The question 'what is literature?' arises, I suggested earlier, not because people are worried that they might mistake a novel for history or the message in a fortune-cookie for a poem but because critics and theorists hope, by saying what literature is, to promote what they take to be the most pertinent critical methods and to dismiss methods that neglect the most basic and distinctive aspects of literature. In the context of recent theory, the question 'what is literature?' matters because theory has highlighted the literariness of texts of all sorts. To reflect on literariness is to keep before us, as resources for analysing these discourses, reading practices elicited by literature: the suspension of the demand for immediate intelligibility, reflection on the implications of means of expression, and attention to how meaning is made and pleasure produced.

Chapter 3
Literature and cultural studies

Professors of French writing books about cigarettes or Americans' obsession with fat; Shakespearians analysing bisexuality; experts on realism working on serial killers. What is going on?

What's happening here is 'cultural studies', a major activity in the humanities since the 1990s. Some literature professors may have turned away from Milton to Madonna, from Shakespeare to soap operas, abandoning the study of literature altogether. How does this relate to literary theory?

Theory has enormously enriched and invigorated the study of literary works, but as I noted in Chapter 1, theory is not the theory *of literature*. If you had to say what 'theory' is the theory *of*, the answer would be something like 'signifying practices', the production and representation of experience, and the constitution of human subjects – in short, something like culture in the broadest sense. And it is striking that the field of cultural studies, as it has developed, is as confusingly interdisciplinary and as difficult to define as 'theory' itself. One could say that the two go together: 'theory' is the theory and cultural studies the practice. *Cultural studies is the practice of which what we call 'theory' for short is the theory.* Some practitioners of cultural studies complain about 'high theory', but this indicates an understandable desire not to be held responsible for the endless and intimidating corpus of theory.

Work in cultural studies is, in fact, deeply dependent on the theoretical debates about meaning, identity, representation, and agency that I take up in this book.

But what is the relation between literary studies and cultural studies? In its broadest conception, the project of cultural studies is to understand the functioning of culture, particularly in the modern world: how cultural productions work and how cultural identities are constructed and organized, for individuals and groups, in a world of diverse and intermingled communities, state power, media industries, and multinational corporations. In principle, then, cultural studies includes and encompasses literary studies, examining literature as a particular cultural practice. But what kind of inclusion is this? There's a good deal of argument here. Is cultural studies a capacious project within which literary studies gains new power and insight? Or will cultural studies swallow up literary studies and destroy literature? To grasp the problem we need a bit of background about the development of cultural studies.

The emergence of cultural studies

Modern cultural studies has a double ancestry. It comes first from French structuralism of the 1960s (see Appendix), which treated culture (including literature) as a series of practices whose rules or conventions should be described. An early work of cultural studies by the French literary theorist Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957), undertakes brief 'readings' of a range of cultural activities, from professional wrestling and the advertising of cars and detergents to such mythical cultural objects as French wine and Einstein's brain. Barthes is especially interested in demystifying what in culture comes to seem natural by showing that it is based on contingent, historical constructions. In analysing cultural practices, he identifies the underlying conventions and their social implications. If you compare professional wrestling with boxing, for instance, you can see that there are different conventions: boxers behave stoically when hit, while wrestlers writhe in agony and

flamboyantly enact stereotyped roles. In boxing, the rules of the contest are external to the match, in the sense that they designate limits beyond which it must not go, while in wrestling the rules are very much *within* the match, as conventions that increase the range of meaning that can be produced: rules exist to be violated, quite flagrantly, so that the 'bad guy' or villain may dramatically reveal himself as evil and unsporting and the audience be whipped up into vengeful fury. Wrestling thus provides above all the satisfactions of moral intelligibility, as good and evil are clearly opposed. Investigating cultural practices from high literature to fashion and food, Barthes's example encouraged the reading of the connotations of cultural images and analysis of the social functioning of the strange constructions of culture.

The other source of contemporary cultural studies is Marxist literary theory in Britain. The work of Raymond Williams (*Culture and Society*, 1958) and of the founder of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Richard Hoggart (*The Uses of Literacy*, 1957), sought to recover and explore a popular, working-class culture that had been lost sight of as culture was identified with high literature. This project of recovering lost voices, of doing history from below, encountered another theorization of culture – from European Marxist theory – which analysed mass culture (as opposed to 'popular culture') as an oppressive ideological formation, as meanings functioning to position readers or viewers as consumers and to justify the workings of state power. The interaction between these two analyses of culture – culture as an expression *of* the people and culture as imposition *on* the people – has been crucial to the development of cultural studies, first in Britain and then elsewhere.

