

Traditions in our discourse about literature

An awareness of different and not always compatible discourses pervades our modern literary studies. You cannot speak of a “first person narrator offering a monologue” in a poem. The first person narrator belongs to the tradition of “narratology”, the “monologue” belongs to the tradition of “poetics of the drama”.

The different discourses mix, yet they do not completely mix within our own discourse of literary criticism. “Metaphor” is a term from rhetoric – it can, however, unlike the “first-person narrator” be found in a political speech, a commercial advertisement, a Shakespeare play, or a Hemingway story.

The complex situation (how do I know what word to use in what context?) is the result of the complex history underlying our modern debate of literature:

The discussion of literature

... until around 1750 the debate of “learning”, “scientific publications” – provided

- the institutions such as literary journals, literary histories, the continuing academic and at the same moment public discussion of publications, and
- the discursive modalities: literature is “discussed” in a fundamentally scholarly exchange, i.e. in an exchange of competing judgments in which the participants must be able to support their views rationally.

The discussion of poetry

provided

- the perspective on (formerly “poetic” now “literary”) genres, on their different ways of “delighting” and “instructing” audiences, their different “aesthetic” requirements (which result in different forms of perfection to be achieved in each genre), their different “rules”
- the debate on the poet or poetess, his (or her) craftsmanship or genius (if not madness) which enables him or her to create great works even without a perfect knowledge of their laws, his or her readiness to violate rules in order to achieve special effects
- the debate on the critic who has to develop a poetological expertise comprising both knowledge about the rules of poetry and a personal taste to judge how artistic aims are achieved

The discussion of rhetoric

provided

- an established analysis of the effectiveness of speech (whether verse or prose)

The discussion of fictions (and their deeper meaning)

...was traditionally located in the field of theological studies, where it was used to analyse and interpret biblical texts – it provided

- a complex set of interpretive modes ranging from the literal to the allegorical, anagogical, and moral interpretation of scripture
- – with Huet’s *Treatise on the Origin of Romances* – an approach to writing histories of fiction in which fictional works can be
 - understood as formed by the different use people made and make of fictions in different cultures
 - analysed as expressions of our changing understanding of the world
 - appreciated by us even if they offend our own taste as soon as we develop an understanding and appreciation of the tastes the original cultures developed
 - in grand narratives following the “streams [in which traditions] have spread” and led to a world wide exchange of knowledge

The history of our modern discourse of literature

The discussion of literature appropriated established debates in order to find a more attractive topic and through that a wider audience.

- Those who discussed literature adopted and reconfigured the debates of poetry, rhetoric, and fiction.
- The belles lettres, the market of fashionable knowledge, became the object of the new literary debate.
- Expertise Aristotle and his successors had provided in the fields of poetics went into the schools of modern “literary criticism”. It was manifest in the 20th century especially in the schools of “New Criticism” and “Structuralism”. In the field of “narratology”, 20th-century literary studies produced a new poetics of narrative fictions.
- Expertise Huet brought into our discussion went into the production of the first histories of literature at the beginning of the 19th century. The 19th century histories moved Huet’s project with its international perspective to an ensemble of national projects designed to inspire political debates of the nations’ individual “characters”, “cultures” and “historical developments”. Huet’s perspective is manifest today in schools of literary studies from those of “New Historicism” to those of “Cultural Studies” (aiming at a discussion of works in different cultural contexts).

Literature

- Aristotle, *The Art of Poetry*, c 350 BC, translated into English after the French translation by André Dacier (1705)
- Pierre Daniel Huet, *History of Romances*, 1670, translated into English by Stephen Lewis (1715)
- Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, *Art of Poetry*, 1674, English translation (1687)