

HANS-ROBERT JAUSS **"LITERARY HISTORY AS A CHALLENGE TO LITERARY THEORY" (1967)**

Jauss' main preoccupation in "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" is ultimately to demonstrate the social function of a historical study of literature, "methodologically grounded and written anew" (20), at a time when its basic premisses have fallen into theoretical "disrepute" (3)¹. If Marxist literary history had overemphasised the dependency of art in general on human history, the Formalists had, in stressing the autonomy of art, severed the link altogether². Jauss proposes a literary historiography oriented towards the reception, rather than the production, of literary works which would restore the connection between art and history without reducing art to a mere reflex of human activity. Jauss' thesis is that

the quality and rank of a literary work result neither from the biographical conditions of its origin, nor from its place in the sequence of the development of a genre alone, but rather from the criteria of influence, reception, and posthumous fame. (5)

The impact of the work is the key to reordering the canon through a revised understanding of the emancipatory value of literature and, thus, to renegotiating the relationship of art to history³.

Traditionally, objectivist literary history has been concerned with the genesis of literary works understood primarily in their representational capacity. An aesthetic of reception, in conceptualising literature communicatively in terms of message and receiver, restores the audience, Jauss argues, to its proper role as the addressee for whom the literary work is primarily intended. The "historical life of a literary work is unthinkable" without its "active participation" (19) precisely because it decides aesthetic significance and value. An understanding of this "dialogical" (19) relationship clarifies the "continuity" (19) that enables works drawn from the past to have meaning for a modern audience, the history of their reception inevitably determining the assumptions that inform the literary historian's present understanding.

Jauss' first four theses seek to justify these claims. First, he argues that a literary work does not possess an unchanging and thus transhistorical existence. Its significance is the product, rather, of the reciprocal interaction of work and readers, from whose experience it is inseparable. It is not

a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence. (21)⁴

Consequently, interpretation is a process of "perpetual confrontation with the text" that is irreducible to a "knowledge of the facts" (21). The goal of interpretation must, accordingly, include, "along with learning about the object" (21), reflection upon the process by which this 'knowledge' is arrived at⁵.

Jauss, secondly, asserts that it is possible to avoid the subjectivism that flaws approaches which focus on the responses of the individual reader by clarifying the "transsubjective horizon of understanding" (23) which determines how a text is comprehended⁶. A work becomes an event only for its reader who compares it to other works both by its own and other authors, which in turn becomes the criteria for evaluating future works. He argues that it is thus possible to describe the reception of a work within an objectifiable system of expectations that arises for each work in the historical moment of its appearance, from a pre-understanding of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works, and from the opposition between poetic and practical language.(22)⁷

Such "literary data" (22) precedes both "the psychological reaction" and "the subjective understanding of the individual reader" (23). The reception of a text is thus by no means "an arbitrary sequence of merely subjective impressions, but rather the carrying out of specific instructions in a process of directed perception" (23)⁸. The literary work predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. (23)

The "horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts" that are evoked are then "varied, corrected, altered, or even just reproduced" (23) in the new text. The best test-cases for the objectifiability of such frames of reference are works that openly parody extant generic norms, exaggeratedly invoking an audience's expectations in order to undermine them.

The horizon of expectations, thirdly, permits a deviationist model of aesthetic value.

Although he is willing to concede that each work has, to some extent, its own "specific, historically and sociologically determinable audience" (26), to argue that literary success is always a function of the "congruence of the work's intention with the expectations of a social group" (26) fails to consider the example of works such as Flaubert's Madame Bovary which "break through the familiar horizon of literary expectations so completely that an audience can only gradually develop for them", with the result that the same audience may then experience "formerly successful works as outmoded" (27).