Tensions

Cultural studies in this tradition is driven by the tension between the desire to recover popular culture as the expression of the people or give

voice to the culture of marginalized groups, and the study of mass culture as an ideological imposition, an oppressive ideological formation. On the one hand, the point of studying popular culture is to get in touch with what is important for the lives of ordinary people – their culture – as opposed to that of aesthetes and professors. On the other, there is a strong impetus to show how people are shaped or manipulated by cultural forces. How far are people constructed as subjects by cultural forms and practices, which 'interpellate' or address them *as* people with particular desires and values? The concept of *interpellation* comes from the French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser. You are addressed – by ads, for instance – as a particular sort of subject (a consumer who values certain qualities), and by being repeatedly hailed in this way you come to occupy such a position. Cultural studies asks how far we are manipulated by cultural forms and how far or in what ways we are able to use them for other purposes, exercising 'agency', as it is called. (The question of 'agency', to use the shorthand of current theory, is the question of how far we can be subjects responsible for our actions and how far our apparent choices are constrained by forces we do not control.)

Cultural studies dwells in the tension between the analyst's desire to analyse culture as a set of codes and practices that alienates people from their interests and creates the desires that they come to have and, on the other hand, the analyst's wish to find in popular culture an authentic expression of value. One solution is to show that people are able to use the cultural materials foisted upon them by capitalism and its media industries to make a culture of their own. Popular culture is made from mass culture. Popular culture is made from cultural resources that are opposed to it and thus is a culture of struggle, a culture whose creativity consists in using the products of mass culture.

Work in cultural studies has been particularly attuned to the problematical character of identity and to the multiple ways in which identities are formed, experienced, and transmitted. Particularly

important, therefore, has been the study of the unstable cultures and cultural identities that arise for groups – ethnic minorities, immigrants, women – that may have trouble identifying with the larger culture in which they find themselves – a culture which is itself a shifting ideological construction.

Now the relationship between cultural studies and literary studies is a complicated problem. In theory, cultural studies is all-encompassing: Shakespeare and rap music, high culture and low, culture of the past and culture of the present. But in practice, since meaning is based on difference, people do cultural studies *as opposed* to something else. As opposed to what? Since cultural studies arose out of literary studies, the answer often is, 'as opposed to literary studies, traditionally conceived', where the task was the interpretation of literary works as the achievements of their authors, and the main justification for studying literature was the special value of great works: their complexity, their beauty, their insight, their universality, and their potential benefits to the reader.

But literary studies itself has never been unified around a single conception of what it was doing, traditional or otherwise; and since the advent of theory, literary studies has been an especially contentious and contested discipline, where all kinds of projects, treating both literary and non-literary works, compete for attention.

In principle, then, there need not be conflict between literary and cultural studies. Literary studies is not committed to a conception of the literary object that cultural studies must repudiate. Cultural studies arose as the application of techniques of literary analysis to other cultural materials. It treats cultural artefacts as 'texts' to be read rather than as objects that are simply there to be counted. And, conversely, literary studies may gain when literature is studied as a particular cultural practice and works are related to other discourses. The impact of theory has been to expand the range of questions to which literary

works can answer and to focus attention on the different ways they resist or complicate the ideas of their age. In principle, cultural studies, with its insistence on studying literature as one signifying practice among others, and on examining the culture roles with which literature has been invested, can intensify the study of literature as a complex intertextual phenomenon.

Arguments about the relation between literary and cultural studies can be grouped around two broad topics: (1) What is called the 'literary canon': the works regularly studied in schools and universities and deemed to form 'our literary heritage'. (2) The appropriate methods for analysing cultural objects.

The literary canon

What will become of the literary canon if cultural studies swallows literary studies? Have the soaps replaced Shakespeare and, if so, is cultural studies to blame? Won't cultural studies kill literature by encouraging the study of films, television, and other popular cultural forms rather than the classics of world literature?

