



Suman Gupta

Contemporary Literature

the basics

CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

THE BASICS

‘Contemporary literature’ is among the most popular areas of literary study, but it can be difficult to define. This book equips readers with the tools needed to take an analytical and systematic approach to contemporary texts. The author provides answers to some of the critical questions in the field:

- What makes a literary text contemporary?
- Is it possible to have a canon of contemporary literature?
- How does a reader’s location affect their understanding?
- What impact do print, electronic and audiovisual media have on contemporary literature?
- Which key concepts and themes are most prevalent?

Containing diverse illustrative examples, and discussing topics that define our current sense of the contemporary, this is an ideal starting point for anyone seeking to engage critically with contemporary literature anywhere.

Suman Gupta is Professor of Literature and Cultural History, The Open University. He is the author of numerous books on contemporary literature, literary theory, political philosophy and current affairs.

THE BASICS

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CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE **THE BASICS**

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book can be read from beginning to end as developing a consistent picture step by step, or different sections of chapters can be read independently as reasonably free-standing discussions of topics. Where a point made in a section is also discussed elsewhere, that is noted.

Observations that readers may wish to consider and explore further are italicised. For ease of reading, arguments and observations are often broken into sequences with their own numbered subheadings.

Several literary texts – poetry, plays, novels, e-texts, etc. – are referred to in order to exemplify and clarify arguments. It is not assumed that the reader will have prior knowledge of such texts. In every instance, a sufficient account of these is given for arguments made with regard to them to be clear. Poems discussed are reproduced.

Lists of references at the end of each chapter are kept to a minimum: only texts that are quoted or discussed are listed. Each chapter is followed by suggestions for further reading. These are listed under headings corresponding to the main issues covered in the chapter, and could be regarded as a next stage of reading. They also give a sense of the kind of material that informs this book, but are not representative of all the material that had a bearing on writing it.

GENERAL STRATEGIES

THE CONTEMPORARY LITERARY FIELD

This book is about what makes contemporary literature contemporary, and how to study such literature in a systematic and informed manner.

A very large number of new literary works are made available to readers every month, indeed every day. Consider what a variety of forms are broadly regarded as serious or popular literature now: various kinds of poetry, short and long fiction, theatre and screen plays, personal journals and blogs, biographies, e-fiction and fanfiction, essays, and so on. Moreover, contemplate the number of languages in which these literary works are produced, in the original or in translation. For a rough estimate, think of a wildly popular recent novel that has been translated for readers in most parts of the world. J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels are a useful example of this sort: it is available in 64 living languages. These are languages in which literary works are published now and read more or less regularly; these languages sustain, so to speak, a contemporary literature market. True, the numbers of literary works published in these languages are very uneven. A great many more appear in English or Chinese, for instance, than in Irish or Faroese. But the point is that, if we think of the totality of the production and circulation of recently written literary works worldwide, we are faced with a very large

and unwieldy field. To begin with, let's think of this almost unimaginably vast field as 'contemporary literature': the literature of our time, or of the present.

We are rarely called upon to think of contemporary literature in such broad terms. By 'we' I mean all readers of contemporary literature, in whatever language and wherever, however young or old, expert or inexperienced – including me. This book is addressed to anyone who reads literary works that seem to be of our time. However, having said that, this book is obviously for readers who wish to do rather more than simply read such literature. I expect you are reading this because you wish to understand contemporary literature in a more systematic and informed fashion than usual. Possibly, that's simply because you have an inquiring mind. Perhaps you are preparing for a school or university examination on, or are a teacher or researcher of, contemporary literature. This book will, I hope, prove useful for all of you – for us – in different ways.

We rarely think of contemporary literature in the broad way described above, for good reasons. Every one of us naturally reads such literary texts in an extremely selective manner. Our reading choices are limited significantly by factors such as where we live, what languages we are competent in, our education and upbringing, and the social circles we move in. That still leaves a much larger quantity of literature within reach than we can possibly read. We generally use various sorts of information to help us narrow down what we actually pick up. These may include advertisements, recommendations, reviews, the reputation of authors, displays in bookshops and libraries, film or television adaptations, literary prizes, packaging (what's on the covers, for instance), issues of current interest, what's trendy, etc. Then, of course, there are selections made for educational and academic purposes – I have much to say of this soon, so won't pause on it here. At any rate, we read contemporary literature in manageable quantities, and our thoughts are unlikely to be burdened by the great weight of all contemporary literature at any given time.

