
Introduction

About this book

The high-water mark of literary theory occurred in the 1980s. That decade was the ‘moment’ of theory, when the topic was fashionable and controversial. By the 1990s there was already a steady flow of books and articles with titles like *After Theory* (Thomas Docherty, 1990) or ‘Post-Theory’ (Nicolas Tredell, in *The Critical Decade*, 1993). As such titles suggest, the ‘moment of theory’ had probably passed. Twenty years on from then, the publication of ‘afters’ continues, with Nicholas Birns’s *Theory After Theory: An Intellectual History of Literary Theory from 1950 to the Early 21st Century* (Broadview Press, 2010), Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge’s edited collection of essays *Theory After Theory* (Routledge, 2011), and Judith Ryan’s *The Novel After Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2014). See also the books mentioned later at the start of Chapter 15. So why another updated ‘primer’ of theory so late in the day?

The simple answer is that after the moment of theory there comes, inevitably, the ‘hour’ of theory, when it ceases to be the exclusive concern of a dedicated minority and enters the intellectual bloodstream as a taken-for-granted aspect of the curriculum. At this stage the glamour fades, the charisma is ‘routinised’, and it becomes the day-to-day business of quite a large number of people to learn or teach (or both) this material. There are evident dangers of oversimplifying things and so offering a false reassurance to students facing the difficulties of this topic for the first time. All the same, the main responsibility of anyone attempting a book like this one is to

meet the demand for clear explanation and demonstration. If the task were impossible, and the mountain of theory could be climbed only by experts, then the whole enterprise of establishing it on undergraduate courses would have been a mistake.

The emphasis on practice means that this is a ‘work-book’, not just a ‘text-book’. As you read you will find suggested activities, headed ‘STOP and THINK’, which are designed to give you some ‘hands-on’ experience of literary theory and its problems. You will not just be reading about it, reducing theory to a kind of spectator sport played only by superstars, but starting to do it for yourself. Becoming a participant in this way will help you to make *some* personal sense of theory, and will, I hope, increase your confidence, even if you suspect that your practical efforts remain fairly rudimentary. It is also hoped that the ‘STOP and THINK’ activities will provide the basis for initiating seminar discussion if this book is being used in connection with a taught course on critical theory.

All the critical approaches described in this book are a reaction against something which went before, and a prior knowledge of these things cannot be assumed. Hence, I start with an account of the ‘liberal humanism’ against which all these newer critical approaches, broadly speaking, define themselves.

There is a problem concerning how to label the older ways of doing literary studies that were challenged in the 1970s and 1980s by the arrival on the scene of the theoretical developments described in this book. One solution is to use a generalised phrase like ‘older approaches to literary study’, or ‘traditional ways of discussing literature’. But the vagueness of descriptors like these is troubling, and it is never safe to assume that everyone understands such terms in the same way. Until around 2000 the term ‘liberal humanism’ was widely current in the UK, and the equivalent term ‘formalism’ similarly so in the USA. It was, and is, convenient to have a simple ‘ism’ name to use as a handle, but it is also important to have such a label, because the label’s very existence asserts the vital point that no ways of studying literature are ‘theory-free’, for all of them stem from a set of assumptions, or principles, or foundational assertions, even (and especially) when these are seldom made explicit. So I have continued in this fourth edition to use the term ‘liberal humanism’, and have formally set out (in the section of Chapter 1 called ‘Ten tenets of

liberal humanism') what I think are its underlying assumptions. Classes and their tutors will want to challenge or supplement this list, of course, but I would be surprised if many believed that there is any untheorised way of studying literature. That is precisely the point which is made by using an 'ism' label to designate the most traditional approaches.

The currently successful versions of Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic, and linguistic criticism also all define themselves against earlier versions of each of these, and therefore I try in each case to explain the earlier versions first. I think that many of the current difficulties students have with theory arise from trying to miss out this stage. My approach amounts to throwing you in at the shallow end. Potentially this is more painful than being thrown in at the deep end – the technique used in most other student introductions to literary theory – but it does reduce the risk of drowning.

It should, perhaps, be stressed that most of the other general introductions to theory that are now available are different from this one. They offer an even and comprehensive coverage of the entire field, often with relatively little in the way of sustained practical discussion of applications. I find some of them very useful, but they seem to me to be recapitulations of literary theory, often from a viewpoint more philosophical than literary, rather than introductions to it. The evenness of the coverage means that the pace never varies, so that there is no opportunity to stop and dwell upon an example in a reflective way. By contrast, I haven't tried to be comprehensive, and I do try to provide variation in pace by selecting questions, or examples, or key essays for closer treatment.

