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A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory

Fifth edition

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Preface to the Fifth Edition

Raman Selden's original *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (1985) now appears in a new fifth edition. Some little while after revising the second edition in 1989, Raman prematurely and tragically died of a brain tumour. He was much loved and highly respected – not least for the remarkable achievement of producing a short, clear, informative and unpolemical volume on a diverse and difficult subject. A third edition appeared in 1993, brought up-to-date by Peter Widdowson, and in 1997 he was joined by Peter Brooker in an extensive reworking of the fourth edition (debts to other advisers who assisted them on those occasions are acknowledged in previous Prefaces). Now, in 2005, and as witness to its continuing success and popularity, the moment for further revision of *A Reader's Guide* has arrived once more.

Twenty years is a long time in contemporary literary theory, and the terrain, not surprisingly, has undergone substantial change since Raman Selden first traversed it. As early as the third edition, it was noted that, in the nature of things, the volume was beginning to have two rather more clearly identifiable functions than it had when the project was initiated. The earlier chapters were taking on a historical cast in outlining movements from which newer developments had received their impetus but had then superseded, while the later ones attempted to take stock of precisely those newer developments, to mark out the coordinates of where we live and practise theory and criticism now. This tendency was strengthened in the reordering and restructuring of the fourth edition, and the present version continues to reflect it, so that the last five chapters – including a new concluding one on what it might mean to be 'Post-Theory' – now comprise half the book. The Introduction reflects, amongst other things, on the issues which lie behind the current revisions, and the reading lists have, of course, again been extensively updated.

Introduction

It is now twenty years since Raman Selden undertook the daunting task of writing a brief introductory guide to contemporary literary theory, and it is salutary to consider how much has changed since the initial publication of *A Reader's Guide* in 1985. In his Introduction to that first edition, it was still possible for Raman to note that,

until recently ordinary readers of literature and even professional literary critics had no reason to trouble themselves about developments in literary theory. Theory seemed a rather rarefied specialism which concerned a few individuals in literature departments who were, in effect, philosophers pretending to be literary critics. . . . Most critics assumed, like Dr Johnson, that great literature was universal and expressed general truths about human life . . . [and] talked comfortable good sense about the writer's personal experience, the social and historical background of the work, the human interest, imaginative 'genius' and poetic beauty of great literature.

For good or ill, no such generalizations about the field of literary criticism could be made now. Equally, in 1985 Raman would rightly point to the end of the 1960s as the moment at which things began to change, and comment that 'during the past twenty years or so students of literature have been troubled by a seemingly endless series of challenges to the consensus of common sense, many of them deriving from European (and especially French and Russian) intellectual sources. To the Anglo-Saxon tradition, this was a particularly nasty shock.' But he could also still present 'Structuralism' as a newly shocking 'intruder in the bed of Dr Leavis's *alma mater*' (Cambridge), especially a structuralism with 'a touch of *Marxism* about [it]', and note the even more *outré* fact that there was already 'a *poststructuralist* critique of structuralism', one of the main influences on which was the

'psychoanalytic structuralism' of the French writer, Jacques Lacan. All of which, he could say at the time, 'only confirmed ingrained prejudices'. No criticism of Raman, of course – indeed, that he *could* say this is to make the very point – but such a conjuncture within 'English' or Literary Studies now seems to belong irrevocably to the dim and distant past. As later pages of the present introduction attest, over the last twenty years a seismic change has taken place which has transformed the contours of 'contemporary literary theory', and which has therefore required a reconfiguration of *A Reader's Guide* to match.

Nevertheless, we retain – along with, it is only fair to note, a good proportion of what Raman originally wrote in the first editions of the book – a commitment to many of his founding beliefs about the need for a concise, clear, introductory guide to the field. We might add that the constant fissurings and reformations of contemporary theory since seem to reconfirm the continuing need for some basic mapping of this complex and difficult terrain, and the *Guide's* widespread adoption on degree courses throughout the English-speaking world also appears to bear this out.

