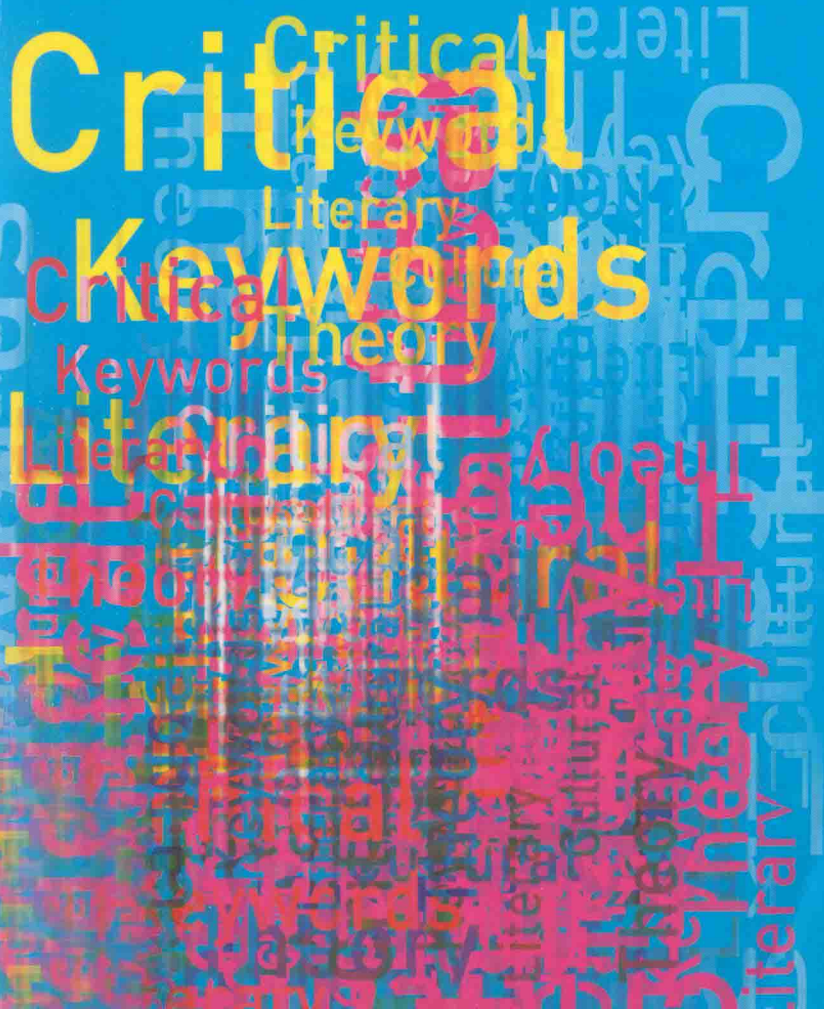


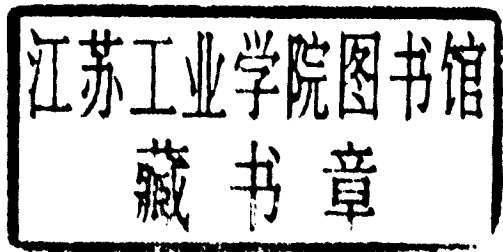
Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory

Julian Wolfreys

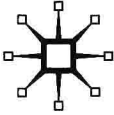


CRITICAL KEYWORDS IN LITERARY AND CULTURAL THEORY

Julian Wolfreys



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PREFACE

Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory offers the reader explorations of more than forty terms, concepts and motifs that are employed to greater or lesser degrees in what is called, generally, literary and cultural theory. More specifically, the keywords explored here acknowledge, whether directly or indirectly, a range of interests and investigations into areas of knowledge that have informed literary and cultural study: psychoanalysis, philosophy, linguistics, feminism, Marxism, postcolonialism, gay studies and queer theory, and what is referred to as 'identity politics'. Admittedly, there are many more such terms and figures, and it is certainly not the purpose of the present volume to be exhaustive. One intention of this book is to introduce the reader to the complexity of particular words through the presentation, under each keyword's heading, of a series of citations from different critics. What the reader will see, it is hoped, is that, far from being simply or easily defined, the various terms in question here share a certain semantic and conceptual slipperiness. Words change their meanings in varying contexts, and contexts themselves are neither finite nor exhaustible.