At undergraduate level the main problem is to decide how much theory can reasonably be handled by beginners. Time is not unlimited, and there is a need to think about a realistic syllabus rather than an ideal one. Theorists, like novelists, are dauntingly plentiful, and the subject of theory cannot succeed in lecture rooms and seminars unless we fashion it into a student-centred syllabus. We are rightly dismissive these days of the notion of teaching a 'Great Tradition' of key novelists, as advocated by the critic F. R. Leavis. But Leavis's Great Tradition was essentially a syllabus, manageable within a year-long undergraduate course on the novel. It is possible to read and adequately discuss a novel or two by Austen, Eliot, James,

Conrad, and Lawrence within that time. We need to make sure that what is presented as theory today makes sense as a sequence of learning and teaching.

When we are about to move into something new it is sensible to first take stock of what we already have, if only so that the distance travelled can later be measured. So in the first chapter of this book I invite you to look back critically and reflectively on your previous training in literary studies. We then go on to look at the assumptions behind traditional literary criticism, or 'liberal humanism' as theorists usually call it.

The term 'liberal humanism' became current in the 1970s, as a shorthand (and mainly hostile) way of referring to the kind of criticism which held sway before theory. The word 'liberal' in this formulation roughly means not politically radical, and hence generally evasive and non-committal on political issues. 'Humanism' implies something similar; it suggests a range of negative attributes, such as 'non-Marxist' and 'non-feminist', and 'non-theoretical'. There is also the implication that liberal humanists believe in 'human nature' as something fixed and constant which great literature expresses. Liberal humanists did not (and do not, as a rule) use this name of themselves, but, says an influential school of thought, if you practise literary criticism and do not call yourself a Marxist critic, or a structuralist, or a stylistician, or some such, then you are probably a liberal humanist, whether or not you admit or recognise this.

In the course of explaining some of the major critical ideas now current, this book provides summaries or descriptions of a number of important theoretical essays. But I want to stress at the outset that it is important, too, that you read some of the major theorists at first hand. Yet as soon as you begin to turn the pages of Barthes, Butler, Foucault, or Derrida you will encounter writing which looks dauntingly difficult and off-putting. How, then, to cope?

I suggest that it is much better to read *intensely* in theory than to read *widely*. By this I mean that you will gain little from reading chapter after chapter of a book that is making little sense to you. You will gain much more by using the same amount of reading time to read one crucial and frequently mentioned chapter or article several times for yourself. Having a detailed knowledge of what is actually said in the pages of a well-known argument, being aware

of how the argument unfolds and how it is qualified or contextualised, will be far more useful to you than a superficial overall impression gained from commentaries or from desperate skim-reading. However daunting the material, you have to make your reading meditative, reflective, and personal. Try to become a slow reader. Further, some intensive reading of this kind will enable you to quote lines other than the handful that are cited in all the commentaries. And most importantly, your view of things will be your own, perhaps quirky and incomplete, but at least not just the echo and residue of some published commentator's prepacked version. In a nut-shell, intensive reading is often more useful than extensive reading. English studies is founded on the notion of close reading, and while there was a period in the late 1970s and early 1980s when this approach was frequently disparaged, it is undoubtedly true that nothing of any interest can happen in this subject without close reading.

I suggest, therefore, that you try out for yourself a useful form of intensive reading, the technique known as 'SQ3R'. This breaks down the reading of a difficult chapter or article into five stages, as designated by the letters 'SQRRR', or 'SQ3R', as is it usually given. The five stages are:

- S – That is, *Survey* the whole chapter or section fairly rapidly, skimming through it to get a rough sense of the scope and nature of the argument. Remember that information is not evenly spread throughout a text. It tends to be concentrated in the opening and closing paragraphs (where you often get useful summaries of the whole), and the 'hinge points' of the argument are often indicated in the opening and closing sentences of paragraphs.
- Q – Having skimmed the whole, set yourself some *Questions*, some things you hope to find out from what you are reading. This makes you an 'active' reader rather than a passive one, and gives your reading a purpose.
- R1 – Now *Read* the whole piece. Use a pencil if the copy is your own to underline key points, query difficulties, circle phrases worth remembering, and so on. Don't just sit in front of the pages. If the book is not your own jot *something* down on paper as you read, however minimal.