It goes without saying, of course, that 'theory' in the fullest generic sense is not a unique product of the late twentieth century – as its Greek etymology, if nothing else, clearly indicates. Nor, of course, is Literary or Critical Theory anything new, as those will confirm who studied Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, Sidney, Dryden, Boileau, Pope, Burke, Coleridge and Arnold in their (traditional) 'Literary Theory' courses. Indeed, one of Raman Selden's other (edited) books is entitled *The Theory of Criticism from Plato to the Present: A Reader* (1988). Every age has its theoretical definitions of the nature of literature and its theorized principles on which critical approaches to the analysis of literature are premised. But in the 1980s, Fredric Jameson made a telling observation in his essay, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' (in Kaplan (ed.), 1988: see 'Further reading' for Chapter 8); he wrote: 'A generation ago, there was still a technical discourse of professional philosophy . . . alongside which one could still distinguish that quite different discourse of the other academic disciplines – of political science, for example, or sociology or literary criticism. Today, increasingly, we have a kind of writing simply called "theory" which is all or none of these things at once.' This 'theoretical discourse', he goes on, has marked 'the end of philosophy as such' and is 'to be numbered among the manifestations of postmodernism'. The kinds of originary theoretical texts Jameson had in mind were those from the 1960s and 1970s by, for example, Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Althusser, Kristeva, together with earlier 'remobilized' texts by, among others, Bakhtin, Saussure, Benjamin and the Russian Formalists. Through the

1980s and 1990s, this process seemed to compound itself in self-generating fashion, with 'Theory' (now adorned by a tell-tale capital 'T') being put on the syllabus by a plethora of Readers, Guides and introductory handbooks. Certainly in 'English' – plunged into a permanent state of 'crisis' (but only, it appeared, for those who did not want to countenance change) – 'Theory' courses became *de rigueur*, prompting one of the central and unresolved debates in that discipline at least: 'How to Teach Theory' (more on this later). This period (c.late 1960s to late 1990s), we may call 'Theorsday' – or, more recognizably, 'The Moment of Theory' – a historically and culturally specific phenomenon coterminous with Poststructuralism, Postmodernism and the sidelining of materialist politics, a period which, it now seems, has been superseded by one declared 'post-Theory' (see below and the Conclusion to the present volume).

But back in 1985, Raman Selden's impetus in writing *A Reader's Guide* was because he believed that the questions raised by contemporary literary theory were important enough to justify the effort of clarification, and because many readers by then felt that the conventional contemptuous dismissal of theory would no longer do. If nothing else, they wanted to know exactly what they were being asked to reject. Like Raman, we too assume that the reader is interested by and curious about this subject, and that s/he requires a sketch-map of it as a preliminary guide to traversing the difficult ground of the theories themselves. Apropos of this, we also firmly hold that the 'Selected Reading' sections at the end of each chapter, with their lists of 'Basic Texts' and 'Further Reading', are an integral part of our project to familiarize the reader with the thinking which has constructed their present field of study: the *Guide*, in the beginning and in the end, is no substitute for the original theories.

Inevitably, any attempt to put together a brief summation of complex and contentious concepts, to say much in little, will result in oversimplifications, compressions, generalizations and omissions. For example, we made the decision when revising the fourth edition that approaches premised on pervasive linguistic and psychoanalytic theories were best dispersed throughout the various chapters rather than having discrete sections devoted to them. 'Myth criticism', which has a long and varied history and includes the work of Gilbert Murray, James Frazer, Carl Jung, Maud Bodkin and Northrop Frye, was omitted because it seemed to us that it had not entered the mainstream of academic or popular culture, and had not challenged received ideas as vigorously as the theories we do examine. The chapter on New Criticism and F. R. Leavis comes before the one on Russian Formalism when even a cursory glance will indicate that chronologically

the latter *precedes* the former. This is because Russian Formalism, albeit mainly *produced* in the second two decades of the twentieth century, did not have widespread impact until the late 1960s and the 1970s, when it was effectively rediscovered, translated and given currency by Western intellectuals who were themselves part of the newer Marxist and structuralist movements of that period. In this respect, the Russian Formalists 'belong' to that later moment of their *reproduction* and were mobilized by the new left critics in their assault, precisely, on established literary criticism represented most centrally, in the Anglo-Saxon cultures, by New Criticism and Leavisism. Hence, we present the latter as *anterior* to Formalism in terms of critical theoretical ideology, because they represent the traditions of criticism, from the outset and principally, with which contemporary critical theory had to engage. In any event, while the *Reader's Guide* does not pretend to give a comprehensive picture of its field, and cannot be anything other than selective and partial (in both senses), what it does offer is a succinct overview of the most challenging and prominent trends within the theoretical debates of the last forty years.

