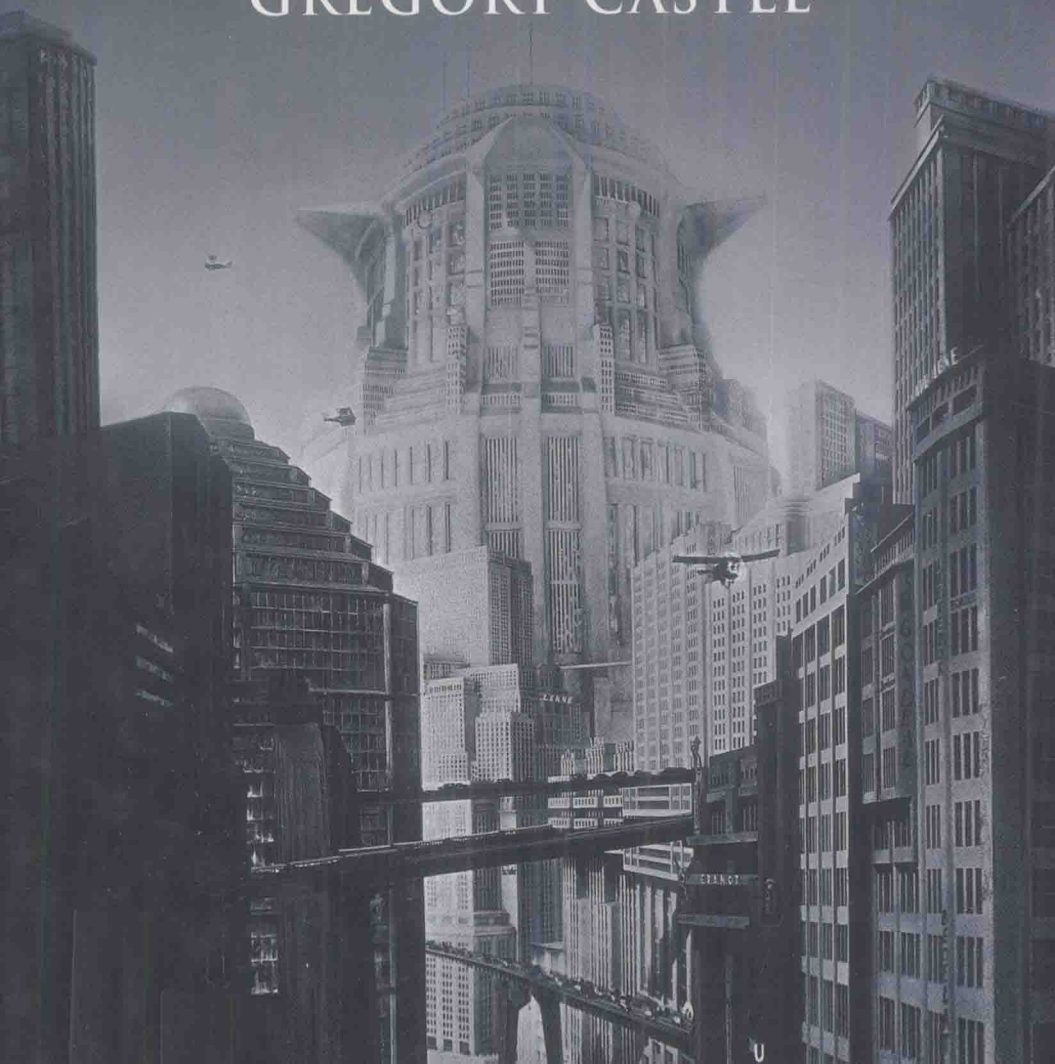
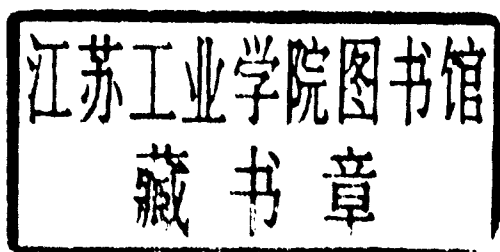


THE BLACKWELL GUIDE TO
LITERARY
THEORY
GREGORY CASTLE



The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory

Gregory Castle



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A book of this sort comes up against two obstacles: the mountain of material on literary theory that must be read and synthesized and another mountain of material, only slightly smaller, that must necessarily be left out. Because *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory* is aimed at readers unacquainted with theory – undergraduates especially, but also beginning graduate students, instructors who need a refresher course, and general readers interested in the sometimes forbiddingly arcane world of literary studies – my focus is on fundamental concepts and the most prominent and influential theoretical movements. I have had to be careful at every step to provide clear and concise descriptions and explanations but at the same time to avoid oversimplification. At times, the complexities that are inevitable in theory could not be avoided, but I have tried whenever possible to lighten complexities with definitions of terms and examples drawn from the works of major theoretical writers. It goes without saying that any infelicities are my own and not those of the theorists herein discussed. Indeed, I owe a profound debt to the innumerable fine writers whose work I read in preparing this book. I hope that this *Guide* will inspire students to turn to these writers and see for themselves the richness and diversity of literary theory.

