A Reader's Guide to

CONTEMPORARY LITERARY THEORY

THIRD EDITION

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To the memory of Raman Selden, the original maker, and for his widow, Jane.

Preface to the Third Edition

Writing this preface is a sad task. Some little while after revising the second edition of *A Reader's Guide*, Raman Selden prematurely and tragically died of a brain tumour. Raman was much loved and highly respected – not least for the remarkable achievement of producing a short, clear, informative and unpolemical volume on contemporary literary theory. As the person asked (and honoured) to revise his book for a third edition, I salute Ray and sincerely hope that my labours do not obscure the work he so intelligently and lucidly initiated.

Four years have elapsed since the book was last revised, and the terrain of literary theory has, of course, again undergone radical change. The whole of *A Reader's Guide*, therefore, has been extensively revised and the reading lists substantially updated. In addition, there are two new complete chapters – on New Criticism and F. R. Leavis, and on postmodernism and postcolonialism – and one other, on feminist theories, which is so fundamentally revised as to be effectively a new one. The second and third of these major revisions clearly signal the directions in which critical theory has been most dynamically moving, and the reordering of the chapters for this edition – with 1–5 already being of a more historical cast – underscores this.

In all of this work I have been generously assisted by the three advisors I recruited to the project, without whom it simply would not have been done: Peter Brooker, Maggie Humm and

Francis Mulhern. My sincerest thanks to them. Peter Brooker supplied, among other things, most of the materials for the chapter on postmodernist and postcolonialist theories. The material on Baudrillard and Lyotard in particular draws on and extends the discussion in his *Modernism/Postmodernism* (Longman, 1992) and elsewhere. Drawing directly on Maggie Humm's *Feminisms: A Reader* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) enabled me to write the chapter on feminist theories. For a fuller introduction to the range and diversity of feminist criticism, I refer the reader to Maggie Humm's forthcoming book, *A Reader's Guide to Feminist Criticism*, also from Harvester Wheatsheaf. And Francis Mulhern exercised his customary critical intelligence at all points of the book – but most extensively in relation to Marxist theory (on which he, too, published a Longman Critical Reader in 1992). Raman Selden thanked others whose books had contributed to his revision of the second edition, and the debt still stands. I must add a couple more: Coyle, Garside, Kelsall and Peck's *Encyclopaedia of Literature and Criticism* (1990), and various essays in it, have been immensely helpful; Elizabeth Wright's work there, and in her *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory and Practice* (1984), was essential for parts of the book: and Mary Eagleton's 'Critical Reader', *Feminist Literary Criticism* (1991), was also fundamental to my writing of the last chapter.

I should thank too my new colleagues at the University of Brighton who allowed me to do this work without complaint even though I had only just arrived there, and, in particular, Amanda Moore who typed my pre-IT script with speed, intelligence and good humour. With all these people to thank, it only remains for me to say that any failings in this new *Reader's Guide* are entirely my responsibility, not theirs – and, sadly, certainly not Ray's.

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Introduction

Until relatively recently, in the English-speaking world at least, 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. Discussions about literature, whether book reviews in the press, or in arts magazines on radio and television, were addressed to the ordinary reader. Most critics assumed, like Dr Johnson, that great literature was universal and expressed general truths about human life, and that therefore readers required no special knowledge or language. Critics 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. In other words, criticism spoke about literature without disturbing our picture of the world or of ourselves as readers. Then, at the end of the 1960s, things began to change.

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. 'Structuralism', for example, hit the headlines

when Colin MacCabe failed to obtain a tenured appointment at Cambridge University in 1980. The protests of the structuralists and their allies at Cambridge alerted the quality papers to the existence of an intruder in the bed of Dr Leavis's *alma mater*. The *Times Literary Supplement* duly published a special number on the scandal and its intellectual background. Most general readers of the newspaper accounts must have emerged more confused about 'structuralism' than they were before the 'MacCabe affair' gave the theorists a chance to explain themselves to the public. To be told that there was a touch of *Marxism* about MacCabe's structuralism, that his approach to structuralism was really a *poststructuralist* critique of structuralism, and that the main influence on his work was the *psychoanalytic* structuralism of the French writer Jacques Lacan only confirmed ingrained prejudices.