Accordingly, the "artistic character" of a work is determinable by the nature of the audience's reaction ("spontaneous success, rejection or shock, scattered approval, gradual or belated understanding" (25)) which corresponds to the "aesthetic distance" (25) between a given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work. If its reception results in a "change of horizons" - to wit, the "negation of familiar experiences" or the raising of "newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness" (25) - then it is aesthetically valuable. By contrast, "'culinary' or entertainment art" (25) are works that unproblematically fulfill ruling canons of taste. Jauss points out, however, that the "original negativity" of a work which at first offers a "pleasing or alienating new perspective" (25) with time becomes a familiar expectation.

Fourthly, Jauss argues that the reconstruction of the horizon of expectations is especially useful for works drawn from the distant past and about which little is known. Foregrounding the work against others which the audience was implicitly or explicitly expected to know enables one to understand how a "contemporary reader could have viewed and understood" it by posing the "questions that the text gave an answer to" (28). This approach, while emphasising the difference between previous and present interpretations, also brings to light the history of reception that mediates these two positions. The history of a work's reception is

the successive unfolding of the potential for meaning that is embedded in a work and actualised in the stages of its historical reception as it discloses itself to understanding judgment. (30)

An understanding of the historicity of reception eliminates the illusion that a "'timelessly true' meaning...must immediately...disclose itself to the interpreter as if he had a standpoint outside of history" (29). Such 'objectivity' in fact "'depends upon the legitimacy of the questions asked'" and denies the inherited "presuppositions" (29) that govern the interpreter's understanding⁹.

Jauss draws upon Gadamer's critique of objectivity in Truth and Method where he argues that all judgments are inevitably influenced by the tradition within which one stands. Gadamer expands upon Collingwood's thesis that "'one can only understand a text when one has understood the question to which it is an answer'" by positing that this reconstructed question can no longer stand within its original horizon because this historical horizon is always already enveloped within the horizon of the present: 'Understanding is always the process of the fusion of these horizons that we suppose to exist by themselves.' The historical question cannot exist for itself; it must merge with the question 'that the tradition is for us'. (29-30)¹⁰

This debt to Gadamer here constitutes, however, the single most important limitation to Jauss' argument that the horizon of expectations can in fact be objectified. Jauss' very vocabulary is contradictory: his use of scientifically-inflected terminology such as "literary data" and "objectifiability" implies that the literary historian can sufficiently bracket his own historical situatedness in order to perceive the various linguistic and formal signals 'objectively' present in the work, but this is only possible through a Gadamerian "pre-understanding" of these categories which is very much the product of its own epistemological tradition.

Moreover, Gadamer's essentially humanist notion of literature, grounded in mimesis and calling upon the audience to perform the "classical function of recognition" (31), fails to consider the potential for social transformation that the work of art can, in fact, embody. Mimesis was itself initially, Jauss points out, a new mode of perception that only in retrospect acquired the appearance of a "timeless truth" (31). Gadamer's notion of interpretation actually shortchanges the "productive function of progressive understanding, which necessarily also includes criticising the tradition and forgetting it" (32).

Jauss argues that the two basic approaches to literary history - the historical/biographical (often nothing more than a "chronology of great authors" (4) or a discussion of the general spirit of the age in which a work was produced) and the formal (essentially "a presentation of literature by genres" (5)) - are both unsatisfactory for reasons he discusses in greater detail with reference to the contemporary methodologies most

representative of these two approaches: Marxist literary sociology and the Formalist "work-immanent method" (9)¹¹. Jauss' observation that neither has as yet reformed the canon or described the "emancipatory social or perceptually formative function" (10) of literature points to what he will identify as the most productive possibilities of an Aesthetic of Reception.

Marxist literary history is predicated upon the notion that literature does not possess a history independent of the "material production and praxis of human beings" (10). All cultural phenomena are reducible to "economic, social, or class equivalents that, as the given reality, are to determine the origin of art and literature and explain them as merely reproduced reality" (11).