A similar charge was made against theory when it encouraged the reading of philosophical and psychoanalytic texts along with literary works: it took students away from the classics. But theory has reinvigorated the traditional literary canon, opening the door to more ways of reading the 'great works' of English and American literature. Never has so much been written about Shakespeare; he is studied from every angle conceivable, interpreted in feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytic, historicist, and deconstructive vocabularies. Wordsworth has been transformed by literary theory from a poet of nature to a key figure of modernity. What *have* suffered neglect are 'minor' works that were regularly studied when literary study was organized to 'cover' historical periods and genres. Shakespeare is more widely read and vigorously interpreted than ever, but Marlowe, Beaumont and Fletcher, Dekker, Heywood, and Ben Jonson – Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists who used to surround him – are little read today.

Would cultural studies have a similar effect, providing new contexts and increasing the range of issues for a few literary works, while taking students away from others? So far, the growth of cultural studies has accompanied (though not caused) an expansion of the literary canon. Literature that is widely taught today includes writings by women and members of other historically marginalized groups. Whether added to traditional literary courses or studied as separate traditions ('Asian-American literature', 'Postcolonial literature in English'), these writings are often studied as representations of the experience and thus culture of the people in question (in the United States, of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, and US Latinos, as well as women). Such writings, though, bring to the fore questions about how far literature creates the culture it is said to express or represent. Is culture the *effect* of representations rather than their source or cause?

The widespread study of previously neglected writings has prompted heated arguments in the media: have traditional literary standards been compromised? Are previously neglected works selected for their 'literary excellence' or for their cultural representativeness? Is it 'political correctness', the desire to give every minority just representation, rather than specifically literary criteria, that is determining the choice of works to be studied?

There are three lines of response to such questions. The first is that 'literary excellence' has never determined what is studied. Each teacher does not pick what he or she thinks are the ten greatest works of world literature but, rather, selects works that are representative of something: perhaps a literary form or a period of literary history (the English novel, Elizabethan literature, modern American poetry). It is within that context of representing something that the 'best' works are

chosen: you don't omit Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare from your Elizabethan course if you think they are the best poets of the period, just as you include what you take to be the 'best' works of Asian-American literature, if that is what you are teaching. What has changed is an interest in choosing works to represent a range of cultural experiences as well as a range of literary forms.

Second, application of the criterion of literary excellence has historically been compromised by non-literary criteria involving race and gender, for instance. A boy's experience of growing up (e.g. Huck Finn's) has been deemed universal, whereas a girl's (Maggie Tulliver's in *The Mill on the Floss*) has been seen as a subject of more restricted interest. Both literary theory and cultural studies have helped modify such assumptions.

Finally, the notion of literary excellence itself has been subjected to debate: does it enshrine particular cultural interests and purposes as if they were the only standard of literary evaluation? Debate about what has counted as literature worthy of study and how ideas of excellence have functioned in institutions is a strand of cultural studies extremely pertinent to literary studies.

Modes of analysis

The second broad topic of dissension concerns the modes of analysis in literary and cultural studies. When cultural studies was a renegade form of literary studies, it applied literary analysis to other cultural materials. If cultural studies became dominant and its practitioners no longer came to it from literary studies, might not that application of literary analysis become less important? The introduction to an influential American volume, *Cultural Studies*, declares, 'although there is no prohibition against close textual readings in cultural studies, they are also not required'. This assurance that close reading is not prohibited is scarcely reassuring to the literary critic. Freed from the principle that has long governed literary studies – that the main point of interest is the distinctive complexity of individual works – cultural studies could easily become a kind of non-quantitative sociology, treating works as

instances or symptoms of something else rather than of interest in themselves, and succumbing to other temptations.

Chief among these is the lure of 'totality', the notion that there is a social totality of which cultural forms are the expression or the symptom, so that to analyse them is to relate them to the social totality from which they derive. Recent theory debates the question of whether there is a social totality, a socio-political configuration, and if so, how cultural products and activities relate to it. But cultural studies is drawn to the idea of a direct relationship, in which cultural products are the symptom of an underlying socio-political configuration. For example, the 'Popular Culture' course of the Open University in Britain, which was taken by some 5,000 people between 1982 and 1985, contained a unit on 'Television Police Series and Law and Order', which analysed the development of police series in terms of a changing socio-political situation.