Raman Selden decided to undertake the daunting task of writing a reader's guide to this subject mainly because he believed that the questions raised by modern literary theory were important enough to justify the effort of clarification. Many readers now feel that the conventional contemptuous dismissal of theory will not do. They would like to know exactly what they are being asked to reject. Inevitably any attempt to put together a brief summation of complex and contentious concepts will drain much of the blood from the body of a theory, and leave it even more vulnerable to the teeth of sceptics. However, we have assumed that the reader is *interested* and *curious* about the subject, and therefore ready to accept lightly seasoned fare as a preparation for the more authentic and pungent flavours of the original theories. We acknowledge that we have perpetrated some gross over-simplifications in an attempt to say much in little, and hope that the reader will not be seriously misled by such unavoidable compressions and sweeping generalisations. We provide at the end of each section graded 'further reading' to enable the reader to follow up particular approaches at various levels of difficulty.

Why should we trouble ourselves about literary theory? Can we not simply wait for the fuss to die down? The signs are that the graft of theory has taken rather well, and may remain intact for the foreseeable future. New journals have been launched, new courses established, conferences are devoted to theoretical

questions, and it is already clearly apparent that this new critical self-awareness is manifesting itself in the newer generations of secondary and tertiary teachers of literature. How does all this affect our experience and understanding of reading and writing? First, an emphasis on theory tends to undermine reading as an *innocent* activity. If we ask ourselves questions about the construction of meaning in fiction or the presence of ideology in poetry, we can no longer naïvely accept the 'realism' of a novel or the 'sincerity' of a poem. Some readers may cherish their illusions and mourn the loss of innocence, but, if they are serious readers, they cannot ignore the deeper issues raised by the major literary theorists in recent years. Secondly, far from having a sterile effect on our reading, new ways of seeing literature can revitalise our engagement with texts. Of course, if one has no desire to reflect upon one's reading, literary criticism of any sort will have little to offer. Alternatively, readers may believe that theories and concepts will only deaden the spontaneity of their response to literary works. They may not realise 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) theorising 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 language of common sense. If we are to be adventurous and exploratory in our reading of literature, we must also be adventurous in our thinking about literature.

One can think of the various literary theories as raising different questions about literature. Theories may ask questions from the particular point of view of the writer, of the work, of the reader, or of what we usually call 'reality', although most will, in effect, also involve aspects of the other approaches. The following diagram of linguistic communication, devised by Roman Jakobson, helps to distinguish the various viewpoints:

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, a telephone, or writing). For the purposes of discussing literature, the 'contact' is usually now the printed word (except in drama or 'performance poetry'); and so we may restate the diagram thus:

	CONTEXT	
WRITER	WRITING	READER
	CODE	

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 its 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. The different literary theories also tend to place an emphasis upon one function rather than another. Taking some of the dominant theories of our time, we might place them diagrammatically as follows:

	MARXIST	
ROMANTIC-	FORMALISTIC	READER-
HUMANIST	STRUCTURALIST	ORIENTED

Romantic-humanist theories emphasise the *writer's* life and mind as expressed in his or her work; 'reader-criticism' (phenomenological criticism) centres itself on the *reader's*, or 'affective', experience; formalist theories concentrate on the nature of the *writing* itself in isolation; Marxist criticism regards the social and historical *context* as fundamental, though it must be added that Western Marxists do not hold a strictly referential view of language; and structuralist poetics draws attention to the *codes* we use to construct meaning. At their best none of the approaches totally ignores the other dimensions of literary communication. For example, in Marxist criticism, the writer, the audience, and the text are all included within a generally sociological perspective. Feminist criticism, it may significantly be noted, is not given a place in our diagram because its project

by definition is to attempt a global reinterpretation and redeployment of all approaches as an aspect of a revolutionary sexual politics. And that word 'politics', which feminism has here foregrounded, is a key term in understanding theory in general and its specific present manifestations. We will return to it briefly in a moment.

This *Reader's Guide* does not try to give a comprehensive picture of modern critical theory, but rather a map of the most challenging and prominent trends. For example, myth criticism, which has a long and various history, and includes the work of Gilbert Murray, James Frazer, Maud Bodkin, Carl Jung and Northrop Frye, has been omitted because it seemed to us that it has not entered the main stream of academic or popular culture, and has not challenged received ideas as vigorously as the theories which we will examine. This admission/omission too will, in its selectivity and partiality, direct us back to the *politics* of literary theory, and to one of the major lessons delivered to us by the alarums and excursions of the theoretical debates of the last twenty years or so. But first, a further brief explanation of apparent oddities in the composition of this Guide.

