severely deranged view of things; remember that one of the first and greatest novels ever written, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, is about a man who makes precisely that mistake and is therefore considered to be crazy. The whole point of educating university students in the liberal arts generally, and literature specifically, is to train them to read not just pious books about good behavior, but all books, particularly those that are morally and

intellectually challenging. What would become of literature if it was to be subjected to rules formulated by a committee of experts as to what can and cannot be read? This is more like the Spanish Inquisition than it is the curricular practice of a modern institution of learning.

I say all this because in the United States and the Arab world we are dangerously close to a situation where political pressure emanating from religious authorities outside the academy is beginning to encroach on our hard-won freedom of expression and on the freedom of artists to write and represent what is most important and interesting for them. For years now a vociferous American lobby has tried to bully schools and universities to eliminate books considered "immoral" on grounds that they do not seem to conform to religious dogma or that they are not anti-communist enough. In the Arab and Islamic world such practices as dancing and singing are similarly threatened, and considered to be immoral, as are certain books and authors. The only answer to this is not to retreat in cowardice but to open these issues to frank and courageous debate. Let the opponents of freedom stand forth and make their case openly, and let the defenders of freedom make theirs. Let all this be public. But to pressure from behind the scenes, to threaten, to intimidate and above all, on the other side, to capitulate to censorship of literature and the arts on purely literal grounds is a disaster.

As Arabs we have already paid too high a price for the absence of democratic freedoms. To be asked now to keep silent is to be asked to give up still more, and to do so in a cowardly and irrational way. Wherever books and ideas are banned on fraudulent "moral" grounds it is the duty of all intellectuals, writers and teachers to stand forth explicitly unafraid and in solidarity. Otherwise there is no saying what book or idea will be banned next, especially in institutions of learning where it is extremely, indeed, ridiculously easy to say that banning a book is done to protect the young and teach them only "moral" books that are good for them. This is utter nonsense of course, disguising authoritarianism and obscurantism in the ready currency of acceptable ideas. Such practices are the opposite of morality and education and should immediately and openly be revealed as exactly that, authoritarianism and obscurantism, neither of which has a place in education.