Another objective of this volume, therefore, is not to resolve instances of paradox, contradiction or ambiguity but rather to emphasise and even affirm such qualities. Indeed, implicit to the organization and purpose of *Critical Keywords* is the understanding that language is never stable; it is not simply that the 'language of theory' – to suppose, naively, that such a thing exists, separate or separable from language in general – is difficult because resistant to semantic determination; rather, one arrives at an understanding that the 'language of theory' merely highlights an aspect of all language. The irony of most, if not all, literary study is that, while one is asked to focus on the operations of language in particular forms, the address is based on a refusal to read the undecidable condition that haunts all production of meaning. The most appropriate response, I would argue, in the face of this comprehension is to be open to, rather than suspicious of, such instability, and to respond in an affirmative manner to the fluxes and intensities at work in what is referred to as 'theoretical' language, inasmuch as such a 'language' (supposing once again that it exists as a separable form or identity) is comprehensible not as jargon but, instead, as *just* the most transparent example of the way words work.

Each keyword is provided with a minimal running commentary, interwoven with various citations. It will be seen from the commentaries that, far from offering potted definitions, I point frequently to the fact that the terms and concepts in question resist definition, and furthermore, that there is often little real consensus – except through certain vague accommodations – over the meaning of even the most seemingly straightforward words, such as *gender*, *identity*, *postmodernism*, *sexuality*, or *writing*. We all have the habit of treating words as though they were names, as though they created simple, complete identities for us, and as though such names or identities can do the work of thinking. It is very much a point that, with regard to critical thinking – or let's just call it thinking at all – glossaries conventionally understood, with their apparatus of headnotes and neatly packaged semantic determinations, no longer work, precisely because such volumes, conventionally understood, operate through simplification, reduction, and the misplaced notion that ideas can be summed up in a nutshell, as the phrase goes. With regard to certain ideas or constellations of notions, the glossary or dictionary-like definition does not function, it ceases to function and falls into ruins in the face of the ongoing tensions, the contest of flow and intensification, of language itself.

Another point to consider is that, while the significance of a word given in isolation (but this can never really happen; if you see only a single word written on a page or screen, you still attempt to provide context and definition, you still bring to bear on that single word the complex linguistic, semantic and conceptual network you have already learnt) can appear unproblematic, the ideas being expressed around and through such a term are resistant to immediate comprehension, if for no other reason than that, often, they are expecting the reader to examine values and beliefs from radically different perspectives. While this might occasion what could be considered obfuscating or turgid prose – and this is an accusation that has frequently been levelled against so-called literary theory, though often without either justification or any signs of reading attentively – it is more often the case that ideas which reorient the reader's perspective and understanding are irreducibly complex; a true comprehension could only arrive, if it arrives at all, through a resistance to transparency. Few, if any, writers or critics write so as *not* to be understood. But what is called understanding often involves patience and attentiveness – rereading as reorientation – on the part of the reader rather than a passive consumption. The reader has to be open to textual complications. She or he must be willing to return to a text, bringing with this a recognition that language and the ideas being conveyed, if they are to have any lasting worth, are not necessarily transparent or self-evident. What kind of a text would it be, about which everything could be comprehended at a glance, in the blink of an eye? Could such a text exist even? Nothing can be read instantaneously

– not even advertising posters comprising a single image, the barest minimum of words or a logo – without highly sophisticated processes of deciphering taking place.

What is termed accessibility by some, equally runs the risk of simplification and reductiveness. The writer who aims at such accessibility can do great violence to ideas, while assuming, condescendingly, that he or she can know his or her audience. How can I know who will read this book? Even if I am told by the publisher that the volume is marketed with specific readers in mind, how can I ever begin to have the presumption of believing I can know or assume each and every member of my audience or the knowledge which he or she possesses? (It is impossible even to assume a single entity called an ‘audience’.) This is impossible, and the various manufactured crises which have been aired and which still persist around critical language, the ‘language of literary theory’, have often proliferated around this very issue of accessibility, while pretending to speak for ‘the greatest number’. *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory* resists appeals to the mystifications of ‘plain speaking’ and in doing so refuses to believe in the myth of a lowest common denominator. Instead, it trusts to the openness and willingness to engage, in whatever manner, however it may be received, on the part of whatever readers it may come to have. If this book is marketed within a specific context such as higher education, then there has to be a question of trust: a trust which is also a belief that whatever recipient this may reach will work with this text, in the spirit in which this text is constituted. Whatever goes by the name of education, in this name there never can be, nor should there be, the illusion of immediacy, transparency or accessibility in a kind of programmed rush equivalent to journalistic haste, by which or to which thinking comes to be sacrificed. *Critical Keywords* risks everything on a certain belief in thinking and an openness to thinking, which, it is believed, is always the difference of thinking; not only the difference between thinking and not-thinking (habits of assumption or prejudice), but also a different thinking, a thinking of difference.