Jauss argues that the heterogeneity of literary forms cannot be traced back to always the same "factors or conceptual hypostases" (12). The point which Jauss misses, however, is that the economic factor does not always possess the same unchanging form. All literature in the Marxist scheme of things shares a common economic substance or "hypostasis", that is, it is a function of the economic mode of production of the society in which it originates. However, the variety of literary forms and genres is explicable, it is argued, with reference to the historical permutation of the economic mode of production. The development of the novel, for example, is a product of specific socio-economic conditions - to be precise, it is synonymous with the rise of the bourgeoisie. Changing economic conditions are responsible for the variation of literary forms. Jauss glosses over the complexity of such a notion of literary change, completely missing the significance of the distinction between the feudalistic, bourgeois and capitalist modes of production that he himself adumbrates¹².

Jauss notes more accurately, however, the problematic question (which even Marx found troubling) of the continuing relevance of artforms to subsequent ages when as the mere reflex of a long-overcome form of social development it would still be serving only the historian's interest. How can the art of a distant past survive the annihilation of its socio-economic basis, if one denies with Lukacs any independence to the artistic form and thus also cannot explain the ongoing influence of the work of art as a process formative of history? (13)

Lukacs' ahistorical solution (to wit, the "timeless ideality" (13) of certain classic works of art) is a blatant contradiction of his own historical-materialist premisses. The reason that a work survives the conditions of its production, Jauss suggests, is precisely because its historicity lies not so much in its representational dimension as in its influence, upon which literary history must focus in order to bring history and aesthetics into a new relationship.

In focusing upon the genesis of the literary work to the exclusion of its impact, such a representational model (according to which the audience is restricted to a role of recognition) ironically forecloses upon the potentially revolutionary nature of art, that is, its capacity to "lead men beyond the stabilised images and prejudices of their historical situation toward a new perception of the world or an anticipated reality" (14). In this light, Jauss criticises Marxism for its failure to question the accepted canon of the 'great' authors, the originality of whose (wilful or involuntary) "insight into the social process" is frequently difficult to distinguish from "traditional expectations or images concerning reality" (12). Marxist aesthetics is only beginning to acknowledge that the work is both expressive and formative of the reality which exists not before or next to but **in** literature, within which "the society that is addressed produces itself" (15).

Russian Formalism foregrounds the autonomous character of literature, detached from all historical conditions, defining it by its difference from rather than its functional dependency on external reality. The distinguishing feature of poetic language is the notion of "'artistic perception'," art being a "means of disrupting the automatised perception of everyday perception through 'estrangement' or 'defamiliarisation' (**ostraneniye**)" (16). Moreover, the work does not exist as an isolated fact in a chronological series. Its significance is determined, rather, by its dialectical relation to the works that precede it. In an endlessly repeated cycle, the defamiliarisation of accepted forms and conventions is followed by their canonisation and then their automatised whereupon the whole process starts again. It is clear from this that historical discontinuity is substituted for the notion of "organic continuity" (17), the history of literature being "a procession with fracturing changes, the revolts of new schools" (17)¹³. Moreover, at no given stage is literature a unified entity since any number of schools and genres simultaneously compete for canonical supremacy.

Jauss may critique Formalism for the manner in which, by focusing on intertextual relations, it divorces the work from the "historical horizon of its origination, social function, and historical influence" (18), but its notions of "dialectical self-production" (17) and defamiliarised perception clearly are the basis for his own conceptions of aesthetic value and the socially-formative effect of literature respectively.

Jauss' last three theses rethink the history of literature along the three principle axes suggested by his critique of Marxist and Formalist methodologies: the diachronic, the synchronic and in relation to the general process of history. He argues that the benefits of inserting the individual work into its literary series are many: it allows one to "recognise its historical position and significance in the context of the experience of literature" (32) alone and to see it as an "event" (32) in a process that "as the **dialectical self-production of new forms**...requires no teleology" (33). Jauss suggests, however, that the notion of literary evolution ought to be expanded beyond the mere description of aesthetic devices to include the interaction of work and audience. This would make up for the evident limitations of Formalist literary history. Firstly, literary change is accounted for in terms of more than just "aesthetic variation" (33) in that each work in a series may be seen to "solve the formal and moral problems left behind by the last work, and present new problems in turn" (32). To understand both the problem and the solution, the interpreter must "bring his own experience into play" (34) which implies that the "historical standpoint of the present observer, that is, the literary historian" is the position from which "all formal oppositions" (34) are mediated and "the vanishing point - but not the goal! - of the process" (34).