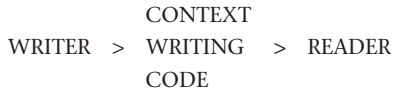
But more generally, and leaving aside for the moment the fact that in 2005, if not in 1985, the effects of these theoretical debates have so marked literary studies that it is unthinkable to ignore them, why should we trouble ourselves about theory? How, after all, does it affect our experience and understanding of reading literary texts? One answer would be that some familiarity with theory tends to undermine reading as an *innocent* activity. If we begin to ask ourselves questions about the construction of meaning in fiction, the presence of ideology in poetry, or how we measure the *value* of a literary work, we can no longer naïvely accept the 'realism' of a novel, the 'sincerity' of a poem, or the 'greatness' of either. Some readers may cherish their illusions and mourn the loss of innocence, but if they are serious, they must confront the problematical issues raised about 'Literature' and its social relations by major theorists in recent years. Other readers again may believe that theories and concepts will only deaden the spontaneity of their response to literary works, but they will thereby fail to realize that *no* discourse about literature is theory-free, that even apparently 'spontaneous' discussion of literary texts is dependent on the *de facto* (if less self-conscious) theorizing of older generations. Their talk of 'feeling', 'imagination', 'genius', 'sincerity' and 'reality' is full of dead theory which is sanctified by time and has become part of the naturalized language of common sense. A second answer might be, then, that far from having a sterile effect on our reading, new ways of seeing literature can revitalize our engagement with texts; that if we are to be adventurous and exploratory

in our reading *of* literature, we must also be adventurous in our thinking *about* literature.

One simple way of demonstrating the effect of theorizing literature is to see how different theories raise different questions about it from different foci of interest. The following diagram of linguistic communication, devised by Roman Jakobson, helps to distinguish some possible starting-points:



An addresser sends a message to an addressee; the message uses a code (usually a language familiar to both addresser and addressee); the message has a context (or 'referent') and is transmitted through a contact (a medium such as live speech, the telephone or writing). For the purposes of discussing literature, the 'contact' is usually now the printed word (except, say, in drama or performance-poetry); and so we may restate the diagram thus:



If we adopt the addresser's viewpoint, we draw attention to the *writer*, and his or her 'emotive' or 'expressive' use of language; if we focus on the 'context', we isolate the 'referential' use of language and invoke its historical dimension at the point of the work's production; if we are principally interested in the addressee, we study the *reader's* reception of the 'message', hence introducing a different historical context (no longer the moment of a text's production but of its *reproduction*), and so on. Different literary theories also tend to place the emphasis upon one function rather than another; so we might represent some major earlier ones diagrammatically thus:



Romantic-humanist theories emphasize the *writer's* life and mind as expressed in his or her work; 'reader' theories (phenomenological criticism) centre themselves on the *reader's*, or 'affective', experience; formalist theories concentrate on the nature of the *writing* itself; Marxist criticism regards the social and historical *context* as fundamental; and structuralist poetics draws attention to the *codes* we use to construct meaning. At their best, of

course, none of these approaches totally ignores the other dimensions of literary communication: for example, Western Marxist criticism does not hold a strictly referential view of language, and the writer, the audience and the text are all included within the overall sociological perspective. However, it is noteworthy in what we have outlined above that none of the examples is taken from the more contemporary theoretical fields of feminism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism and gay, lesbian or queer theory. This is because all of these, in their different ways, disturb and disrupt the relations between the terms in the original diagram, and it is these movements which account for the disproportionate scale of the twenty-year gap between the moment when Raman Selden began the book and the moment of its revision now.