ABOUT THIS VOLUME

The terms, concepts or motifs discussed in the present volume are used throughout the book, both in my commentaries and in the citations; these references are too numerous, and have too many other tangential associations, to make it practical to highlight their appearances, but the reader is advised to pay close attention to the use of the various keywords and to refer back to the entries on those terms.

In a small number of cases, a quotation will have found its way into other sections, in order to stress that terms cannot be isolated for particular uses or contexts; in a number of places a quotation will be repeated because it employs several of the keywords that are considered here.

After each collection of quotations three questions are provided to direct the reader towards further consideration. The questions do not assume a single addressee; some may be found to be more appropriate for individual research and consideration, while others might function more actively in seminar and other group discussions. It is not necessarily the case, nor is it assumed, that such questions have precise answers; they are merely intended to open other avenues of thought. In some cases, the questions will ask the reader to consider the work of a particular term in relation to another which is also to be found in the volume.

Following each entry, explanatory and bibliographical notes are provided for foreign, archaic, and obscure or rarely used words. In addition, notes are provided which amplify on matters related to theoretical discourse, while also offering sketched definitions of philosophical and other terms. Of course, selection of words for inclusion in notes is a risky business, but I have sought to highlight those which stick in the mind because students have asked for a definition during lectures and discussion. Notes have also been given where a proper name occurs, for the most part. Such notes give biographical dates for critics, philosophers, and other writers, and brief bibliographies are also offered. These are, admittedly, by no means exhaustive and should not be taken as such. Only publications not listed in Works Cited at the end of this book have full bibliographical details in the notes.

Short bibliographies follow each entry, offering the reader possible 'first ports of call' of significance in relation to the keyword under consideration. Bibliographical details are given in full, regardless of whether they have been cited or not.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To borrow an image from Edmund Spenser, there may be no cantos to be found in the present volume but, in the course of writing and editing, it has shown all the hallmarks of mutability, becoming on occasion the baggiest of monsters. I would therefore like to thank Emily Garcia for her invaluable editorial assistance in the initial stages of this project, which served to keep some of the more Spenserian excesses at bay. Ruth Robbins and Ken Womack inadvertently caused this volume to come about, as have students in various criticism and theory courses in England, Scotland, and the United States. Speaking of students, the following are exemplary in their sense of inquiry, intellectual endeavour and commitment to study and research, and I would like to thank Alissa Fessell, Jonathan Hall, Lessley Kynes and Christina Leon, for reading through various drafts, and commenting on, as well as questioning, obscurity and obfuscation (my own and that in some of what follows).

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CRITICAL KEYWORDS

CRITICAL KEYWORDS

ABJECTION

Abjection is employed by Julia Kristeva¹ in an effort to destabilize the binary² logic of much psychoanalytic thought, where the notions of (desiring) subject and object (of desire) often represent a co-dependent oppositional pairing. In order to understand Kristeva's point it is necessary that we recognize 'subject' and 'object' not only as opposed locations or two halves of a logical model, but also as supposedly discrete and complete identities in and of themselves. Each figure in the pair is accorded its own self-sufficient meaning with definable boundaries. Such boundaries are the psychic limits by which the self separates itself from its *other* within the psychoanalytic framework of Kristeva's text. Indeed, another way of positing the subject/object dyad would be to comprehend it, as already implied, in terms of 'self/other'. The abject, says Kristeva, is 'neither subject nor object'; instead it opposes the ego by 'draw[ing] me to the place where meaning collapses'. While the subject/object structure makes logical meaning possible, the abject produces, or is otherwise comprehensible as, an uncanny effect of horror, threatening the logical certainty of either the subject/object or self/not-self binarism. Abjection is thus the process or psychic experience of a slippage across the boundaries of the self, and with that a partial erasure of the borders of the psyche which define the ego. The abject is, amongst other things, the fluid locus of forbidden desires and ideas whose radical exclusion is the basis of the subject's cultural determination; in comprehending the process of abjection thus, we come to see, as Kristeva makes apparent, that that which threatens the self is not simply, necessarily locatable outside the self but rather emerges or erupts within subjectivity.

