



Märt Väljataga

Why study literature?

Literary studies in Estonia has had to rapidly assimilate twentieth-century literary criticism in order to become an international and modern discipline. But has this process been successful? During the Soviet era, national authors were almost sacrosanct, but rarely discussed in a critical way; today, in the universities, a plurality of approaches and idioms, above all a poorly-spoken postmodernese, has developed at the expense of quality. The editor of Estonian literary and cultural journal *Vikerkaar* argues that instead of baffling one another with jargon, literary critics should aim at a wider readership. This would satisfy theory's political claims and guarantee good writing at the same time.

Why-questions in general

Why-questions of a very general kind are rarely asked by adults. Usually, it is children and philosophers who are obsessed by them. Most fields of human activity can do pretty well without questioning their own purpose. And even in fields of enquiry supposed to be curious and open-minded, there is often the fear that to take why-questions too seriously would be to open up a Pandora's box, ending in an infinite regress, a vicious circle, dogmatism, or total scepticism.

The progress of the natural sciences has been accompanied by the exclusion of why-questions from their remit. These disciplines have explicitly relegated why-questions (eg "For what purpose has the universe or man evolved?") to theology or metaphysics. And neither are the latter particularly happy about them. But the question, "Why do we study nature?" has at least two plausible answers. The first is the possible use of the results: the prediction and control over the natural events via technology. The second is purely cognitive: these endeavours satisfy our curiosity, a central human feature.

The second line of explanation could be used for answering the question posed in the title. We get a very general, though somewhat empty answer: literature is studied for achieving a more satisfyingly complete account of literature. But of course, this answer does not stop the sceptic — if he could be stopped at all. Many things are not studied academically, so why is literature privileged? I will return to this question later.

The institutional context in which the question usually arises

Having used the phrase "academically", I must at first deal with the circumstances in which the question most typically arises. People involved in literary studies routinely find themselves in the position of having to answer the question, "Why do you study literature?" It happens in the context of

institutionalized science, especially when these people must justify their jobs to those holding the purse strings. As the result of a historical process, literary studies is nowadays confined to the academy. In order to get jobs, the people who write about literature must pretend they are pursuing academic specialities. Literary studies justifies itself to the rest of society as a science, and inside the bureaucracy of science as a very special kind of science. The human sciences are younger than natural sciences, and one of their functions is to compensate for the neutralization or homogenization of the human world by the natural sciences and its technological applications. As a counter-balance to these processes, the humanities offer stories, which help preserve and better perceive the diversity of the human world, and to orientate in it.¹

Traditionally, the strength of human sciences comes from practices of description and understanding. Ideally, these practices, sometimes cumulative and sometimes in upheaval, guarantee the object of study its stability and afford each generation of scholars a sense of common purpose. The human sciences define the horizon in which research is done, at the same time maintaining flexible boundaries. While every discipline develops its own culture, the human sciences have not been governed by strict or explicit rules as has medieval theology or modern science. Therefore, the human sciences should be fashioned more intimately by the acceptance of informal agreements and intellectual tact.² But in the present-day academy, old-fashioned informality is under a threat from the rhetoric of "objective evaluation by international standards".

Literary scholars must accommodate themselves to methods of evaluation originally designed for the natural sciences. They are urged to publish abroad despite the authors they write about usually being known only in their country. But what is the point in publishing in English an article uncovering new aspects in the work of Oskar Luts, if his books are almost unknown in this language. And what *scientific* or *scholarly* value does a popular overview acquainting the international reader with Luts have? Translated back into Estonian, it would probably sound trivial. This is one of the paradoxes of the "national sciences": English language articles, which are those rated most highly by the academic bureaucracy, are often quite superficial and do not bear publication in the native language.

In the academic context, scholars of literature must pretend their work provides "scientific" results. Since this demand makes little sense in their field, they develop quasi-scientific jargon. The results are evident in the "poetics" of criticism: obscure slang, a deliberately inelegant academic style that seems designed to frighten the reader, a maze of footnotes where simple paraphrasing would suffice, and so on.