- R2 – Now, close the book and *Recall* what you have read. Jot down some summary points. Ask whether your starting questions have been answered, or at least clarified. Spell out some of the difficulties that remain. In this way, you record some concrete outcomes to your reading, so that your time doesn't simply evaporate uselessly once the book is closed.
- R3 – This final stage is the *Review*. It happens after an interval has elapsed since the reading. You can experiment, but initially try doing it the following day. Without opening the book again, or referring back to your notes, review what you have gained from the reading; remind yourself of the question you set yourself, the points you jotted down at the *Recall* stage, and any important phrases from the essay. If this produces very little, then refer back to your notes. If they make little sense, then repeat the *Survey* stage, and do an accelerated *Read*, by reading the first and last paragraphs of the essay, and skim-reading the main body assisted by your pencilled markings.

You may well have evolved a study technique something like this already. It is really just common sense. But it will help to ensure that you gain *something* from a theoretical text, no matter how initially forbidding it might be.

Finally, it will, I hope, go without saying that no comprehensiveness is possible in a book such as this. Clearly, also, this book does not contain all you need to know about theory, and it does not in itself (without the reading it refers you to) constitute a 'course' in literary theory. It leaves out a good deal, and it deals fairly briskly with many topics. It is a starter-pack, intended to give you a sense of what theory is all about, and suggest how it might affect your literary studies. Above all, it aims to *interest* you in theory.

Approaching theory

If you are coming to literary theory soon after taking courses in such subjects as media studies, communications studies, or sociolinguistics, then the general 'feel' of the newer theoretical approaches to literature may well seem familiar. You will already be 'tuned in' to the emphasis on ideas which is one of their characteristics; you will

be undaunted by their use of technical terminology, and unsurprised by their strong social and political interests. If, on the other hand, you took a 'straight' 'A' Level, Higher, 'Access,' or High School literature course with the major emphasis on set books, then much of what is contained in this book will probably be new to you. Initially, you will have the problem of getting on the wave-length of these different ways of looking at literature. As you would expect in studying at degree level, you will encounter problems which do not have generally agreed solutions, and it is inevitable that your understanding of the matters discussed here will remain partial, in both senses of that word, as everybody's does.

But whichever of these two categories you fall into, I want to assure you at the outset that the doubts and uncertainties you will have about this material are probably *not* due to:

1. any supposed mental incapacity of your own, for example, to your not having 'a philosophical mind', or not possessing the kind of X-ray intellect which can penetrate jargon and see the sense beneath, or
2. the fact that your schooling did not include intensive tuition in, say, linguistics or philosophy, or
3. the innate and irreducible difficulty of the material itself (a point we will come back to).

Rather, nearly all the difficulties you will have will be the direct result of the way theory is written, and the way it is written about. For literary theory, it must be emphasised, is not innately difficult. There are very few inherently complex ideas in existence in literary theory. On the contrary, the whole body of work known collectively as 'theory' is based upon some dozen or so ideas, none of which are in themselves difficult. (Some of them are listed on pp. 36–8.) What *is* difficult, however, is the language of theory. Many of the major writers on theory write in French, so that much of what we read is in translation, sometimes of a rather clumsy kind. Being a Romance language, French takes most of its words directly from Latin, and it lacks the reassuring Anglo-Saxon layer of vocabulary which provides us with so many of our brief, familiar, everyday terms. Hence, a close English translation of a French academic text will contain a large number of longer Latinate words, always perceived as a source

of difficulty by English-speaking readers. Writing with a high proportion of these characteristics can be off-putting and wearying, and it *is* easy to lose patience.

But the frame of mind I would recommend at the outset is threefold. *Firstly*, we must have some *initial* patience with the difficult surface of the writing. We must avoid the too-ready conclusion that literary theory is just meaningless, pretentious jargon (that is, that the theory is at fault). *Secondly*, on the other hand, we must, for obvious reasons, resist the view that we ourselves are intellectually incapable of coping with it (that is, that we are at fault). *Thirdly*, and crucially, we must not assume that the difficulty of theoretical writing is *always* the dress of profound ideas – only that it *might* sometimes be, which leaves the onus of discrimination on us. To sum up this attitude: we are looking, in literary theory, for something we can use, not something which will use us. We ought not to issue theory with a blank cheque to spend our time for us. (If we do, it will certainly spend more than we can afford.) Do not, then, be *endlessly* patient with theory. Require it to be clear, and expect it, in the longer term, to deliver something solid. Don't be content, as many seem to be, just to see it as 'challenging' conventional practice or 'putting it in question' in some never quite specified way. Challenges are fine, but they have to amount to something in the end.