Developments in critical theory and practice have diversified in geometric progression since 1985, and the shape and composition of the present version of *A Reader's Guide* attempt to take account of this and are witness to it. Although not overtly structured to indicate such a change, the book is now in two distinct halves. Those theories which comprised the entirety of the earlier editions have been reduced and pressed back into Chapters 1–6, or just about half of the whole volume. It is clear that these are now part of the *history* of contemporary literary theory, but are not accurately described as 'contemporary literary theory' themselves. This is not to say that they are now redundant, sterile or irrelevant – their premises, methodologies and perceptions remain enlightening, and may yet be the source of still more innovative departures in theorizing literature – but in so far as they were the pace-makers for the new leaders of the field, they have dropped back and are out of the current race. A difficult decision in this context was how to deal with the chapter on feminist theories. In earlier editions, this had concluded the book – signalling that this was where the action was; but the chronology of the chapter, often paralleling other theories of the 1960s and 1970s, came to make it look like a gestural afterthought: 'and then there is feminism'. In the fourth edition, therefore, we returned the chapter comprising that time-frame, with its largely 'white' Anglo-American and French focus, to its more appropriate place at the end of the 'historical' half of the book, and dispersed accounts of the newer feminisms, taking account especially of their pivotal non-Eurocentric energies, throughout the later 'contemporary' chapters. The long chapter on poststructuralism now contains rather more on psychoanalytic theories and an updating of the treatment of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. A previous single chapter on postmodernism and postcolonialism was split in the fourth edition into two separate chapters, with new

sections which introduced both theorists who had only more recently begun to make a major mark on the field and the impact of work around gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity. In addition, there was an entirely new chapter on gay, lesbian and queer theories, which brought the book's coverage of the most dynamic areas of activity up-to-date. Most of the above has been retained in the present fifth edition, although revised and refined where necessary. The most significant addition here, however, is the concluding chapter on 'Post-Theory', which takes stock of the various emergent tendencies and debates regarding aesthetics and politics which are occurring under its banner. Finally, the 'Selected Reading' sections have again been recast to make them more accessible and up-to-date. One notable change in these is the inclusion (in square brackets) of dates of first publication for many of the founding texts of contemporary literary theory in order to indicate how much earlier they often are than the modern editions by which they subsequently made their impact. Equally, the date of translation into English of seminal European texts is included for the same reason.

So what has been the turbulence between 1985 and 2005 in the field of 'contemporary literary theory'; what is the context which explains the continuous need to revise *A Reader's Guide*? For a start, 'Theory', even 'literary theory', can no longer usefully be regarded as a progressively emerging body of work, evolving through a series of definable phases or 'movements' – of delivery, critique, advancement, reformulation, and so on. This appeared to be the case in the later 1970s and early 1980s – although no doubt it was never entirely true – when the 'Moment of Theory' seemed to have arrived and there was an anxiety, even to those enthusiastically participating in it, that a new academic subject, worse a new scholasticism – radical and subversive, yes, but also potentially exclusive in its abstraction – was coming into being. Books poured from the presses, conferences abounded, 'Theory' courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level proliferated, and any residual notions of 'practice' and of 'the empirical' became fearsomely problematical. Such a 'Moment of Theory' no longer obtains – whether, paradoxically, because it coincided with the rise to political power of the new right, whether because, by definition in a postmodern world, it could not survive in a more or less unitary state, or whether it contained, as itself a postmodern creature, the catalysing agents for its own dispersal, are beyond confident assertion. But a change *has* occurred – a change producing a situation very different to that of the increasingly abstract and self-obsessed intellectual field which the original edition of this book felt itself just about able to describe and contain. First, the singular and capitalized 'Theory' has

