At one point in *The Autonomy of Literature*, Richard Lansdown remarks that he hopes his does not belong to the ‘poisonous’ genre of anti-theory books. He doesn’t justify this striking epithet, but the remark at least indicates where his book’s loyalties are pitched. This is not, despite appearances, an anti-literary theory book but a work of literary theory that seriously engages with some current intellectual approaches to literature, many of them emanating from other disciplines in the Humanities. In fact, the book’s subject is the very nature of what we call ‘literature’. Its object is to bring home to the reader just how elusive and unique it is, how impossible to capture in the terminological and ideological net thrown over it by philosophers, psychologists and historians. (That is why, although the term is constantly deployed, the reader who itches for the author to define what he means would be barking up the wrong tree.) To this end, his discussion of theory is constantly supplemented by discussions of particular literary texts, some brief, some considerably extended. Lansdown’s argument, then, is that ‘literature’ is a discrete phenomenon that cannot be subsumed or treated as if it were philosophy or history, and that a good deal of contemporary discussion does just that: collapses the category of literature into something else — into sociology or rhetoric or, in the case of Freud, dream-work.

As the Introduction argues, the fountainhead of many of the schools of criticism now dominant in the academy (with the exception, of course, of that blacklisted worker, the liberal humanist) is Derrida, and so the book begins by engaging with him. And engagement it is: Derrida’s work is not dismissed (*à la* Bloom) but read very attentively. Derrida, Lansdown shows, strives neither to succumb to the notion of literature being determined by outside forces (‘contamination’) nor to revert to a wholly ‘idealist’ conception of the text, essentially free, or riding above, them. Despite Derrida’s subtlety, Lansdown ultimately argues, despite his effort to transcend this dialectic, he gets sucked into it, and his influence has been dire.

*The Autonomy of Literature* is thus a partly polemical work, which addresses itself to a number of widely influential theorists who in Lansdown’s view mistake the nature of the phenomena (not the objects) they are dealing with. The three long central chapters of the book deal in turn with...
philosophy, psychoanalysis and versions of New Historicism. The views of the American neo-Aristotelian philosophers Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor and Martha Nussbaum are apparently friendly to literature and appear to elevate it to the position of a central human discipline that subsumes philosophy itself. Nussbaum argues that works of fiction are ethical documents of a subtlety that exceeds almost all abstract ethical discussion. But when you look closely at what they say, Lansdown shows, their conception of what makes a work literary is impoverished. In Nussbaum’s case, it consists of rather high-minded and old-fashioned Arnoldian views about the nature of human conduct. In dealing with Nussbaum, Lansdown is less than generous; and in pointing to those features of the literary her writing fails to respond to he becomes vague (‘essential human qualities’ etc.) and assertive. But Lansdown does not have much trouble in showing that neither Rorty nor Alasdair MacIntyre ever really engages in detail with the literary examples they gesture towards in their arguments. These philosophical friends of literature succeed only in gutting the literary texts they appear to praise.

The next chapter of the book engages with psychoanalysis. Lansdown makes rather heavy weather of the inadequacy of Freud’s comparisons of literature to the dream-work. We all know this by now — and the equally blind alley of the notion, here less queried, of sublimation. But the discussion of Melanie Klein, and then of Hannah Segal that follows, certainly redeems this section. In this part of the book, Lansdown is not merely forensically displaying the elisions and contradictions of the theorists he discusses, but here seems, as with Derrida, to be taking part in an active to-and-fro engagement with them, pulling material from their work into his own, learning from them, at the same time as he is qualifying and shifting the direction of Segal’s thinking. The book here attains to a demonstration of creative critical thought, and the links made between Segal, Marion Milner’s On Not Being Able to Paint and Lily Briscoe in To the Lighthouse are particularly cogent.

In the chapter on New Historicism, the book’s real enemy and target appears. It is the avowed project of the writers that Lansdown first discusses here to promote, in Stephen Greenblatt’s words, ‘a salutary return of the literary text to the condition of all other texts’. New Historicism, Lansdown shows, is ‘uniformly hostile to the idea of the autonomy of literature’, backing up this claim by analysing, and having fun with, some incautious and sweeping remarks made by the likes of Marilyn Butler and Jerome McCann. On the other side of the disciplinary divide, there are those historiographers like Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur who also want to collapse the distinction between the literary and the historical narrative. The work of R.G. Collingwood, and particularly his concept of the ‘double character of thought’, which ‘allows us both to acknowledge the primacy of context as a matrix of thought, and to preserve the integrity of thought outside such a matrix’, is illuminatingly drawn upon here. And Ricoeur, though contended with, emerges rightly as a more considerable figure than his contemporary Anglo-Saxons. It really is hard, as Lansdown suggests, to see how the ‘new’ (though now rapidly declining) ‘historicism’ in the American and British academy differs from the old.

But besides being polemical (Lansdown clearly enjoys knocking down some of the figures whose critical positions he despises), The Autonomy of Literature is also meditative — provoked to hard, intent thought by the difficult issues it deals with. At the real centre of the book are the numerous citations of authors’ accounts of their writing process, and Lansdown’s own descriptions of the ways writing itself alters the given material it deals with. In this stress on the literary as an activity, as against the varied writers who reduce it to a fundamentally passive thing (recipient of codes, ideologies etc.), Lansdown rejoins the Derrida with whom he has performed such an intricate dance of association and disassociation throughout his text. Occasional moments of exasperation and mean temper aside, this is a subtle, often intricately argued and scholarly book that confronts numerous influential writers and makes a genuinely original contribution to the international discussion of what Derrida has called the ‘singular impropriety’ of its topic. Literature is a dodgy business — and that’s the point.