In this way, too, innovation is not only an aesthetic category that determines artistic value. Jauss points to cases, such as neoclassicism, that would contradict this, the frequent consequence of the development of newer forms being to alter aesthetic attitudes enough to allow a fresh appreciation and/or wilful reappropriation of older forms. Novelty is also a historical exercise for the literary historian, who must determine the exact moment of the emergence of the new, the degree to which it represents a significant departure and its impact.

This diachronic approach would be supplemented by synchronic cross-sections that would uncover the system of relationships existing between contemporary works at any given stage. Jauss adopts Kracauer's notion of the coexistence of the contemporaneous and the non-contemporaneous at any one historical moment in order to assert that literature at any stage is actually a mixture of the obsolete, of works that correspond to the present horizon of expectations and of the avant-garde. Synchronic cross-sections allow the non-contemporaneous and "heterogeneous multiplicity" (37) of the literary works of any given stage to coalesce again

for the audience that perceives them and relates them to one another as works of **its** present, in the unity of a common horizon of literary expectations, memories and anticipations that establishes their significance. (38)

These cross-sections, however, must themselves be diachronically correlated to others taken both before and after in order to "articulate historically the change in literary structures in its epoch-making moments" (36). From this point of view, Jauss contends, there are both constant and variable factors in literature as there are in language:

literature as well is a kind of grammar or syntax, with relatively fixed relations of its own: the arrangement of the traditional and the uncanonised genres; modes of expression, kinds of style, and rhetorical figures; contrasted with this arrangement is the much more variable realm of a semantics: the literary subjects, archetypes, symbols, and metaphors. (38)

Consequently, it is possible to recognise behind the change of literary forms and contents, "**reshufflings** in a literary system of world-understanding that makes the horizontal change in the process of aesthetic experience comprehensible" (38)¹⁴.

A major consequence of all this is the rewriting of the canon which would be restricted neither to the traditional classics nor an undifferentiated totality of literary texts. The "problem of selecting that which is important for a new history of literature" (38) would be solved by "arbitrary points of intersection between diachrony and synchrony" (39) which would focus on works with a demonstrable socially-transformative effect, the work's "history of influence" (39) being the criterion of selection¹⁵.

The link between literature's "special history" (39) and the general process of history is more adequately restored by emphasising literature's social function rather than origin: "the literary experience of the reader ...preforms his understanding of the world, and thereby also has an effect on his social behaviour" (39). Reading can compel "one to a new perception of things" (41) in that literature not only reflects "actual experiences, but also anticipates unrealized possibility, broadens the limited space of social behaviour, and thereby opens paths of future experience" (41). In this sense, aesthetic innovation can be a "summons to moral reflection" (41): an unfamiliar literary form can confront the reader with questions to which the "solution remains lacking for them in the religiously or officially sanctioned morals" (44) of the time. Jauss offers, as an example of this, the legal brouhaha surrounding the

publication of Madame Bovary, due, he argues, to the effect of its innovatively impersonal narrative technique. Its indifference to the distinction between the viewpoint of the author and that of his characters compelled its readers to perceive things differently and "thrust them into an alienating uncertainty of judgment" (43). The absence of the requisite and unequivocal moral judgments served "to raise new questions of lived praxis" (43) and to contest formerly valid social norms. The judgment of the court attested to this, stating that this new brand of realism amounted to a "negation of the beautiful and the good" and was offensive to "public morals and good manners" (44). For Jauss, the most valuable contribution of a literary history refocused upon the reader in this way is precisely its revolutionary function: the capacity to compete with "other arts and social forces in the emancipation of mankind from its natural, religious and social bonds" (45). The crucial area of research for the literary historian is thus those works that "toppled the taboos of the ruling morals" (45) by offering new epistemological perspectives.

