Twentieth-Century Literature

Critical Issues and Themes

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ROLAND BARTHES: A CONSERVATIVE ESTIMATE

FRENCH CAESARISM FROM NAPOLEON I TO CHARLES
DE GAULLE

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Critical Issues and Themes

Philip Thody

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Preface

Twentieth-Century Literature: Critical Issues and Themes makes no claim to be anything but a personal view. Its ideal reader is someone who shares my own interest in history, politics, philosophy and religion, and who is occasionally tempted, as I am, to see literature as a kind of collective autobiography written by those who are most sensitive to what is happening in their society. I am writing for the person who wants to know what books are about, who wishes to test her or his reactions against those of somebody else, and who is interested in what makes the literature of the twentieth century different from that of earlier periods. Since all views and preferences are subjective, the information as well as the ideas and opinions in this book should be supplemented by consulting the section entitled *Suggestions for Further Reading*.

While I agree with T. S. Eliot's remark in *The Function of Criticism* that

The critic, one would suppose, if he is to justify his existence, should endeavour to discipline his personal prejudices and cranks – to which we are all subject – and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible in the pursuit of true judgement¹

I see this as an ideal which one can try to follow rather than an attitude which can be consistently adopted. It is inevitable that the fact that I am an agnostic in matters of religion, a conservative in my political views, and a sceptical empiricist in philosophy should influence my judgements. It is honest to warn the reader about this from the outset.

In 1748, in his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, David Hume gave a piece of advice to his readers which I am often tempted to reproduce, albeit in slightly milder form, when discussing literary theory. 'If we take in our hand', Hume wrote,

any volume; of divinity, or school metaphysics, for instance: let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact or existence? No. Commit it then

to the flames. For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

The equivalent of this in literary criticism is to say:

Take down any volume of literary theory and ask yourself: does it illustrate its argument by reference to authors such as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Ernest Hemingway, Tolstoy, Thomas Mann or Proust? No. Does it contain an analysis of works such as Goethe's *Faust*, *The Divine Comedy* or *Don Quijote*? No. Does it explain why the plays of Racine are still performed while those of his contemporary Pradon are not, or why Shelley's *Ozymandias* is a better poem than Emma Lazarus's *The New Colossus*? No. Then put it back on the shelves. For it can contain nothing but sophistry and delusion.

The work of Roland Barthes, like that of the thinkers whom he has influenced, nevertheless offers so intriguing a challenge to so many of the presuppositions on which the appreciation and discussion of literature have been based in the past that some account has to be given of what he said. My reasons for thinking that Barthes is wrong, though in a very interesting way, provide one of the arguments running through this book.

Philip Thody
Stanford-Leeds
1993-4

A Guide to Contents

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of the way writers in the twentieth century have treated the problem of religious faith. I then move on, in the same chapter, to discuss the importance of the theatre, the tendency of writers in the twentieth century to live in exile, and their fondness for experimentation. Chapters 2 and 3 talk about attitudes towards childhood, and Chapters 4, 5 and 6 about the problems of realism. Chapter 7 provides a transition to the discussion of ethics by looking at the treatment by twentieth-century writers of the problem of cowardice. Chapter 8 studies some of the moral dilemmas raised by novelists and playwrights in the twentieth century, Chapter 9 carries on this discussion through a study of novels about the future, and Chapter 10 looks more particularly at the plays of Shaw, Steiner and Sartre.

Chapter 11 tries to analyse what influence writers such as Bertrand Russell, Solzhenitsyn, Brecht and Dürrenmatt had on the behaviour of governments during the Cold War, and Chapter 12 examines the theme of madness in Pirandello, Evelyn Waugh, Peter Weiss and Jean Genet. The closing chapter examines the work of García Márquez, Kafka, Salman Rushdie and Toni Morrison in the context of the movement known as magical realism.

Endnote markers in the text in standard type denote references. Those in bold indicate notes which offer further information.