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INTRODUCTION

*Circumference thou Bride of Awe
Possessing thou shalt be
Possessed by every hallowed Knight
That dares to covet thee.*

Emily Dickinson (#1620)

More than eighty years ago, the English literary critic, I. A. Richards, spoke of a “chaos of critical theories,” an assessment that would not be wide of the mark in the early years of the twenty-first century. The student of literature today is confronted with an array of theories concentrating on the literary text, TEXTUALITY, language, genre, the reading process, social, historical, and cultural context, sexuality and gender, the psychology of character, and the intentions of the author. In some cases, the specific nature of a given course in literature will make selecting from among these various theoretical approaches easier; in many cases, however, students must choose for themselves which direction their analyses should take. The *Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory* is designed to facilitate this process by offering students and instructors basic information on the major theories, practitioners, and their texts. It also includes a history of literary theory from the late nineteenth century to the dawning of the twenty-first and a series of sample theoretical readings of a variety of literary texts.

The Nature of Literary Theory

Before moving on to describe some of the strategies for using this book, I would like to discuss the nature of theory in general and the problems associated with literary theory in particular. First, I want to make clear that literary theory is distinct from literary criticism, the latter being the practical application of the former. This book is concerned primarily with the theoretical principles and concepts that form the foundation for practical methods and strategies used in literary criticism. Since the 1970s, when literary theory entered a new phase dominated by philosophy, history, politics, and psychoanalysis, a number of introductory texts have emerged that seek to explain the tenets of the main theoretical trends – Marxism, Structuralism, Poststructuralism, Feminism, Cultural Studies, New Historicism, and so on. These many and varied trends have complicated greatly the task of understanding both the nature of theory and of the literary text. Literary theory can be understood, as I have suggested, in terms of principles and concepts, strategies and tactics needed to guide critical practice. But at the same time, many literary theories have as an expressed goal the desire to inspire and guide social and political action. Moreover, students of theory might see a rift in the historical development of the late twentieth century between text-based theories like the New Criticism, Structuralism, and Poststructuralism and historicist theories like Marxism, Feminism, New Historicism, and Postcolonialism. In both of these very broad contexts, theory is understood as fundamentally different: in one, it is restricted to the analysis of language, rhetoric, signs or other systems of signification; in the other, it is directed towards a critique of social, cultural, and historical conditions and the way these conditions are reflected in and altered by cultural forms like literary texts. The differences in method and object of study are often complicated by ideological differences. For example, a New Critical or Deconstructionist approach to literature might strike some readers as conservative or apolitical, while a Marxist or feminist approach might appear radically progressive or even insurrectionary. The methodological and ideological differences multiply once individual theories are examined closely, for each theory has its own complex history of relations with more general theories of society, politics, language, knowledge, history, psychology, and gender.

There is one common element, however; practitioners of all the various theories tend to think in a certain way. Broadly speaking, thinking theoretically might be considered a paradigm for thought itself, at least that form of thought used to understand complexities in the physical and metaphysical worlds. A working definition might run as follows: *theory is the capacity to generalize about phenomena and to develop concepts that form the basis for interpretation and analysis.* The mode of thought suggested by this working definition involves the ability first to think generally about a given set of phenomena (language, social relations, women's experience, the novel as a form); second to develop theoretical concepts (or models) based on assumptions and principles governing the inclusion of elements within the set and the relations between those elements; and, finally, to use these concepts as the starting point from which to interpret and analyze specific instances within a set (the function of metaphor, capitalism, female gender roles, the *Bildungsroman*). A natural scientist will use theory in ways that will yield precise, verifiable, repeatable results; a literary scholar will use it in order to make informed and plausible interpretations that may not be precise, verifiable, or repeatable. To speak of "using" literary theory is to speak of how to recognize and effectively address theoretical problems when they arise in the process of reading. In fact, knowing that one is reading a "literary" text is the first step in this process. The other steps vary, of course, according to which theory is being employed and, indeed, according to how the same theory is applied by different critics.