devolved rapidly into 'theories' – often overlapping and mutually generative, but also in productive contestation. The 'Moment of Theory', in other words, has spawned a hugely diverse tribe of *praxes*, or theorized practices, at once self-conscious about their projects and representing radical forms of political action, at least in the cultural domain. This has been particularly the case with critical theories and practices which focus on gender and sexuality and with those which seek to deconstruct Euro- and ethnocentricity. Second, given the postmodern theoretical fission we have suggested above, there has been a turn in some quarters to ostensibly more traditional positions and priorities. The verdict here is that 'Theory Has Failed': that, in an ironic postmodern twist, the 'End of Theory' is now with us. This is by no means the Lazarus-like spasms of the old guard come back from the dead, but the view of younger academics who have gone through the theory mill and who wish to challenge the dominance of theoretical discourse in literary studies on behalf of literature itself – to find a way of talking about literary texts, about the experience of reading and evaluating them. As the concluding chapter in the present edition makes clear, this aspect of 'post-theory' is most perceptible in the tendency towards a so-called 'New Aesthetics'. The question of 'practice' in the present theoretical context we will return to briefly below.

Other related effects of developments in contemporary theory over the past decades may be adduced as follows. Perhaps the most notable has been the deconstruction of notions of a given literary canon – of an agreed selection of 'great works' which are the benchmark for the discrimination of 'literary value', and without exposure to which no literary education can be complete. The theoretical challenging of the criteria on which the canon is established, together with the arrival on the agenda of many more marginal kinds of literary and other cultural production hitherto excluded from it, has at once caused a withering of the old verities and an explosion of new materials for serious study. While the canon retains some prestigious defenders (for example, Harold Bloom and George Steiner), the more pervasive tendency has been to push literary studies towards forms of cultural studies, where a much larger and uncanonized range of cultural production is under analysis. Indeed, it might more accurately be said that this tendency represents a form of feedback, since it was precisely the earlier initiatives of Cultural Studies proper which were among the agents that helped to subvert naturalized notions of 'Literature' and literary criticism in the first place. In the context of contemporary literary theory, however, the more telling recent shift has been to the development of 'Cultural Theory' as the umbrella term for the whole field of enquiry. Most of the significant

work outlined in the later chapters of this *Reader's Guide*, it is important to note – on postmodernism, postcolonialism, gay, lesbian and queer theories, in particular – is always *more than literary* in orientation. Such theories promote a global reinterpretation and redeployment of all forms of discourse as part of a radical cultural politics, among which ‘the literary’ may be merely one more or less significant form of representation. The present volume recognizes this, but in turn and given its brief, it attempts to retain a literary focus within the broad and constantly mutating processes of cultural history.

Despite the complexity and diversity of the field as we have presented it, however, there are a number of fundamental lessons that the theoretical debates of the past thirty years have thrown up – ones learnt not only by radicals but also by those who wish to defend more conventional or traditionally humanistic positions and approaches. They are: that *all* literary-critical activity is *always* underpinned by theory; that the theory, whatever it may be, represents an ideological – if not expressly political – position; that it is more effective, if not more honest, to have a praxis which is explicitly theorized than to operate with naturalized and unexamined assumptions; that such a praxis may be tactical and strategic rather than seemingly philosophically absolute; that ‘Theory’ is no longer apparently monolithic and awesome (although still ‘difficult’); and that it is to be *put to use* and critiqued rather than studied in the abstract and for its own sake.

It is at this point, then, that we might reflect for a moment on the notion that ‘Theory Has Failed’ and that an age of ‘post-theory’ has dawned (to be revisited more substantively in our Conclusion). What is meant by ‘The Failure of Theory’? In Literary Studies, the crucial issue seems to be the relation between Theory and Criticism. But what, after all, is Theory in this context? What distinguishes it from ‘practice’, and how then does it impact on ‘empirical’ textual analysis? The answers lie in a number of fallacies which traverse the notion of the failure of theory. First, it implies that theory has a privileged role in a hierarchy of conceptual, creative and critical discourses, rather than recognizing the dialectical relationship between theory and practice in which they test and transform each other. Second, it assumes that theory somehow exists outside the kinds of assumptions and ideologies it discloses, that it is not itself a socio-cultural practice (Terry Eagleton once put the converse: ‘just as all social life is theoretical, so all theory is a real social practice’ (Eagleton, 1990)). Third, as a consequence, it seems to set up a stark choice at a specious crossroads between a cul-de-sac of autonomous and impenetrable theory and a through-road of critical practice, accessible language and direct encounter with literary texts. The first