Further, we probably choose to read contemporary literature because we expect it to be directly relevant to our lives and our world. We hope to find in it expressions and issues with which we are familiar. We anticipate resonances with our experiences, attitudes and concerns, as these have developed within our lifetimes and surface in our everyday lives. Of course, reading literary texts

from past periods (before our time, or the historically defined past) also necessarily call upon our present-day experiences and attitudes. We are, for instance, apt to make sense of Shakespearean sonnets in relation to our own memories and feelings. But contemporary literature is read with a sense of being closer to us than literature from the past. We feel that the literature that is written and appears in our time is more intimately connected with the complexity and messiness of our lives. It is in tune with how we speak and what we think about and observe. That means that we usually think of contemporary literature in the blurred way in which we think of our lives and times. We don't often feel the need to stand back and think systematically about contemporary literature any more than we feel the need to stand back and ponder our lives – we are generally busy simply living our lives. We tend unquestioningly to accept that this sort of literature is woven with our lives.

To move beyond simply reading thus and to begin *thinking about contemporary literature in a systematic manner* puts us in danger of feeling intimidated. It means confronting contemporary literature in all its unwieldiness and breadth, much as described above. Understandably, the prospect could be discouraging. To persevere involves developing strategies for ordering and describing the field of contemporary literature so that its relevance to our lives/world, and its place in literature generally, would become clear. Fortunately, scholars and teachers have come up with such strategies already. These provide the foundation for studying contemporary literature in schools and universities – in brief, for academic study. To approach contemporary literature in an informed and systematic manner, it makes sense to take recourse to these existing academic strategies.

As it happens, the existing strategies are functional but not necessarily satisfactory for studying contemporary literature. Nor do they lead to a consistent way of approaching contemporary literature, but to various and often contradictory ways. To begin with then, it is worth enumerating what these strategies are, and deciding to what extent they are useful for our purposes. There are two levels of such academic strategies to take into account:

- firstly, general strategies for the study of literature from different periods, which are therefore relevant to studying contemporary literature too; and

- secondly, specific strategies for dealing with contemporary literature itself, which involve ways of defining what is specifically contemporary in literature.

Chapters 1 and 2, respectively, are devoted to discussing strategies at these two levels. In both, we shall consider whether and why these strategies are useful and sensible.

This chapter is concerned with the general academic strategies that have been, and still are, widely accepted – in particular, the following:

- close reading and contextualisation of literary texts;
- preferring the study of texts in their original languages rather than in translations;
- selecting texts that are worthy of attention, which should belong to the ‘literary canon’; and
- presenting the relationship between texts and readers with minimal attention to the literary industry.

I should say straightaway that habitual recourse to these strategies has often been questioned by literary critics, especially of late, and sometimes discouraged. However, while misgivings about some of these strategies are well known, for the practical purposes of teaching and studying literature they continue to be used confidently. In fact, this is far from uncommon in the academic study of literature. Numerous long-standing literary notions that recently have been reconsidered and found wanting nevertheless continue to be used unthinkingly. For instance, until quite recently – say, the 1960s – literary critics largely agreed that the key to understanding a literary work is to understand what its author intended. To understand the poem *The Waste Land* (1922) properly, for instance, it was felt that the best way would be to work out what the poet T.S. Eliot was thinking when he wrote it, what his social circumstances were, and whom he was writing it for. Now, after several decades of debating this assumption, most literary critics put less weight on what the author intended. It is now largely accepted that equal – if not predominant or even exclusive – attention should be given to who is reading and where and why, and to other factors which the author may

not have been aware of. Nevertheless, when it comes to actually discussing a specific literary text, teachers and critics frequently continue to put superlative emphasis on the author's intentions (this is discussed further in chapter 3). There is, in brief, often a gap between what literary critics and teachers think in principle and what they actually and habitually do.

With that in mind, let's consider by turn the general strategies mentioned above, and try to decide how useful they are for a systematic approach to contemporary literature. That also helps me to clarify some of the principles that are followed in this book.