ENDNOTES

1. This is evident, Jauss argues, judging by both university course listings and scholarly research, the focus of and the knowledge produced by literary history being dismissed as "pseudo-problems" and merely "antiquarian" (4) respectively. Opponents argue that its name is a contradiction in terms because it in fact "operates outside the historical dimension and...lacks the foundation of aesthetic judgment demanded by its object" (4).

2. Cohen, following Wellek, distinguishes between literary theory as the "study of the principles of literature, its categories, criteria, and the like" and literary criticism and literary history as "the study of concrete works of art...the former being "the study of literature as a simultaneous order" whereas the latter is the study of "works arranged in chronological order as integral parts of the historical process" (2).

3. The original title of this article - "What is and Toward What End Does One Study **Literary** History?" - stresses Jauss' conscious debt to Schiller's 1789 Jena lecture entitled "What is and Towards What End Should One Study **Universal** History?". Here, Schiller sought to redefine the value of historiography in the light of the charge that history failed to both delight and teach: it offered little moral instruction, knowledge or pleasure to its reader (Jauss 5).

Schiller's conception of his discipline (like Jauss') is situated very much within a rhetorical paradigm of language, conceived functionally in terms of its end or effect, that of persuading or affecting its recipient in some way. This view underpins the dominant pragmatic approach to literary studies for many centuries before this one (for a fuller account, see Tompkins' essay). Compare Sidney who, following Horace, defines the function of poetry as to "teach and delight" (114). Poetry is superior to both history and philosophy. The former, teaching by "example" (118), is so bound "not to what should be but to what is, to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine" (119). The latter, teaching by "precept" (118), "standeth so upon the abstract and general, that happy is the man who may understand him" or "apply what he doth understand" (119). The poet "coupleth the general notion with the particular example...he yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description: which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much as that other doth" (119). Poetry achieves what the other two cannot, to wit, "the knowledge of a man's self, in the ethic and politic consideration, with the end of well doing and not of well knowing only" (117). For Jauss, it is the literary historian's function to articulate the moments when and the ways in which literature initiates an epistemological and moral rupture with preceding experience that contributes to the liberation and amelioration of society.

4. Contrast this to Longinus' notion of the 'verdict of the ages' as proof that literary value is objectively perceptible: "when men who differ in their pursuits, their ways of life, their ambitions, their ages, and their languages

all think in one and the same way about the same works, then the unanimous judgment, as it were, of men who have so little in common induces a strong and unshakeable faith in the object of admiration" (107-8). Similarly, Arnold contrasts the "real estimate" (237) - that "sense for the best, the really excellent, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it" which "should govern our estimate of what we read" (237) - to the fallacies of the "personal" and the "historic estimate" (237). He contends that it is possible to detect the "reality of a poet's classic character" by virtue of the "wide difference between it and all work which has not the same high character" (239).

5. Jauss cites with approval the validity for literary history of Collingwood's opposition to "the prevailing ideology of objectivity in history" (21): his view that history is the "reenactment of past thought in the historian's mind" rather than an "objective" description of a series of events in an isolated past" (21). Shortly after, he seems to forget this in his zeal to distinguish between literary and historical events. He speaks of the "historical matter-of-factness" (21) of a lived event of the past as something that can be objectively ascertained by reconstructing its "situational preconditions" (21), the intent that lies behind it and its unavoidable consequences. By contrast, he argues that the historical context of literature is not a "factual, independent series of events that exists apart from an observer" (21); hence, he argues, positivistic explanations of a work in terms of its causes or necessary consequences are unsatisfactory (the latter because the literary event has no unavoidable consequences since a work can continue to have an effect only if there is still an audience for the work and/or "authors who want to imitate, outdo or refute it" (22)).