we might call 'Metaphysics', the second 'New Criticism' – and we have been there before. In reality, of course, there is no crossroads: theory shadows criticism as a questioning and interiorized companion, and the conversation between them goes on, whatever their apparent separation. The function of literary/critical theory is to reveal and debate the assumptions of literary form and identity and to disclose the interleaved criteria of aesthetic, moral and social values on which critical modes depend and which their procedures enact and confirm. No justification should be needed, therefore, to encourage this conversation further, to make criticism's theoretical assumptions explicit, to assess one theory by another, to ask how a theoretical framework influences the interpretation of literary texts. But perhaps the most insistent fallacy is the judgement that the 'radical' Theory of the post-1960s period failed to produce a criticism which matched its radicalizing intentions; that instead of a theoretically aware, interventionist and socially purposive criticism which could be deployed in the empirical analysis of texts came work of wayward or leaden abstraction and of self-promoting dogma. Now we would be the first to admit that the academic world has sipped full of the ritualistic trotting-out of major theorists' names and theoretical clichés; of wooden Foucauldian or Bakhtinian 'readings' of this, that or the other; of formulaic gesturing towards the 'theoretical underpinnings' of this or that thesis – often seriously disjunct from what are, in effect, conventional literary-critical analyses. In the present context, then, we might want to recast 'post-theory' as 'post-Theoreticism', where '-eticism' is shorthand for an arcane, hermetic scholasticism, but 'theory' properly remains the evolving matrix in which new critical practices are shaped. In a sense, as the introduction to a collection of essays on the subject suggests, 'post-theory' is to flag no more than 'theory "yet to come"' (McQuillan *et al.* (eds), 1999: see 'References' for Conclusion).

In the event, the demystification of theory, which has resulted in the great plurality of theorized praxes for specific interests and purposes, should allow us to be rather more self-questioning and critical about it. For example, in the context of 'post-theory', is one implication that we would no longer have to face that overwhelming question which has haunted our profession since the 1970s: 'How to Teach Theory'? Would grateful students no longer have to 'do Theory'? The answer must surely be No; but a principal anxiety about the term 'post-theory' is that it might seem to legitimate such 'end of Theory' fantasies. To restate the obvious, occupying a theory-free zone is a fundamental impossibility, and to allow our students to think that it is not would be a dereliction of intellectual duty. But if we do continue to teach theory, familiar questions abound. Given that 'the

Theory course' is usually taught independently of those on the familiar literary genres, and so becomes boxed off from what are still seen as the central components of a literature degree, we might want to ask: whether it is indeed appropriate to place the autonomous study of literary/critical theory on every undergraduate literature degree; whether such theory is something which can be usefully studied as though it were a separate philosophical genre; where historically such a theory course might start, and wherever it does, how far the student needs to comprehend the informing philosophical antecedents of any critical position or practice before taking it up (must you know Marx to engage with marxist critical theory)? Should students be introduced to theory via abstruse, perplexing and intimidating theoretical essays which are conceptually and stylistically far removed from their own experience of studying literature? Can students engage in meaningful seminar discussion when they have limited grasp of the debates the theory is addressing and scant knowledge of the literary texts to which it may do no more than allude in passing? Are particular theories actually tied to particular kinds of text or to particular periods (is the same theory usefully applied, for example, to a novel and to a poem, to Renaissance and to Romantic literature); how far and with what justification does a theoretical position 'rewrite' its object of study? Is there any meaningful use, finally, in simply *lecturing* on theory? All such questions are, in effect, a reflex of the pressing central questions: how to get beyond a passive engagement with theory or, conversely, a loose pluralism in which students shop around for those theories which most appeal to them (i.e. the ones they find easiest to grasp), and what, crucially, is theory's relation to critical practice?