It would be difficult, in contemporary literary theory, to achieve the kind of stability, uniformity, consistency, and universality that science achieves across social and cultural contexts. Theory inevitably reflects the social world in which theorists operate; but whereas scientists act on the assumption that scientific theory is unaffected by ideology, literary theorists make the point that theory is a product of ideology, that all theorists operate from specific ideological positions. The same can be said for the literary text, which is the product of a particular person or persons in a particular society and culture at a particular time. Literary theory can help us understand both the particular contexts and the ideological points of view that help shape literary texts. We can discern, within practical limits, a good deal about the social and political attitudes of the producers of such texts and the kinds of experiences they make available to the reader. For example, if one is interested in the

social or cultural context of a Dickens novel, a Marxist theory would be useful in explaining the author's ideological position and his attitude towards class formations and social problems like poverty; it would also help determine whether the novel in question was read as social criticism or whether it was received primarily as harmless comic realism meant to shore up the social status quo. However, it is important to stress that within a given theory there may be several divergent points of view and methodologies. Thus, one reader of Dickens's *Hard Times* might apply Leninist assumptions and principles and speak mainly of economic disparities and class conflict, while another might draw on **Louis Althusser's** poststructuralist "post"-Marxism in order to discuss the formation of the social SUBJECT under ideological pressures.

Another way in which literary theory differs from theoretical practices in scientific domains is that it is more likely to be bound up in myriad ways with more general (i.e., non-literary) theories (of knowledge, of the mind, of interpretation, of desire, of power, and so on). Any attempt to define literary theory that does not explore and describe the relations between general theories and particular (i.e., literary) theories – or between and among particular theories – is bound to be incomplete; the outcome of such an attempt will be a theory cut off from the general PROBLEMATIC in which it has a context and a history. Unlike scientific theories, in which new discoveries tend to displace old ones, literary theories proliferate, with multiple and contesting versions of a given general theory (for example, Marxism or Psychoanalysis) existing simultaneously and with equal claims to validity. This exercise could be repeated with other general theories as well as with the more specialized theories that evolve from them. But, as with the differences between theories, the differences that arise within the conceptual or historical development of a single theory have to do with the construction of new or the modification of existing assumptions and principles. The activities of thinking and working theoretically remain fairly constant. Even theories that attack the very possibility of generalization are grounded on the general principle that generalities are useless.

This leads me to address the problem of style in theory. Many readers are put off by the obscure terms, difficult locutions, allusiveness, self-reflexiveness, and linguistic play that they find in so much theoretical discourse. Deconstruction, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Marxist theory, Postcolonial theory – all are targets of criticism for stylistic extrava-

gance, logical incoherence, or doctrinal rigidity. To some extent, a specialized vocabulary or a special mode of argumentation or even phrasing is vitally important for theorists addressing new problems which cannot be adequately treated within a discursive framework that is itself, in many cases, the target of critical analysis. I refer here to a framework of Enlightenment thinking, characterized by a universalized subject of knowledge, an empirical orientation to phenomena, and a belief in the universality and instrumentality of reason. In such a critical project, a clear and forthright style could be said to reflect an epistemological self-assurance with respect to the material world that Enlightenment thinkers desired so strongly to master. Contemporary literary theorists for the most part refuse to allow their arguments to fall into this comfortable framework. To be sure, some theorists use obscure terminology or affect a difficult style in order to follow a fashionable trend or mask a trivial or incoherent argument; in such cases, readers are not mistaken in referring to jargon or obscurantism.

Literary interpretation, like any other mode of intellectual inquiry, is subject to the more or less intangible influences of political outlook, gender, social class, race and ethnicity, religious belief, and a host of other social and cultural determinants. Recent developments in the history of science have revealed that even the ostensibly objective methods of science are not immune to such determinations. These developments may result, in time, in substantial modifications to how science is conducted, but for the vast majority of scientists and lay people, scientific method continues to achieve objective results. If literary theory does not seek "objective results," what then does it seek? To answer this question, I want to consider the putative object of literary theory: literature.

What is Literature?

Even if we concede that theory, or theoretical thinking *as such*, operates in similar ways regardless of the specific application of that thinking, the nature of the *object* of theory and the methods for analyzing it remain highly problematic. What, exactly, do we mean when we use terms like "literature" and "literary"? Few theorists agree that literary theory can

be adequately defined and even fewer among those who make the attempt can agree on *how* to define it, in large measure because most people founder on the idea of the “literary.” It is not possible, in the present context, to pursue this question in any detail. But it might be useful for the student who is new to literary theory to understand that there are numerous ways to describe the nature and function of literature. Though the concept of *literature* is contested today by many theorists, it has had a long history as a term designating an art form devoted to the written word. From Aristotle to Heidegger, philosophers have recognized the value of literary art, and literary theory up until very recently has been strongly influenced by AESTHETIC THEORY. Of special importance is the role that aesthetic theory has played in the development of the New Criticism and the more recent emergence of a Post-modern aesthetics that rejects the Kantian basis of modern aesthetic theory and, as is the case preeminently with **Jean-François Lyotard**, emphasizes the sublime.

