

# Literary Studies and Social Sciences

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“The writer, like scientist, cannot pose as the dispassionate observer of events; he must have his own point of view concerning the phenomena that he depicts.”<sup>1</sup>

Vissarion Belinsky

Literature is one of the best human expressions and documentation of styles of thinking, values and actions. From literature we could uncover the human frailties and strengths, his prejudices and altruisms, his benevolence and aggression, his perfection and perversion and the like. The power of literature to illuminate reality and enrich our feelings has been acknowledged by many thinkers and writers alike. Albert Guerard opines:

“Literature as one of the elements of a civilization, conditioned if not determined by social life as a whole, reacting upon social life in its turn.”<sup>2</sup>

To Richard Hoggart, literary insight is invaluable, in which no other cultural documents cannot provide:

“Works of literature give an insight into the life of an age, a kind and intensity of insight, which no other source can give. They are not a substitute for these other sources; to think so would be foolish. It is just as foolish to think that these other sources can be sufficient in themselves. Without the literary witness the student of society will be blind to the fullness of a society’s life.”<sup>3</sup>

James T Farrell once said:

“One of the great values of literature is that it means of expanding consciousness. The world’s meaning to us is locked up in our minds...Through literature we expand our

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<sup>1</sup> M Yovchuk, “A Great Russian Thinker: Introductory Essay,” in *V G Belinsky: Selected Philosophical Works*. (Moscow , Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1948), p. xlv

<sup>2</sup> Albert Guerard, *Literature and Society* ( New York , Cooper Square Publishers, 1970), p.8

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hoggart, *Speaking To Each Other*. Vol. 2 (London : Chatto &Windus, 1970), p. 20

consciousness. It's possible to feel that we know characters in literature more intimately, more surely, more completely than many living people with whom we are acquainted or even friends with."<sup>4</sup>

Foremost, there is little doubt on the importance of literary criticism and studies are central in the intellectual life of a society. "[I]t is no exaggeration", says Belinsky, "to say that only in art and literature, and consequently in aesthetic and literary criticism, does the intellectual consciousness of our society find expression."<sup>5</sup> Studying literature therefore should give insights to students of society about the situation and realities which they live in. Richard Hoggart opines: "Without the literary witness the student of society will be blind to the fullness of a society life." since "works of literature give an insight into the life of an age, a kind and intensity of insight, which no other source can give."; while W H Auden writes: "In grasping the character of a society, as in judging the character of an individual, no documents, statistics, 'objective' measurements can ever compete with the single intuitive glance...." And surely this glance is available in literary documents.

This means that reading and studying literature is an engagement *with* and *for* life. If classical humanities incorporated literature to groom a humane gentleman and gentlelady, critical pedagogy requires a critical reading to emancipate man from his will to escape from freedom. Though it may be cliché to say that literature should never be associated alone with aesthetic appreciation and refinement, it is nevertheless the dominant approach of reading. To avoid such regression of literacy, it would be commendable if we could engage a reading to understand and confront all sorts of authorities and ideologies as found within and without the texts. And reading literature certainly promises the pleasures of comprehending human intricacies of emotions as well as the promise of building up our critical consciousness. It is from literature that not only we could understand the portrayal of man on his life, but also through literary creation (be it fictive, autobiographical or realism) we could marshal our creative powers to imagine the perplexities and propensities of human powers of production and destruction. An appreciation of literature, informed substantively by perspectives of diagnostic social sciences and the will to question all forms of dogmatism,

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<sup>4</sup> Read, "Relevance in Literature," *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 22, 1, 1976.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert E Bowman, *Vissarion Belinski: A Study in the Origins of Social Criticism in Russia* (New York, Russell & Russell, 1969), p.164

is an approach that deserves attention and development. Our will to read, is the will to understand and the will to act. Indeed, the celebration of reading, an act only to and for human, is only meaningful if it is a celebration of reason and criticism for humanity.