These questions are at the heart of a pragmatic and strategic politics in the general field of cultural study in the early 2000s, and they urgently demand answers if theory is not to be seen by students as yet another example of arid scholasticism (some such answers are more or less convincingly proposed by the 'post-theory' texts surveyed in our concluding chapter). Students need to be able to make informed and engaged *choices* about the theories they encounter, to take a critical stance towards them, and to deploy the resulting insights in their own critical practice. Perhaps, as Mikko Lehtonen argued in 2001, since there can be no such thing as "untheoretical" criticism versus "theoretical" theory', since 'teaching literature is always already teaching theory', and since students 'are always already inside theory', 'Theory can be taught best as *theorising*'. Without in any sense denying the importance of ingesting the theoretical work itself or appearing to promote once more a simplistic empiricism, this new edition of *A Reader's Guide* seeks to facilitate the process of becoming theorized by

making the plethora of theoretical positions now available accessible to students. The fundamental belief behind the book is that to be in a position to understand and mobilize theory – to be able to theorize *one's own practice* – is to enfranchise oneself in the cultural politics of the contemporary period.

Selected reading

Anthologies of literary theory

- Brooker, Peter and Widdowson, Peter (eds), *A Practical Reader in Contemporary Literary Theory* (Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1996).
- Davis, Robert Con and Schleifer, Ronald (eds), *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies: 1900 to the Present* (4th edn, Longman, London and New York, 1998).
- Lodge, David (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism: A Reader* (Longman, London and New York, 1977).
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CHAPTER 1

New Criticism, moral formalism and F. R. Leavis

Origins: Eliot, Richards, Empson

The origins of the dominant Anglo-American traditions of criticism in the mid-twentieth century (roughly from the 1920s to the 1970s) are of course complex and often apparently contradictory – as are their theoretical and critical positions and practices. But we may crudely say that the influence of the British nineteenth-century poet and literary and cultural critic Matthew Arnold is strongly perceptible in them – especially the Arnold who proposed that philosophy and religion would be ‘replaced by poetry’ in modern society and who held that ‘Culture’ – representing ‘the best that has been known and thought in the world’ – could mount a humanistic defence against the destructive ‘Anarchy’ (Arnold’s word) of what F. R. Leavis was later to call the ‘technologico-Benthamite’ civilization of urban, industrialized societies. The principal twentieth-century mediator of Arnold into the new critical movements, and himself the single most influential common figure behind them – British or American – was the American (and then naturalized English) poet, dramatist and critic, T. S. Eliot (see below).

To over-simplify, what is central to all the diverse inflections of the Anglo-American tradition – and itself derived from the two sources mentioned above – is a profound, almost reverential regard for literary works themselves. This may manifest itself as an obsessive concern with ‘the text itself’, ‘the words on the page’, nothing more nor less; with literary works as icons of human value deployed against twentieth-century cultural barbarism; or as an ‘objective’, ‘scientific’, ‘disinterested’ (Arnold’s word) criticism of the text – but at heart it represents the same aesthetico-humanist idealization of works of Literature. We capitalize ‘Literature’ because one of the most influential

– and later most crucially deconstructed – effects of this critical tradition was the elevation of some literary works over others by way of close and ‘disinterested’ textual analysis (‘scrutiny’ leading to ‘discrimination’, both key Leavisite terms). Only some literary writing, in other words, was ‘Literature’ (the best that has been thought and *written*), and could become part of the ‘tradition’ (Eliot’s key term and then Leavis’s, as in *The Great Tradition*) or, more recognizably these days, of *the canon*. By its nature, the canon is exclusive and hierarchical, and would clearly be seen to be artificially constructed by choices and selections made by human agency (critics) were it not for its endemic tendency to naturalize itself as, precisely, *natural*: self-evidently, unarguably *given, there*, and not created by critical ‘discrimination’, by taste, preference, partiality, etc. This is its great danger; and of course it disenfranchises huge tracts of literary writing from serious study and status. It is why, in the post-1960s critical revolution, it had to be demystified and dismantled, so that all the writing which had been ‘hidden from criticism’ – ‘gothic’ and ‘popular’ fiction, working-class and women’s writing, for example – could be put back on the agenda in an environment relatively free from pre-emptive evaluation.