STOP and THINK: reviewing your study of literature to date

Before we go on, into what may well be a new stage in your involvement with literature, it would be sensible to 'take stock' and reflect a little on the nature of our literary education to date. The purpose of doing this is to begin the process of making visible, and hence open to scrutiny, the methods and procedures which have become so familiar to you (probably going back to the time when you began secondary school) that they are no longer visible at all as a distinct intellectual practice. But stock-taking is not part of our normal intellectual routine, unfortunately, and it is a difficult and demanding thing to do. Yet please do not skip this section, since theory will never make any sense to you until you feel the need for it yourself. What I would like you to do is to try to become conscious of the nature of your own previous work in English, by recalling:

1. what first made you decide to study English, what you hoped to gain from doing so, and whether that hope was realised;
2. which books and authors were chosen for study and what they had in common;
3. which books and authors now seem conspicuously absent;
4. what, in general terms, your previous study taught you (about 'life', say, or conduct, or about literature itself).

Doing this will help you to begin to obtain a perspective on your experience of literature to date. Spend an hour or so doing it. I carried out a similar exercise myself as part of the process of working on this book, and some of the result is given below. It is intended more as a prompt than a model, and I have not responded in any systematic way to the four questions above. Reproducing it will perhaps help to 'personalise' the voice behind this book, but I leave you to decide whether you want to look at this before or after doing your own.

My own 'stock-taking'

Since literary theory is the topic of this book I will concentrate on detailing the course of my acquaintanceship with it. In fact, I heard nothing at all about literary theory as an undergraduate at London University in the late 1960s. I took a straightforward 'Wulf-to-Woolf' English course (*Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf) with compulsory Old and Middle English papers. Essentially, I now realise, the English course I followed in the late 1960s retained the shape and the outlook of the pioneer English degree courses established at London University more than a century before.

The one innovation in English teaching at London was to recognise the existence of something called American literature and to appoint a lecturer to teach it. The lecturer was Eric Mottram, who died in January 1995.¹ As a result of taking this American course I

1 I wrote in detail about Eric as critic and teacher in Chapter 7 of my book *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Salt Publishing, 2006).

became an enthusiast for a range of American poets who were part of the 'alternative culture' of the time. At the same time, and for several years afterwards, I was also trying to write poetry of more or less this kind. It quickly became apparent that conventional criticism could make very little of poetry like this. So by the early 1970s I was beginning to look at newer critical approaches than those I had encountered at university. But I wasn't at that time an advocate of literary theory, since 'theory' as such was then a non-existent category in literary studies.

The change of emphasis seems to have happened in my own case around 1973, when the words 'structuralism' and 'semiotics' begin to feature in notes about what I was reading and in the titles of the books and articles I was interested in. Structuralism, we were then learning, was a new kind of literary theory which had recently become prominent in France, and semiotics ('the science of signs') was one of its sub-branches. I was loosely connected with the London Graduate Seminar started by Frank Kermode after he became Professor of English at University College, London. The group debated the work of the structuralist Roland Barthes and caught Kermode's enthusiasm for it. I bought and read everything by Barthes then in print in England, no great undertaking since all that was available was *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology*, probably his least interesting and least accessible books. His much more engaging collection *Mythologies* appeared in English in 1973 in the Paladin imprint. 1973 was also the year when *The Times Literary Supplement* devoted the major part of two issues (5 and 12 October) to a 'Survey of Semiotics', with articles by Umberto Eco, Tzvetan Todorov, and Julia Kristeva, major names in these new kinds of critical theory and encountered then (in my case) for the first time. This interest in theory was consolidated in 1981 when I was asked to devise a course on literary theory as part of the BA programme at my previous college, and, in turn, a decade or so of teaching that course led to this book. So far as I am aware, this course, at LSU College of Higher Education, Southampton, was the first undergraduate literary theory course to be taught in Britain.