Beginning, then, with abjection, it is clear from this term that there is, in one sense, an intimate relationship between the psychic construction of the human body and that which both revolts and yet in some manner belongs to that body. In literary or filmic forms, such revulsion and rejection need not be figured literally. While it can be the case that the image of a corpse, a character vomiting or the metaphor of vomit may be employed, it is often the case that the abject is symbolized, given a determinate form outside the self and other than the self and yet causing a visceral, often violent response.

Seeing the monstrous and the repulsive in any narrative representation is, in effect, to witness an exteriorized manifestation of that which is already incorporated in my psyche and yet which is irrecoverable as belonging to my 'self'. As the discussion of the break-down of binary oppositions and the concomitant evacuation of stable semantic value makes plain, there is therefore a mobile structural relationship to be understood here, whether that which makes me abject is actually external to me or is incorporated with me, whether within my body or in my psyche. The relationship is structural because I am reacting to something which, though not me, none the less brings about a response, described in the following manner by Julia Kristeva, in her definition of the term *abjection*:

repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting.
 Julia Kristeva (1982: 13)

As Kristeva's brief comment and, in particular, her hyphenated gerund, *ab-jecting*, should make clear, I am speaking here not simply of a subject-object relationship, nor yet a static structural model but, instead, a process or movement that defines the structurality of the structure. This is expressed through both the particular gerund and also the function of the gerund throughout the citation. For abjection to be felt it has to get underway. It is thus less important, perhaps, that we understand the concept as a moment, than as a motion, if we are to register the fundamentally destabilizing aspect of abjection. This will help to explain how what makes one person feel abject will not do the same for others.

The abject threatens life . . . Although the subject must exclude the abject, the abject must, nevertheless be tolerated for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life . . . The abject can be experienced in various ways – one which relates to biological bodily functions, the other of which has been inscribed in a symbolic (religious) economy.

Barbara Creed (1993: 9)

That the abject threatens and creates a violent sensation of disorientation is very clear. Moreover, as Barbara Creed explains, the abject is irreducible to any particular type of experience. Abjection can take place anywhere, in any context, and its nature is such that, while it is so intimately connected to our own sense of identity, whether individual or communal, social or private, personal or national, its unnerving force comes from the fact that, however much a part of us the abject might be, it is radically, irreducibly other than any element of our identities which we take to be normal or healthy. What we therefore reject, or whatever it is we are repulsed by, belongs to being.

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated . . . Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.

Julia Kristeva (1982: 1)

The abject is unequivocally excessive; psychic in its condition, it is a response either to something material or to something psychic, and it can produce physical or material effects. Such is its excessiveness, following from previous comments, we might wish to suggest that the abject cannot be defined except through its effects. We see this problem here, when Julia Kristeva describes her response to the skin on milk. You or I may have no such response to this particular phenomenon, and yet, through the physiological and psychic response described by Kristeva, we comprehend the feeling of abjection. What is also significant here is the fact that Kristeva makes explicit the relation between abjection and the self, signalled in her passage through the suspension of the first person pronoun in quotation marks. It is not so much the fact that she is recounting a particular experience, though this is the point from which she begins, but rather that the 'I', the subject, is disturbed in the assumed security of its identity by the involuntary response to the milk.

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck . . . Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk . . . I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly . . . Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream . . . 'I' want none of that element . . . 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it. But since food is not an 'other' for 'me' . . . I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself.

Julia Kristeva (1982: 2–3)

However, what has to be acknowledged and repeatedly stressed, between Kristeva's and McAfee's comments, is that the object is neither the milk, nor indeed any particular object as such. The subject rids itself of something that is other than itself and yet part of itself, thereby seeking in the process of 'ab-jecting' to re-establish the boundaries of the self.