6. 'Affective' literary criticism is frequently dismissed as a mere "sociology of taste" that cannot "approach the meaning of the work" (22): see Wimsatt and Beardsley who argue that the "affective fallacy is a confusion between a poem and its results (what it **is** and what it **does**)" which derives its "standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism" (1022). Jauss cites Wellek's opposition to the assumption that the effect of the work of art can be empirically determined: such a view informs I.A. Richards' concern with the psychology of reader response in Practical Criticism (his account of how he inductively examined his students' responses to a wide range of poems in terms of the attitudes and impulses that they felt). The crucial issue here, however, lies not so much in the verifiability of the procedure, as in the characteristic interpretive flaws and impediments to sound understanding that Richards identifies.

7. Compare this to Wordsworth's view of the 'contract' that a writer enters into with his audience: the "formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association...that certain classes of ideas and expressions will be found in his book, but that others will be carefully excluded" (303).

8. Compare this to Jauss' colleague Iser who argues that the literary work is the product of the convergence of the text and the reader, reading being akin to a game of filling in the blanks: the "text's 'unwritten' part

stimulates the reader's creative participation" (275) by suggesting certain "outlines" that the reader can "shade in" and "animate" (276).

9. Compare this to R.S. Crane's assertion that no critical "question or problem...has any absolute status or isolable meaning, but is always relative, as to both its content and the conditions of its answer, to the total extent of the discourse in which it occurs" (10-11).

10. An understanding of the history of reception addresses the flaws inherent in "modernizing" as well as "classicist" (28) interpretations, i.e. the process by which the interpreter's "own aesthetic preconceptions" are frequently raised to an unacknowledged norm that "modernises the meaning of the past text" (29), or evaluations based solely upon the standards of the past which narrowly ignore the ways in which a work may have become important for subsequent generations. Jauss dismisses Gadamer's notion of the classical work of art as the "prototype for all historical mediation of past with present" (30): a classic's unquestioned eternal status in fact obscures the horizon of expectations against which the work was originally read and which persists as a form of tradition in interpreting it. This necessitates "our regaining the `right horizon of questioning' once again in the face of the confirmed classicism" (31): "the past work can answer and `say something' to us only when the present observer has posed the question that draws it back out of its seclusion" (32).

11. Compare Harris' definition of the two principle trajectories followed by literary history: the "study of the language and historical contexts in which literary works were produced, and/or the lives of authors" and the "history of the succession of literary works, conventions, genres, or techniques, almost always including an explanation of temporal changes based on an implicit or explicit causal theory" (185).

12. Jauss also points to the existence of certain nonmimetic genres (as opposed to the epic, for example) that are conspicuously ignored by Marxists precisely because genres are "variously permeable of events in historical reality" (12). He fails, however, to specify both the nonmimetic genres that would be less permeable of reality and his criteria of permeability. If, to cite just one example, he is thinking of the genre of Romance, much recent criticism (see Jameson) has argued that it is an ideological production grounded in specifiable economic and political conditions, its fabulous elements notwithstanding.

13. Contrast Longinus' emphasis on the continuity of tradition: "many authors catch fire from the inspiration of others...certain emanations are conveyed from the genius of men of old into the souls of those who emulate them" (119). Eliot adopts Longinus' metaphor (for whom lesser poets are "tributary streams from the great Homeric river" (119)) in his discussion of the relation of the individual talent to the great tradition of English poetry: the "poet must be very conscious of the main current" (7), he argues, in that the "existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of...the really new...among them" (7). The

"historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (7).

14. See Colie, in this respect, who argues that a "genre-system offers a set of interpretations, of `frames' or `fixes' on the world" (8) that by its very nature changes over time. Just as "patterns, kinds, mental sets organise for us the lives we individually lead," so "kinds, sets, patterns" organise "the vast body of literature" (30) of any period. Genre-theory allows one to see "the connection of the literary kinds with **kinds** of knowledge and experience" (29).

15. At this point, Jauss' assertion that the revised canon would be based on purely arbitrary points of intersection between diachrony and synchrony seems to be superseded by a fairly specific set of criteria. Jauss' canon would apparently revolve around books that he could identify as liberatory, both epistemologically and, consequently, ethically and socially.