This need for academic self-justification has not benefited literary studies. The justification of oneself to others, as opposed to the justification of oneself to oneself, tends to become a rather hypocritical business. Sometimes it is simply said that literature is studied everywhere, even in Latvia and Finland, so how can Estonia be a sovereign western nation without having an institution of literary studies. Sometimes, even more grandiose claims are put forward: the task of the Estonian Republic, as stated in the Constitution, is to "guarantee the preservation of the Estonian nation and culture throughout the ages". Estonian literature could be taken as the very core of both: historically it has played a crucial role in the formation of the nation; the portraits of the major literary figures still decorate the Estonian banknotes. So it could be tempting to argue that the very idea of the Republic of Estonia is the study of Estonian literature.

This argument sounds too far-fetched or pathetic to be plausible; and anyway, it resembles political seduction. It starts looking particularly implausible as soon as we take a closer look at the actual state of literary scholarship. For instance, comic tensions emerge when students of literature, who are usually good patriots, try to appropriate jargon that originated in a radically anti-humanist context.

One would think that the study of literature might fare better if it were not forced to justify itself to the bureaucrats, if its existence were taken for granted. An unfortunate consequence of this bureaucratic self-justification is that the justifiers start to believe their own justifications, leading to the sacrifice of academic autonomy to dubious ideological goals. It must be hoped that social poverty does not increase to an extent which renders the study of literature an irresponsible luxury and waste of resources. But perhaps these doubts are destined to accompany literary studies forever. Could there ever be an ideal and permanent solution to the dilemma: Shakespeare or boots?

What follows are some questions and doubts raised on the assumption that it could be healthy to take time off from thinking about mundane things such as earning one's living, getting grants, and creating jobs, and ask "Why study literature?"

The function of criticism

Let's return to the claim that literature is studied in order to achieve a more satisfyingly complete knowledge of literature. Although slogans such as "art for art's sake" or "knowledge for knowledge's sake" are still powerful justifications in themselves, it is reasonable to assume that the point in studying literature is perhaps not only a literary one. Maybe there is some truth in the claim that a better knowledge of literature makes you a better person, and that it is possible to discuss literature in ways that deepen and enrich our lives. A traditional liberal humanist position, if you like.

In the English-speaking world, this question has frequently been discussed under the title, "The Function of Criticism".³ There are at least four important essays bearing this title — by Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, Northrop Frye, and Terry Eagleton. It should be borne in mind that the English word *criticism* designates all kinds of discussion of literature, be it journalistic or academic, whereas in our part of the world, the tradition of literary studies has been influenced by the German model, in which literary studies is a *Wissenschaft* which differs from the activity called criticism, which means book-reviewing.

Matthew Arnold, in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864), argued that criticism must be a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world. The work should be judged "as it in itself really is", without becoming entangled in its psychological, historical, or social context. Although criticism, he argued, is a secondary activity compared to imaginative creation, it has vague powers of cultural renovation, and prepares the appropriate atmosphere for the appreciation of literature.

T.S. Eliot, in "The Function of Criticism" (1923), defined the task of criticism as "the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste", but also the study of historical relationships between the work and the order of literary monuments. Eliot objected to what he considered Arnold's blunt distinction between criticism and creative work: for Eliot, every author must be their own

critic. Eliot complained about the impressionism prevalent in literary criticism, and suggested that criticism should concern itself mainly with facts — which would throw new light on the works — rather than with speculation, psychological hypotheses, or impressions. But for Eliot too, criticism is a secondary activity, and he was sceptical about the Romantics' attempt to establish the autonomy of criticism.

Northrop Frye, whose essay (1949) bears the same title as Arnold's, saw the critic as intermediary between artist and public. Frye declared that criticism should become a social science that studies literature as a whole, bringing it under a single conceptual framework. Instead of studying particular facts, criticism should deal with the whole literary universe, with its genres and categories.

Finally, Terry Eagleton, in a pamphlet entitled "The Function of Criticism" (1984), reviewed the aforementioned writings, reaching the gloomy conclusion that criticism has lost all the substantive social function that it had during the Enlightenment. Even those who do not share Eagleton's Marxism can sympathize with the view that, "The academicization of criticism provided it with an institutional basis and professional structure; but by the same token it signalled its final sequestration from the public realm." Eagleton expressed his admiration for Enlightenment criticism, whose voice was audible in the public sphere, helping partially to constitute it.

These four essays graphically exemplify the general line of development — from the traditional view of criticism as a subservient activity to literature proper, to criticism as the guardian of tradition, to the desire to make it cognitively, and then socially, more relevant. Let us consider the last two: the desire for literary study to become a social science and the longing for the politically transformative power of literary theory. These have been the views — in many ways unfortunate — which shaped international literary studies during the second half of the twentieth century, a development from which Estonian literary studies was effectively cut off.