The task of literary studies or criticism is not to accentuate the **“anesthetization of critical sense”** or the quietistic attitude and indifference with regards to the predicament of man and society.<sup>6</sup> This also applies to the literary authors themselves. Belinsky, the famous Russian intellectual and literary critic opines: “the writer like scientist, cannot pose as the dispassionate observer of events; he must have his own point of view concerning the phenomena that he depicts.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, knowledge gained or formulated through our reading of literature should never be seen as definitive and final since “knowledge has historicity. It never is; it is always in the process of being.”<sup>8</sup> Most importantly,

“To understand anything about human history, it is necessary to see it from the point of view of those who made it, not to treat it as packaged commodity or as an instrument of aggression... In our encounters with other cultures and religions, therefore, it would seem that the best way to proceed is not to think like government or armies or corporations but rather to remember and act on the individual experiences that really shape our lives and those of others. To think humanistically and concretely rather than formulaically and abstractly, it is always best to read literature capable of dispelling the ideological fogs that so often obscure people from each other.”<sup>9</sup>

A discerning textual analysis, constitutes a critical response of our part of what and how representations have been made in those texts. This requires an active critical engagement, and not a passive covering of the text. In this regards, the subject of ideology should not be seen as something abstract nor merely a political thing, but a reality, that is, “ideology as lived experience, in literature, music, painting, and social interaction.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Read, “An Interview with Edward W. Said,” *Boundary 2*, 20, 1, 1993 and “Roads Taken and Not Taken in Contemporary Criticism,” *Contemporary Literature*, XVII, 3

<sup>7</sup> M Yovchuk, “A Great Russian Thinker: Introductory Essay,” in *V G Belinsky: Selected Philosophical Works*. p. xlv

<sup>8</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart* (New York : Continuum, 1998), p.31

<sup>9</sup> Edward Said, “Impossible Histories: Why the many Islams cannot be simplified,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Julai 2002.” p. 74

<sup>10</sup> Stanley Aronowitz, “Politics and Higher Education in the 1980’s” *Journal of Education*, pp. 48-9

Undoubtedly, the **critical humanities**, combined with the analytic social sciences can provide an intellectual depth that allows us to comprehend the changes and challenges around us. Thus in literary studies/criticism, we should see literary texts as a dynamic field, and not just a compact of static words and imagination, for, according to Said: “This field has a certain range of reference, a system of tentacles, partly potential, partly actual – to the author, to the reader, to a historical situation, to other texts, to the past and present. In one sense no text is finished, since its potential range is always being examined, hence extended, by every additional reader.”<sup>11</sup>

Through the incorporation of critical perspectives of social science, we are able to bring insights on various subjects, such as, ideological vested interest, utopian thinking, alienation, prejudice and discriminations, mass pathology and narcissism, and the like. But one must remember that a discerning reading of literature is not primarily a critical posture, nor critical within the texts itself, but to link it with the purpose of engaging those criticisms. Thus the latter should be one that is “life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are non-coercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom.”<sup>12</sup> Said adds:

“Criticism cannot assume that its province is merely the text, not even the great literary text. It must see itself, with other discourse, inhabiting a much contested cultural space.... Once we take that view, then literature as an isolated paddock in the broad cultural field disappears, and with it too the harmless rhetoric of self-delighting humanism. Instead we will be able, I think, to read and write with a sense of greater stake in historical and political effectiveness that literary as well as all other texts have had.”<sup>13</sup>

Shutting out literary studies from its socio-political context can be intellectually fatal, if not a cancerous source for unethical numbness. Literary studies will then become a sheer academic vanity, “insofar as they become sovereign and as their practitioners lose touch with the resistance and the heterogeneity of civil society, they risk becoming wall-to-wall discourses, blithely predetermining what they discuss, heedlessly converting everything into

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<sup>11</sup> Edward Said, “Roads Taken and Not Taken in Contemporary Criticism,” p. 348

<sup>12</sup> Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Context* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 29

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224-5

evidence for the efficacy of the method, carelessly ignoring the circumstances out of which all theory, system, and method ultimately derive.”<sup>14</sup> As Said deliberated aptly:

“As it is now practiced....criticism is an academic thing, located for the most part away from the questions that trouble the reader of a daily newspaper. But we have reached the stage at which specialization and professionalization, allied with cultural dogma, barely sublimated ethnocentrism and nationalism, as well as a surprisingly insistent quasi-religious quietism, have transported the professional and academic critic of literature –the most focused and intensely trained interpreter of texts produced by the culture – into another world altogether. In that relatively untroubled and secluded world there seems to be no contact with the world of events and societies, which modern history, intellectuals, and critics have in fact built....”<sup>15</sup>

In the words of Gombrich, “the humanities must depend on a system of values and that this is precisely what distinguishes them from the natural sciences.”<sup>16</sup> He concludes: “What you are not able to do, in my view, if you want to go practicing the humanities is to throw away all standards of value. Dehumanizing the humanities can only lead to their extinction.”