CLOSE READING AND CONTEXT

At this stage, let me introduce you to my friend Dr Guru, an experienced teacher of literature. He has a firm grasp of what he regards as necessary principles for studying literature, and I have found it useful to consult him occasionally for the first two chapters here. When I first told him about the idea of this book, his immediate advice was: 'Don't begin with a heavy barrage of concepts and theories. They frighten most readers. Stick to the close reading of specific texts. The skills of close reading are what studying literature is ultimately about, the ability to analyse content and language and style and form. You must develop your arguments through reading particular literary works carefully; in fact it might be a good idea to do so by focusing on one text in a sustained way. I know this from experience.' This was said with the conviction that a literary text for the thinking reader is rather like a corpse for the forensic pathologist. The latter assumes that close attention to the corpse will tell all about its condition, and thereby confirm the usefulness of forensics generally. Just as a Dr Guru of forensic pathology may advise students to focus on the body, so Dr Guru of literature recommends the close reading of texts.

It seems to me unquestionable that studying literature by and large entails reading texts carefully. However, for a systematic approach to contemporary literature, I feel rather more is needed than simply reading particular literary texts closely.

What I have in mind can be made clearer with reference to a particular text. Take, for instance, this poem by Seamus Heaney, entitled 'Testimony':

pause that emphasises the ironic counterpoint of the poem: that the bloodletting in this scenario has to do with the everyday civilian activities of the slaughter house, while the playful tossing of sweets is what the soldiers do. There is a hint of a merging between the soldiers and civilians at that moment: 'standing there like youngsters' (line 12) could equally refer to the workers or the soldiers. We may wonder why this has the weightiness of a 'testimony', and may conclude that it is the irony of the counterpoint behind the apparently unmemorable event which gives it weight. Awareness of what comes in the future may render apparently unmemorable moments in the past memorable.

We can carry on in this vein, and come up with further thought-provoking observations by looking closely at the text. Undoubtedly, in doing this we bring something of our contemporary experience of life to understanding the poem (we bring, for instance, attitudes to soldiers and slaughter houses which may or may not have been common at the time of the Second World War). But beyond that, the *contemporary* impact of this poem, that which make us in 2011 (as I write this) think of the poem as a work of contemporary literature, remains unclear so far. It could have been composed any time after the Normandy campaign (that much the poem itself indicates) – to many amongst us, especially younger readers, this might not seem to be particularly contemporary, or especially relevant to our present-day world and lifetimes. But so far I have presented this close reading in an artificial manner, by concealing information that readers would normally be aware of when examining the text.

The reputation and writings of the poet, Seamus Heaney, would be known to many and are likely to colour our close reading. We might find ourselves discerning an underlying awareness of other conflicts in the poem, especially of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, which has often been Heaney's theme in verse. Further, knowledge of the date and manner in which 'Testimony' first appeared will undoubtedly give it a turn which a close reading in itself cannot – indeed, this information is likely to mould our close reading significantly. It first appeared in the Reviews section of *The Guardian* newspaper of 15 February 2003, alongside two other poems under the overarching title 'Three War Poems'. These were introduced briefly as follows: 'Poets have been among the most eloquent critics

of war. Here, we publish a new work by Seamus Heaney and poems by Iraqi writer Saadi Youssef and Vietnam veteran Michael Casey.'

February 2003 was a period of intense anxiety and passionate debates about moves towards invading Iraq led by the US and UK administrations. On 15 February, some of the largest peace marches ever witnessed were organised in various cities around the world. It was a political environment that was powerfully polarised between supporters and opponents of the forthcoming invasion. Literary texts of the time, especially those alluding to war, were apt to be read accordingly, in terms of what position they took apropos the developing conflict. Clearly, the British newspaper *The Guardian*, which was regarded as having primarily an anti-invasion readership, recruited 'Testimony' as a statement against war. It subtly directed readers to Heaney as an 'eloquent critic of war'. Readings of 'Testimony' were also manoeuvred by placing it alongside Saadi Youssef's translated extract from the Arabic poem 'America, America', which has a more explicitly of-the-moment message, and Michael Casey's 'A Bummer', which is redolent with the experience of having been in a war. In April 2003, by which time the invasion was in full swing, the poem reappeared in a Faber anthology, edited by Matthew Hollis and Paul Keegan, entitled *101 Poems Against War*. The title left the reader little choice about how the poems in the anthology should be read. Youssef's and Casey's poems were also included.