Despite the tradition of regarding literature as a fine art and despite the consensus in previous historical eras that literature is *imaginative* writing (a consensus that developed in large measure on the basis of Aristotle’s distinction between poetry and history), literary theory has, throughout the twentieth century, called into question the special status of both aesthetics and literature. Anyone who has read a major anthology of literature will discover that a substantial amount of the material in it is not imaginative. One is as likely to find political, historical, or scientific writings as poetry, fiction, and drama. If literature is not simply imaginative, fictional, or poetic discourse, what, then, makes a given written work literary? A common, and commonsensical, response is that literature employs a special form of language, more evocative and “connotative” than that used in other forms of writing; in this sense, literature is “fine” or creative writing, no matter what the content. Thus, we find excerpts from John Stuart Mill, Cotton Mather, Margaret Fuller, and Charles Darwin in literature anthologies. However, one might argue that some of these figures do not produce “fine” writing, and that the criterion itself is hopelessly ambiguous and subjective. The commonsensical response is therefore not sufficient. Nor is it sufficient to appeal to authorial intention – the writer *meant* to write literature – since it suggests the existence of multiple conceptions of literature.

But what definition could ever be sufficient? A brief glance at other possibilities suggests that sufficiency will always elude us. For many readers, literature is that which has stood the test of time. But this criterion is mystifying, for while it suggests an objective temporal process, the “test of time” really amounts to a long historical process of selection and exclusion by cultural elites (publishers, professors, editors, agents) who create CANONS of literature according to criteria that may shift and change rapidly and for no clear or defensible reason. Is literature only that which is readily available to advanced students or is it accessible to general readers as well? Is a forgotten, badly written novel languishing in a library’s special collections (or in a secondhand book shop) more or less literary than James Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, both of which are regularly written about and assigned in literature courses? Is a forgotten bad novel as literary as a forgotten good one? Who decides whether one is good or bad? And by what criteria: those that existed at the time of publication or those in place at the time of discovery? This raises a question at the heart of Reader-Response theory: Is literariness a quality of the text or of the reading process? Does it have to do with socio-historical context? What about works that were not first read (or written) as literary? One response comes from the tireless and persistent scholar in the special collections archive who has discovered a forgotten text, edits and publishes it, writes about and teaches it: it is literature *now*, despite any doubts in the past.

Inevitably, criteria having to do with a given text being a “classic” or a masterpiece are met with the same objection that arose with “the test of time.” Such criteria, the argument goes, have more to do with publishing and marketing, critical opinion, and the vagaries of scholarship and teaching. Few readers, though, will be happy with a definition of literature that is grounded in the marketplace or on the subjective opinions of critics, scholars, and teachers. Therefore, we might consider a definition of literature that emphasizes perennial themes and subject matter. But who is to decide what the important ideas and themes are? This option too appears to be arbitrary and subjective. Would John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* be more “literary” than a lyric poem by John Ashbery? Would a Samuel Beckett play about “nothingness” be less “literary” than Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, which focuses on AIDS and the nature of gay experience in late-twentieth-century US? Indeed, some might regard the latter as indicative of a trend in literature that focuses on

social issues to the exclusion of truly literary themes. The question is clear: What is a *truly literary* theme? For many readers, the “truly literary” is that which transcends the social and political spheres. This leads us to still another possible definition: literature is that which is *AUTONOMOUS* from these spheres. But how can autonomy be realized or, for that matter, recognized? Books and other works of writing are printed and sold, they are advertised and reviewed, they have demonstrable effects on readers and other writers. Even if we argue that literature is autonomous in the sense that it works according to its own inner laws and principles, we must contend with the objection that authors and readers are inextricably caught up in complex ideological and cultural matrices which, in their turn, have powerful effects on literature’s “inner laws.” At best, we can speak of what some theorists call *AUTONOMIZATION*, the attempt to place literature (aesthetic production in general) in a separate sphere or, more accurately, the attempt to create the illusion of such a separation. Even if we were to grant that literature is “relatively” autonomous, what would be the limits of such an autonomy? One logical conclusion is that realistic writing would not qualify, for it relies on a *MIMETIC* or reflective relation to the social world. Another conclusion would be that writing of a political nature would have to be excluded for the obvious reason that it engages with issues and themes that are clearly part of the social sphere. In the end, the argument that literature is somehow separate from other spheres of society violates good sense as well as logic.

Other possible arguments could be put forward and they could be contested on similar grounds, for most attempts to define literature are based either on inferential reasoning, in which case the definition entails features of an already-existing canon, or on moral or ethical considerations, in which case the definition is based on extra-literary criteria (religious or political ideals are often adduced to limit what is properly literary from what is not). In both cases, new problems arise concerning selection and exclusion. There is clearly no easy way to define *literature* because it is subject to so many determinations, influences, and pressures, any one of which can be arbitrarily elevated to a defining trait. There is no way to determine by formula or by precedent what will become the subject of literary treatment, nor is there any way to determine whether a text written in the past will be reinterpreted as literature at some later date. Today’s journalism may be tomorrow’s literature, as