T. S. Eliot was central to many of the tendencies sketched in so far, and his early essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919) has been perhaps the single most influential work in Anglo-American criticism. In it, Eliot does two things in particular: he emphasizes that writers must have ‘the historical sense’ – that is, a sense of the tradition of writing in which they must situate themselves; and that this process reinforces the necessary ‘depersonalization’ of the artist if his or her art is to attain the ‘impersonality’ it must have if it is ‘to approach the condition of science’. Famously, he wrote: ‘Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality’, while characteristically adding that, ‘of course, only those who have personality or emotions know what it means to want to escape from those things’. The poet (and we may note Eliot’s privileging of poetry as the dominant genre, for this was to become the main focus of much New Criticism – and an instance therefore of the way particular theories relate most closely to particular kinds of writing: see Introduction, p. 11) becomes a kind of impersonal ‘catalyst’ of experience, a ‘medium’ not of his or her ‘consciousness’ or ‘personality’ but of that which in the end makes up the ‘medium’ itself – the poem – and our sole object of interest. In another famous phrase from his essay on ‘Hamlet’ (1919), Eliot describes the work of art as an ‘objective correlative’ for the experience which may have engendered it: an impersonal re-creation which is the autonomous object of attention. (It is closely

related to the notion of the ‘image’ which is central to the poetics of Ezra Pound, Imagism and Eliot’s own poetic practice.) What emerges from all this in the context of the diverse developments of New Criticism is the (seemingly) anti-romantic thrust of Eliot’s thinking (a new ‘classicism’); the emphasis on ‘science’, ‘objectivity’, ‘impersonality’, and the ‘medium’ as the focal object of analysis; and the notion of a ‘tradition’ of works which most successfully hold an ‘essence’ of human experience in their constituent ‘medium’.

In the immediate post-First World War period when Eliot was developing these ideas, ‘English’ was emerging (most particularly at Cambridge University) as a (some would say *the*) central subject in the Arts higher-education syllabus, and with it a new, younger generation of academics determined to transcend the older ‘bellettrist’ critical tradition which had dominated English hitherto. In a sense, they can be regarded as the first proponents of a ‘professional’ criticism working from within the academy, and it was to them that Eliot’s critical precepts appealed most strongly. It is worth registering – both in the present context and in the later one of contemporary critical theory’s assault on the earlier tradition, and of *its* consonance with *postmodernism* – that this new criticism had a thoroughly symbiotic relationship with literary modernism, finding its premises borne out in such works and using these as its model texts for analysis. To put it over simply, perhaps: this new critical movement *was* ‘modernist’ criticism.

I. A. Richards, William Empson and, slightly later, F. R. Leavis (see below) were the main proponents of the new English at Cambridge. Richards, whose background was in philosophy (aesthetics, psychology and semantics), produced his widely influential *Principles of Literary Criticism* in 1924. In it he innovatively attempted to lay down an explicit theoretical base for literary study. Arguing that criticism should emulate the precision of science, he attempted to articulate the special character of literary language, differentiating the ‘emotive’ language of poetry from the ‘referential’ language of non-literary discourse (his *Science and Poetry* was to follow in 1926). Even more influential – certainly in terms of its title and the praxis it enunciates – was *Practical Criticism* (1929), in which Richards included examples of his students’ attempts to analyse short, unidentified poems, showed how slack their reading equipment was, and attempted to establish basic tenets for the close reading of poetry. *Practical Criticism* became, in both the United States and England, the central compulsory critical and pedagogic tool of the higher-education (and then secondary) English syllabus – rapidly and damagingly becoming untheorized, and thus naturalized, as *the* fundamental critical practice. Its virtues were, however – and we may yet come to regret its obloquy in the demystifying theoretical initiatives of the past

Reflecting the continuing change and development in modern literary theory, the key features of this book includes its clarity, brevity, equal coverage of the main literary theories and useful bibliographies of further reading

Literature students will find its clearly defined sections easy to navigate and whilst avoiding over-simplification, it makes a complex subject accessible

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