The urge of modernization

The development of literary studies in the twentieth century can be seen, following Thomas Pavel, as an uneven process of modernization.⁴ Periodically, the humanities have sensed a local backwardness vis-à-vis the natural sciences, and have tried to reduce the gap. It has often taken the form of borrowing formalisms from neighbouring disciplines thought to be more advanced. The desire to modernize occurs every now and then in literary studies: nineteenth-century literary history itself developed in the name of a scientific ideal. Whereas literary historians based their science on the historical and philological rigor of the nineteenth century, twentieth-century formalisms emulated more recent models of science: cybernetics and linguistics. However, both sought to make up lost ground in the humanities and to unify science and the humanities into a single epistemological order. One of the results was a short-lived project called semiotics, which eventually revived pre-modern forms of thinking (gnosticism, cabalism, neoplatonism). As far as I know, it has now filtered through into traditional departments, and has an institutional basis in only a few places, one of which is Tartu.

The claims of political relevance

The pressure of modernization on literary studies has brought about a specific mindset that Vincent Descombes has described using the psychiatric concept of "cyclothymic oscillation",⁵ or the alternation between states of agitation and depression. Literary studies has always been accompanied by serious self-doubts; but in its recent history, it has experienced at least one period of euphoria, which still radiates to many fields. I mean the proliferation of literary studies in the United States in the 1980s. During that decade, a cluster of programmes emerged often known as postmodernism, which, to use Mark Lilla's description, is a loosely structured constellation of ephemeral disciplines such as cultural studies, feminist studies, gay and lesbian studies, science studies, and post-colonial theory. "Academic postmodernism is nothing if not syncretic, which makes it difficult to understand or even describe. It borrows notions freely from the works of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Julia Kristeva — and as if that were not enough, also seeks inspiration from Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and other figures of the German Frankfurt School. Given the impossibility of imposing any logical order on ideas as dissimilar as these, postmodernism is long on attitude and short on argument. What appears to hold it together is the conviction that promoting these very different thinkers somehow contributes to a shared emancipatory end, one which remains conveniently ill-defined."⁶ I would like to emphasize particularly the strong faith in the political relevance of critical theory, which in the writings of Paul de Man and John Hillis Miller could even take on utopian overtones. They had a very clear, albeit fantastic, answer to the question, "Why do we study literature?": "For bringing nearer the millennium, the new heaven and the new earth by unveiling the ideological oppression inherent in our current practices."

This strange faith in the redeeming power of literary theory or critique of ideology is perhaps best explained as an overreaction to the occupational alienation of a literary academic, or as the self-deceptive channelling of radical energy into theory after the Left's hopes for any real political change were dampened after 1968. It was animated by the belief in tight interconnections between symbolic systems and systems of oppression. It was hoped that disturbing the former could transform the latter. The result is an extremely distorted self-understanding of the political impact of literary theory.

The Estonian situation

To describe the situation of literary studies in Estonia, let me quote from the English summary of an article recently published in *Keel ja Kirjandus*. Its rueful tone captures the feelings of many, both inside and outside the academy: "The predominant methods in the understanding of Estonian literature and of the histories of literature have been, to this very day, positivism and biographism. We have been moved by neither new criticism nor Russian formalists nor Prague or French structuralists, although one of the branches of the latter, namely semiotics, actually has its centre at Tartu University, thanks to Yuri Lotman."⁷

The sense of local backwardness, the need for modernization (or postmodernization) is strongly evident here. But the central assumptions of the passage are quite doubtful. I don't believe that literary history needs or even has a method, if a method is a procedure which can be taught by reference to rules. And second, positivism in literary studies has acquired an undeservedly bad name. The positivism of the nineteenth century was one of the most productive "methods" or approaches, which produced many nuanced accounts

about the interrelationship between biography, history, psychology, the works, and their environment. Entanglement in irrelevant facts, sociological reductions, and other stupidities are not to be blamed on positivism but rather...on stupidity.

Estonian literary studies' encounter with Western theory will probably pose problems for some time. The sense of local backwardness will produce strange overreactions. We can witness how deconstruction is interpreted as a licence to indulge in undisciplined free association, and semiotics as a pretext for evading empirical research. The sense of backwardness is overcompensated by an almost self-parodying use of jargon, and, as we can see predominantly in the realm of art theory and criticism, by political posturing.