> 'Dixon of Dock Green' centres on a paternalistic father-figure who is intimately familiar with the working class neighbourhood he patrols. With the consolidation of the welfare state in the prosperity of the early 1960s, class problems become translated into social concerns: corresponding to this, a new series, 'Z Cars', shows uniformed police in patrol cars doing their job as professionals but at some distance from the community they serve. After the 1960s there is a crisis for hegemony* in Britain, and the state, unable to win consent easily, needs to arm itself against opposition from trade union militancy, 'terrorists', the IRA. This more aggressively mobilized state of hegemony is reflected in such examples of the police genre as 'The Sweeney' and 'The Professionals' in which plain-clothes cops typically

* *Hegemony* is an arrangement of domination accepted by those who are dominated. Ruling groups dominate not by pure force but through a structure of consent, and culture is part of this structure that legitimizes current social arrangements. (The concept comes from the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci.)

combat a terrorist organization by matching its violence with their own.

This is certainly interesting and may well be true, which makes it all the more alluring as a mode of analysis, but it involves a shift from reading ('close reading') that is alert to the details of narrative structure and attends to complexities of meaning, to a socio-political analysis, in which all the serials of a given era have the same significance, as expressions of the social configuration. If literary studies is subsumed into cultural studies, this sort of 'symptomatic interpretation' might become the norm; the specificity of cultural objects might be neglected, along with the reading practices which literature invites (discussed in Chapter 2). The suspension of the demand for immediate intelligibility, the willingness to work at the boundaries of meaning, opening oneself to unexpected, productive effects of language and imagination, and the interest in how meaning and pleasure are produced – these dispositions are particularly valuable, not just for reading literature but also for considering other cultural phenomena, though it is literary study that makes these reading practices available.

Goals

Finally there is the question of the goals of literary and cultural studies. Practitioners of cultural studies often hope that work on present culture will be an intervention in culture rather than mere description. 'Cultural studies thus believes', the editors of *Cultural Studies* conclude, 'that its own intellectual work is supposed to – can – make a difference'. This is an odd statement but, I think, a revealing one: cultural studies does not believe that its intellectual work *will* make a difference. That would be overweening, not to say naive. It believes that its work 'is supposed to' make a difference. That is the idea.

Historically, the ideas of studying popular culture and of making one's work a political intervention are closely linked. In Britain in

'I'm sorry sir, but Dostoyevsky is not considered summer reading.'

the 1960s and 1970s, studying working-class culture had a political charge. In Britain, where national cultural identity seemed linked to monuments of high culture – Shakespeare and the tradition of English literature, for example – the very fact of studying popular culture was an act of resistance, in a way that it isn't in the United States, where national identity has often been defined *against* high culture. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, the work which does as much as any other to define Americanness, ends with Huck Finn lighting out for 'the territories' because Aunt Sally wants to 'sivilize' him. His identity depends on escaping civilized culture. Traditionally, the American is the man on the run from culture. When cultural studies denigrates literature as elitist, this is hard to distinguish from a long national tradition of bourgeois philistinism. In the United States, shunning high culture and studying popular culture is not a politically radical or resistant gesture so much as a rendering academic of mass culture. Cultural studies in America has few of the links with political movements that have energized cultural studies in Britain, and it could be seen as primarily a resourceful, interdisciplinary, but still academic study of cultural practices and cultural representation. Cultural studies is 'supposed to be' radical, but the opposition between an activist cultural studies and a passive literary studies may be wishful thinking.

Distinctions

Debates about the relation between literature and cultural studies are replete with complaints about elitism and charges that studying popular culture will bring the death of literature. In all the confusion, it helps to separate two sets of questions. The first are questions about the value of studying one sort of cultural object or another. The value of studying Shakespeare rather than soap operas can no longer be taken for granted and needs to be argued: what can different sorts of studies achieve, in the way of intellectual and moral training, for example? Such arguments are not easy to make: the example of German concentration

camp commanders who were connoisseurs of literature, art, and music has complicated attempts to make claims for the effects of particular sorts of study. But these issues should be confronted head on.

A different set of questions involves the *methods* for the study of cultural objects of all sorts – the advantages and disadvantages of different modes of interpretation and analysis, such as interpreting cultural objects as complex structures or reading them as symptoms of social totalities. Though appreciative interpretation has been associated with literary studies and symptomatic analysis with cultural studies, either mode can go with either sort of cultural object. Close reading of non-literary writing does not imply aesthetic valuation of the object, any more than asking cultural questions of literary works implies that they are just documents of a period. In the next chapter, I pursue further the problem of interpretation.

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