A new chapter in this revised edition is the first one on New Criticism and F. R. Leavis. The question is: why have we put it *first* when even a cursory glance at the original opening chapter on Russian Formalism would indicate that chronologically the high point of the latter arguably *precedes* the former? Two points of interest can be made here. First, because of the determinations of political and cultural history Russian Formalism, albeit mainly *produced* in the second two decades of the twentieth century, did not have widespread impact until the late 1960s and 1970s, when it was effectively rediscovered and translated (made accessible and given currency) by Western intellectuals who were themselves part of the newer Marxist and structuralist movements of that time. In this sense the Russian Formalists 'belong' to this later moment of their *reproduction* and are mobilised 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. The second point, therefore, is that despite the apparently later and longer mid-twentieth-century chronology of these Anglo-American movements they are *anterior*, in terms of critical-

theoretical ideology, to the older but more latterly reproduced work of the Russian Formalists. Periodicity in any context is problematical; here we have partially solved it by putting New Criticism and the 'moral formalism' of Leavis first because, in a very real sense, they are the traditions of criticism with which contemporary critical theory, from the onset and principally, had to engage.

Developments in critical theory and practice have diversified in geometric progression since Raman Selden was first brave enough to write this book. Revised editions, including the present one, have attempted to keep up with this profusion – witness here the separation out of a new chapter on 'Post-modernism' from the one on 'Poststructuralism'; the inclusion of a preliminary section on postcolonial theory; and the extensive but still no doubt inadequate revision of the chapter on feminist criticism. But all such attempts are doomed to failure – because to some they will be partial (in both senses), tendentious, exclusive, wrong-headed or whatever. For example, it has already been pointed out to me that the book will inevitably be seen to be – indeed is – ethnocentric and homophobic, and the absences and naturalised prejudicial emphases are, I am afraid, readily apparent: little if anything on African-American, Asian, Caribbean or black British theory – especially in relation to feminism; nothing on queer theory or lesbian theory, and so on. Perhaps a still later edition will be able to overcome this one's inadequacy and accommodate these dynamic manifestations of postmodern theoretical fission.

But this is indeed the point which begins to emerge from the gap between the moment when Ray Selden began in 1985 and the moment of revision now: 'theory', even 'literary theory', can no longer be usefully 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 – no doubt it was never true – in the later 1970s and very early 1980s, when the 'moment of theory' seemed to have arrived and there was a danger even to those enthusiastically participating in it that a new academic subject, even a new scholasticism – radical and subversive, yes, but also potentially exclusive in its abstraction – was emerging. Books poured from the presses, conferences

abounded, 'theory' courses on undergraduate degree programmes became *de rigeur*, MAs proliferated, and residual notions of 'practice' and of 'the empirical' had to be defined and defended very carefully and exactly. To me, such a 'moment of theory' seems no longer to obtain – whether because it paradoxically coincided with the rise to power of the new right, whether because in a postmodern world it could not by definition survive in a more or less unitary state, or whether it contained, as itself a postmodern creature, the catalysing agents for its own dispersal, I could not confidently say. But a change *has* occurred – a change very different to that increasingly abstract and self-obsessed intellectual field the first edition of this book felt itself just about able to describe and contain. The moment of theory has instead spawned a hugely diverse tribe of *praxes*, or theorised practices, at once self-conscious about their project and representing forms of political action in the cultural domain at least. This is in particular the case with the various critical theories and practices which focus on gender and sexuality, and with those which seek to deconstruct ethno- and Eurocentricity. Herein, too, lies the explanation for our reordering of the chapters in this revised *Reader's Guide* – where 1–5 already have an *historical* feel to them, and 6–8 represent 'the state of the art' or where the action is.

The lesson that has been learnt from the theoretical debates of the past twenty years, and learnt not only by radicals but also by some of those who wish to defend more conventional or traditionally humanistic positions and approaches, is that *no* literary-critical activity is not underpinned by theory; that the theory, whatever it may be, represents an ideological – if not expressly political – attitude; that it is more effective, if not more honest, to have a praxis which is explicitly theorised than to operate with naturalised and unexamined assumptions; that theoretical praxis may be tactical and strategic rather than seemingly philosophically absolute; that 'theory' is no longer awesome (although still 'difficult'); and that it is to be *put to use* rather than studied for its own sake.

The demystification of theory, then – which has resulted in the great plurality of theorised praxes for specific interests and purposes – allows us to be rather more self-questioning about it. How far is it appropriate to force the autonomous study of