We can speak about theoretical dazzle, where theoretical vocabularies are taken over without mastering syntax, or when traditional historical and philological research is undervalued as obsolete, while neglect of empirical data hinders the development of theoretical and interpretive approaches. Literary studies needs a certain balance between empirical or historical research and theoretically guided reflection. I am aware of the possible response that there are no facts uninformed by theory, but still, there could be such a thing as theoretical over-investment that decreases the cultural relevance of literary studies. The level and proportion of accomplished historical research, interpretation, and theoretical reflection varies in different cultures. For example, Jonathan Culler argues that new interpretations of *King Lear* are unnecessary since hundreds are already on the market, and that consequently one should concentrate on poetics of literature instead.⁸ However, we can't automatically apply his dictum in Estonia, because the necessary preliminary historical research even on the literary figures depicted on banknotes is still very rudimentary. The development of literary criticism does not follow the predetermined path from -ism to -ism described in North American theory books. In many cases, it consists in very local responses to very local stimuli. And in many cases, it may turn out that the stimuli were misconceived or inadequately responded to.

In order to avoid such misconceptions, we should reconstruct the recent history of French or American literary studies in a way that takes into account their local context. The revolutionary programme of structuralist modernization failed to produce a genuine modernization of the study of literature. Instead, it promoted an ambiguous discourse which in (post-)structuralist rhetoric made heavy use of traditional intuitive techniques, however, without the old hermeneutical and philological controls.

Thomas Pavel has described the degeneration of structuralism into postmodernism thus: "It is a familiar pattern from all kinds of revolutionary action. It starts with a radical revolution based on inapplicable principles and unattainable objectives. It survives through the surreptitious use of pre-revolutionary methods as the only recourse against the ineffectiveness of the new principles. Utopian political regimes do not proceed any differently when, rather than admitting the impossibility of their programme, they blend the disorderly return to traditional practices with an unflinching affirmation of utopia. From this tension terror is born."⁹

There is another problem facing Estonian literary studies in the age of pluralism — that of academic standards and peer review. While it seems impossible and undesirable to direct all people in the field in one direction, the pluralism of approach and terminology makes it increasingly difficult to

uphold the peer review process and sense of common purpose. It offers more and more chances to baffle one's colleagues, not to speak of the general public, with new and exotic jargon: the emperor's new clothes. In these circumstances, no one may assume they are working in a collective discipline, in which premises, concepts, terminology, and definitions can be taken for granted. Rather, the academic critic must always start from square one, explaining his or her presuppositions and concepts, if these are not intuitively intelligible.

Even if there is no deliberate imposture, the small scale of the Estonian academic community might create a situation when there are only one or two fluent speakers of one particular idiom, in which case the process of peer review becomes impossible. This could increase administrative pressure towards the internationalization of literary studies, which in turn diminishes their cultural relevance. A case in point is the "evaluative report" on Estonian literary studies, an absurd bureaucratic document commissioned by the Ministry of Education some years ago from our Swedish colleagues.¹⁰

Why and how should we study literature?

Still, I am not wholly rejecting the claim about the backwardness of Estonian literary studies. However, I don't think that the remedy consists in fulfilling a fifty-year plan in five years, or catching up and surpassing America in learning to speak perfect, accent-free postmodernese.

Alongside socio-political obstacles to free enquiry and research, there was an additional factor that hindered literary studies during the Soviet era. The rise of literary studies is itself related to a development that Hegel called the end of art. In Hegelian thought the emergence of literary studies as an academic discipline was somehow related to art and literature's loss of ability to reach a wide audience without mediation. There arose a need for mediation, interpretation, explication, and so on. When literature is able to fascinate the youth without having recourse to interpretation or theory, then it is still in an enviably pre-modern stage. I don't claim that Estonian literature was so simpleminded, or that there was nothing to study or interpret. However, it was received in this way for a long time. Historical facts were collected, but the meaning of particular works of literature was rarely discussed. Maybe it reflected the quasi-sacredness of literature, the immense respect people paid to it. In any case, every professional critic once in a while feels that criticism is a manipulative business. Every critic has a poem that she loves too much to treat as an object of criticism — a lyric that is silently recited but not related to anything.