Abjection is the state in which one's foothold in the world of self and other disintegrates. The object is the symptom of being on the border, pushing toward psychosis where the I blurs and is *not yet* . . . In anxiety or abjection – through this overwhelming ill-ease – there can be no differentiating between beings.

Noëlle McAfee (1993: 120)

So, to reiterate: abjection or, as Kristeva has it above, *ab-jecting* names the work of a psychic traversal resulting in a corporeal, physiological and psychological response which, due to the extremity and violence of subjective experience, breaks up the subject's sense of identity in the very process by which 'I' strive to maintain myself, my identity, my life. Abjection effects a violent revelation to me about my selfhood: that identity, comprehended as a fixed meaning, is only an illusion promoted by the psyche; rather, the self is nothing but a fiction, a series of narratives precariously assembled and always susceptible to the erasure of its boundaries and the dissolution of its assumed sovereignty or autonomy.

The object is that which, although intimately a part of early experience, must be rejected so that the self can establish the borders of its unified subjectivity: the familiar foreign(er) who is suddenly recognized as a threat to (national) identity. This rejection (abjection) of certain aspects of physical immediacy, whether of the personal body or the body politic, is the act which establishes subjective identity, but this act also establishes that identity as a prohibition, and as lacking an earlier bodily continuity. The subjective self, therefore, is always haunted by the possible return of the object that was part of the presubjective experience . . . Abjection contradicts the self's (national or individual) claim to unity and knowledge, but this contradiction is so profound precisely because it emerges from the gestures with which the self attempts to assert such a claim . . . Abjection blurs the usually clearly marked space between the self and the other . . . the object is that which seems to confound the possibility of meaning . . . The self objects that which is most necessarily inescapable and rejected: the bodily reminders of physical dependence and necessity.

Norma Claire Moruzzi (1993: 144–5)

Questions for further consideration

1. In what ways might the object be thought of in relation to the uncanny?
2. Is the object purely a negative determination or negation of self, or can it be read as a configuration, a provisional difference or non-identity within identity, of otherness or alterity?

3. In light of the emphasis on corporeality in discussions of the abject, is there discernible an articulation of abjection in relation to the carnivalesque body?

Explanatory and bibliographical notes

1. Julia Kristeva (b.1941): *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980); *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982); *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984).
2. Throughout, the reader will find the occasional reference to binaries, binarisms, binary oppositions. While binary oppositions operate in the history of Western thought at least since the Aristotelian text, the phrase *binary opposition* is given significant emphasis in the work of a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (b.1857–d.1913): *Course in General Linguistics*, rev. edn, Introduction by Jonathan Culler, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, with Albert Reidlinger, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana/Collins, 1981). Saussure's work in linguistics (which became the principal influence on structuralist critics) stressed the structural nature of signs. The sign consists of two components, the signifier (the word) and the signified (the object, thing or idea represented or signified). Signifiers are not representative of the things they indicate; language is arbitrary, and we arrive at meaning through common agreement rather than by creating words which in some manner resemble that which we wish to signify. Therefore, no word bears meaning intrinsically: we know 'cat', not because the word has any similarity to the creature it names, but rather, because it is neither a 'bat' nor a 'hat', much less a 'cut'. Moreover, signifiers only have a particular meaning or range of meanings relationally; that is to say, we only know the meaning of a word by the structural–semantic context in which we find it. Significantly, then, many meanings are comprehended through comparison with what they are not: we know what day means because it is not night, absence and presence are not absolute values or concepts but are only determined and determinable by being comprehended in relation to one another; we know what good is, because it is not bad, and so on. Such pairs are referred to as binary oppositions, which structural pairing not simply operates at a semantic level but also governs much human conceptualization (see, for example, entries under *alterity*, *culture*, *deconstruction*, *difference/différance*, *gender*, *materialism/materiality*, *other*, *race*, *sexuality*, *subjectivity*, *uncanny*).

Further reading

- Creed, Barbara (1993), *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge).
- Geyer-Ryan, Helga (1994), *Fables of Desire: Studies in the Ethics of Art and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- Kristeva, Julia (1982), *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, trans. Margaret Waller, Introduction by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Press).