When the poem appeared thus in 2003, I inevitably found my close reading inclined towards trying to work out what it meant in terms of ongoing political concerns. I wondered whether anything could be inferred from these lines about the USA as a military power, about the USA's foreign policy. How should the ironic counterpoint be read under the circumstances? How balanced really is the balance of perspectives (American soldiers' and narrator's) that the poem presents? Are these words really an expression of a position *against* war? Or does it present something else: for instance, could it be suggesting that war is an intensification of the violence that is already there in civil society (the blood from the slaughter house), and that war could be a promise of peace (the soldiers distributing sweets)? How do these implications gel with what we know of Heaney's other poems and writings?

Dr Guru's sort of conviction about the great importance of close reading, in other words, needs to be tempered when we are considering contemporary literature generally. What gave Heaney's 'Testimony' its immediate and contemporary edge in 2003 were a number of factors outside the text: the reputation of the poet, the timing and political situation, where it first appeared, how it was introduced, who was reading it – to name a few. And if the poem still seems contemporary (though in a less urgent way) to us in 2011 as I write this, it is because the anxieties arising from the invasion of Iraq are still very much with us, because Heaney is still writing, and most of us have lived through 2003. It seems to me very likely that *what seems contemporary for us usually, for most literary texts (even in less controversial times), has as much to do with what close reading reveals as with how, when, where and by whom the text is produced and received. Indeed, the latter is often of greater moment than the former.* Or, put in terms that are familiar to literature students, the importance of close reading is conditional here on the various contemporary *contexts* of a text. Close reading is moulded by a text's contexts to accentuate its contemporary status.

Although the scope of this book does not allow for detailed consideration of contexts or really close attention to many texts, the relation of texts within their various contemporary contexts is of the greatest importance here. The texts that I discuss, more or less closely, in subsequent chapters are considered within some context of current relevance – in terms of when the text was written, how it was made available to readers, who reads it and for what purpose, etc.

ORIGINAL LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

'The texts that you will read closely in your book,' continued Dr Guru, 'should obviously be in the original language. What's the use of reading a translated text closely, except to see how it relates to the original? And even where you won't be reading closely, you will naturally be discussing literature that you have read in the original and have a confident grasp of. So, you will mostly be writing about contemporary literature in your language, in English, in the language your book is written in. This very broad idea of contemporary literature which you have in mind is impractical; it is

merely an idea, and cannot really be discussed – that would need proficiency in many languages. You will actually be writing about contemporary literature written originally in English, and that, too, in a sketchy fashion. At best, you can extend your range to the very few languages you are fluent in. In my experience, it is best to be honest about one's limitations.'

Dr Guru is right to point to my limited knowledge of languages, and indeed to that of any reader. We are very unlikely to find readers who are able to deal with more than a small proportion of the 64 languages mentioned above. All readers will feel only modestly equipped insofar as contemporary literature is understood as being read meaningfully in the original. By those standards, none of us can practically claim to have anything more than a very restricted sense of what is contemporary in literature.

It is worth pausing, though, on Dr Guru's strong emphasis on original languages. This emphasis is grounded on powerful presumptions among scholars, teachers and many non-professional readers that:

- literature is best studied systematically in terms of particular linguistic traditions; and
- there is a close and inextricable relationship between a particular language and a literary text written in it – so that, to understand a literary text *fully*, we need to pay attention to its distinctive use of a particular language.

The second presumption can hardly be argued with. But we can probably agree that it is possible to understand a text at least *partially* without looking too closely at the distinctive use of a particular language. And we might agree, too, that it is sometimes useful to try to understand a broad range of literature *partially* rather than to confine ourselves to a *fuller* understanding of a small range of literature. This might be a trade-off worth making. It seems to me well worth making when thinking systematically about contemporary literature, especially in view of objections that can be raised about the first presumption: that literature is best studied according to particular linguistic traditions.

There are understandable political reasons for the conviction that literary study should focus on separate language traditions. It can be