<sup>17</sup> And surely one of the ways to avoid this intellectual impasse is to blend creatively and critically on both, humanities (literature) and the analytic social sciences. The blending of the humanizing humanities and the critical social sciences will provide a powerful perspective, which not only could affirm intellectual freedom, but also keep in check of any excessive particularistic nationalism that will dampen the voice of common humanity. Said’s view on this point is best mentioned here:

“For in its essence the intellectual life --- and I speak here mainly about the social sciences and the humanities – is about the freedom to be critical: criticism is intellectual life and, while the academic precinct contains a great deal in it, its spirit is intellectual and critical, and neither reverential nor patriotic. One of the great lessons of the critical spirit is that human life and history are secular – that is, actually constructed and reproduced by men and women. The problem with the inculcation of cultural, national, or ethnic identity is that it takes insufficient note of how these identities are constructions, not god-given or natural

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 26

<sup>15</sup> Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, p. 25

<sup>16</sup> *The Essential Gombrich: selected writings on art and culture*. Edited by Richard Woodfield. (London : Phaidon Press, 1996), p.164

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

artifacts. If the academy is to be a place for the realization not of the nation but of the intellect—and that, I think, is the academy’s reason of being—then the intellect must not be coercively held in thrall to the authority of the national identity. Otherwise, I fear, the old inequalities, cruelties, and unthinking attachments that have so disfigured human history will be recycled by the academy, which then loses much of its real intellectual as a result.”<sup>18</sup>

In short, it is an intellectual disaster when our *littérateurs*, in their ignorance of the keeping up with critical sciences of their time, self-styled themselves as thinkers in their society. By this, we do not mean that this group should never engage in social criticism; but if they have to do so, they must be responsible, both intellectually and ethically. The domain of literary creativity may be the place that they may good at, but once in the domain of exploring social thought and advance criticisms against it, the rigour and commitment can never be compromised at all. The observation by Max Eastman is apt:

“As the poetic and scientific uses of language diverge, the functions of the critic diverge also, and here too a division of labour is set up. We have our critic of science.....—and we have our critics of literary art ....very little troubled by the advance of science and very little troubling it. These latter men are not satisfied to fall to the level of the critic of pure art--and indeed they cannot quite do so...--but they are also not willing to study science. They cling to a position and aspire toward a prestige no longer exists. This is what causes them to make up all sorts of fantastic ‘theories of criticism,’ and invent strange intermediary spheres of being, which are neither science nor poetry, neither knowledge nor yet ignorance, and even in their dire groping and dismay descend to the disaster of boasting that they do not think.”<sup>19</sup>

Theorizing and deliberating on literature cannot be the ghetto for ambivalence, nostalgia and elitism. Theories of literature should direct us against any form of dogmatism which may manifest in various forms, such as exclusivism, racism, chauvinism, sexism, fascism, imperialism, fundamentalism, and the like. Moreover a theory that is opiated by the aesthetic lure is both a moral and an intellectual abandonment. So is the case when theory is only to affirm a particular dogma. A theory should never be a type of knowledge that is accessible only to the elite of connoisseurship. Theorizing involves a discussion. A “genuine

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<sup>18</sup> Edward Said, “Identity, Authority, and Freedom: The Potentate and the Traveler.” *Boundary 2*, Fall 1994, p. 11

<sup>19</sup> Max Eastman, *The Literary Mind* (New York, London: C. Scribner's sons, 1931), p. 265

discussion is that no argument from authority and no dogmatic assertion based upon mere intuition is admitted.”<sup>20</sup>

Propounders of literary theories are intellectuals within their specialized domain. And as intellectual, they have crucial role to play. Karl Mannheim allegorizes their role as the “watchmen in what otherwise would be a pitch-black night.”<sup>21</sup> He adds: “Fundamentally, the intellectual should recognize that his intellectual identity prescribes certain duties: he must learn to cherish the fact of his intellectual education as an obligation.”<sup>22</sup>

Literary studies, like any other intellectual scholarship is a function of a free spirit. A captive mind will stay, but only to be forgotten in history. A slavish mind will not only be dictated by exogenous intellectual concern, but it will remain dependent on the latter for ‘aspirant’ as much as recognition. And surely it bears no seeds of creativity and criticality. In the end, all students of literature and society need to be reminded always of the fundamental task and purpose of their studies. We can only end this with a succinct note from Edward Said which enunciated that “the purpose of the intellectual activity is to advance human freedom.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 192

<sup>21</sup> Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976) p. 143

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 79

<sup>23</sup> Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 13