Notwithstanding the correctness of my hypothesis about the pre-modern reputation of Estonian literature, it is certain that it is no more a reality. Nowadays literature *does* need mediation, interpretation, popularization, keeping alive.

Perhaps one remedy against the stagnation of literary studies consists in opening up the academic boundaries of the discipline — not to peer review and not even to neighbouring academic disciplines — but to the general enlightened public. In this respect, I share Terry Eagleton's nostalgic utopia of a public sphere or "republic of letters", where the literary criticism could operate. Instead of indulging in jargon and terminological games, literary criticism would regard not only academic colleagues but a wider public as its potential audience.

The first prerequisite for this is good writing. Perhaps it would help if a literary critic conceived of himself as a travel writer. Before a layman goes on a trip, he may want to read more about the history, the people, the landscapes, and the present political and cultural situation of the place he is visiting. Sometimes, he may wish to read about them afterwards, when the trip is over. Analogously, a reader may be interested in reading good books of criticism and biographies of authors. Works of literary criticism could be seen as travel books of the written world or the republic of letters — as guides, reportage, travelogues, or impressions. There are respected canonical authors whom even a specialist finds difficult to visit without a guide. Some authors are made boring by school teaching; some have ossified into monuments. The critic should keep alive interest in literature, and if it is beneficial for the author's reputation, so much the better. Even if a dose of iconoclasm is needed, it's still better than respectful oblivion.

I am aware that the study of literature is not exhausted by the kind of writing I have envisaged. The historical and philological scholarship that produces grist for the critic's mill is at least as important. This kind of research needs a better protected environment than criticism or theory, and I am afraid that they can survive only in the academy. Of course, a good critic can be a good scholar. But even if the scholar's writings are extremely dull, even if they possess only the virtues of meticulousness, pedantry, and industriousness, she still deserves the highest respect.

And then there is a third kind of writing about literature, namely theory. Unfortunately, this term has acquired two very different meanings. One could be identified with general poetics, the study of the conditions and regularities of literature. This is the continuation of the Aristotelian project to which the "moderate structuralists" (Genette, Todorov, Lotman) have made an invaluable contribution. It has helped to clarify the conceptual framework in which we discuss the properties of literature. If it is treated in a pragmatic or instrumental manner, it can escape the parodic repetition of all those epistemological and ontological paradoxes into which philosophy has run.

The second understanding of "Theory" associates it with features of postmodernism, as described above. Instead of being a quest for most general regularities of literature, it has become an undisciplined eclecticism, which justifies itself through some vague utopianism or delusions of political relevance.

The answer to the question we started with depends on the stress. The question, "Why *study* literature?" one can answer briefly: for the sake of literature. But if we shift the stress: "Why study *literature*?" then a longer answer is needed, which would relate literature to notions such as quality of life, humanist literary culture, the republic of letters, and to the anthropological, psychological, political, and moral dimensions of these concepts.

Revised draft of a speech given in October 1998 in Tallinn at the Estonian–Finnish joint seminar, "National literature in a world of international methods of literary study".

¹ See Odo Marquard, "On the Unavoidability of the Human Sciences", *In Defence of the Accidental*, trans. R. M. Wallace. Oxford: OUP 1991, 9–108.

²

See Thomas Pavel, *The Feud of Language. A History of Structuralist Thought*, trans L. Jordan and Th. Pavel. Oxford: Blackwell, 23.

- ³ As an overview see Imre Salusinszky "Introduction", *Criticism and Societ*, New York: Methuen.
- ⁴ See Thomas Pavel. *The Feud of Language*, 134–140.
- ⁵ Vincent Descombes. *The Barometer of Modern Reason*. Translated by S. A. Schwartz. Oxford: OUP 1993, 132.
- ⁶ Mark Lilla, "The Politics of Jacques Derrida", *The New York Review of Books*, 25.6.1998 (vol. 45, no. 11).
- ⁷ Sirje Kiin, "On the Understanding of Literature, or What's Beyond Literature", *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 1998, no. 10, 728.
- ⁸ Jonathan Culler, "Beyond Interpretation", *The Pursuit of Signs*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1981, 4–17.
- ⁹ Pavel op. cit., 140.
- ¹⁰ Louise Vinge and Ingemar Algulin, *Review of Research in Estonia Within Humanities. History and Literature*, ms., 1993.

Published 2005–10–05

Original in English

Contribution by Vikerkaar

© Märt Väljataga/Vikerkaar

© Eurozine