

*Critical Terms*  
for  
*Literary Study*

Edited by  
Frank Lentricchia  
and  
Thomas McLaughlin

# Critical Terms for Literary Study

*Edited by Frank Lentricchia  
and Thomas McLaughlin*

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# Introduction

*Thomas McLaughlin*

LITERARY theory, which has a deserved reputation for its stylistic and conceptual difficulty, has escaped from the academy and become part of popular culture. "Deconstruction" is a word that gets used in *Newsweek*. A current British pop group, Scritti Pollitti, publishes its lyrics under the copyright of "Jouissance Music," adapting for their own purposes the term that the French critic Roland Barthes used to describe the pleasure of reading. "Jouissance," the French idiomatic equivalent of "coming," appealed to Barthes because he called for a reading without restraint, a reading that amounted to a creative act, fully as inspired as writing. The fact that this term finds its way into pop culture suggests how pervasive the mind-set of literary theory has become in our time. I have even heard a basketball coach say that his team had learned to deconstruct a zone defense. Literary theory has permeated our thinking to the point that it has defined for our times how discourse about literature, as well as about culture in general, shall proceed. Literary theory has arrived, and no student of literature can afford not to come to terms with it.

By "literary theory" I mean the debate over the nature and function of reading and writing that has followed on the heels of structuralist linguistics and cultural analysis. The basic premises of criticism have been interrogated, again and again, from perspectives as diverse as feminism, deconstruction, Marxism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and reader-response theory. What holds these various and often combative programs and schools of thought together under the rubric of theory is a shared commitment to understanding how language and other systems of signs provide frameworks which determine how we read, and more generally, how we make sense of experience, construct our own identity, produce meaning in the world. Theory, then, gets at very basic questions that any serious reader must face.

And yet many serious readers do resist theory. They are troubled rather than challenged by it. Theory questions the assumptions by which readers read, and some readers feel that theory thereby draws unnecessary attention to a process that ought to be impulsive and emotional. Like a runner who has just had a

coach analyze his stride and finds himself stumbling awkwardly, a reader might feel accosted by theory. Everything feels unnatural. What is an author? Should we care about the author's intentions? What is writing? How do (or should) readers proceed? What is at stake when we interpret literature? What is literature, and what isn't? How do we judge the value of a literary work? Questions. Too many questions.

And no lack of answers. Theory is contested territory. Every one of the questions I just raised, and a million more, elicits a complex array of answers, all engaged in rhetorical struggle. Theory is certainly not a place for readers to go for easy answers, for guides to good reading. Though every theorist offers an answer of one kind or another to such questions, the cumulative effect of the various answers is to leave readers with more complicated and more unsettling questions. And many readers—students and faculty, academics and other careful readers—feel that these questions come at the expense of their own response. Theory is cerebral. Even when it proclaims the Dionysian, its performance is always Appollonian. It doesn't let you just react emotionally and trust your intuition. It probes, asking, How did you do that? How did you make that sense of this text? Where are you coming from?

So the very project of theory is unsettling. It brings assumptions into question. It creates more problems than it solves. And, to top it off, it does so in what is often a forbidding and arcane style. Many readers are frightened off by the difficulty of theory, which they can then dismiss as an effort to cover up in an artificially difficult style the fact that it has nothing to say. This response seems to me valid as an emotional reaction to the often maddening difficulty of reading theory, but it is finally just defensive. Of course theory is difficult—sometimes for compelling reasons, sometimes because of offensive self-indulgence—but simply *assuming* that it is all empty rhetoric ultimately keeps you from confronting the real questions that theory raises.

Theory isn't difficult out of spite. It is difficult because it has proceeded on the premise that language itself ought to be its focus of attention; that ordinary language is an embodiment of an extremely powerful and usually unquestioned system of values and beliefs; and that using ordinary language catches you up in that system. Any discourse that was out to uncover and question that system had to find a language, a style, that broke from the constraints of common sense and ordinary language. Theory set out to produce texts that could not be processed successfully by the commonsensical assumptions that ordinary language puts into play. There are texts of theory that resist meaning so powerfully—say those of Lacan or Kristeva—that the very process of failing to comprehend the text is part of what it has to offer.

But legitimate as the difficulty of theory can be, one consequence of its stylistic commitment is that it has ghettoized itself, defining itself as an esoteric discipline for advanced critics in elite institutions. And, accordingly, the critical strat-



egies that theory makes possible have had a limited political impact. The pop culture of our time shows signs, as I mentioned earlier, that students and general readers may be ready for theory, but until very recently theory has not been ready for them. Over the last five years there have been signs that theory could have a larger educational and cultural impact. Some curricula have been revised in the light of theory; some textbooks have begun to attempt to introduce theory to a more general audience. This text is part of that effort. Our aim is to present students and readers who want to learn about theory with some examples of theorists at work. We wanted to resist the tendency common to some introductions to theory to provide capsule summaries of "critical schools" or "approaches." Such essays might provide an abstract and conceptual framework for beginners, but they do not provide the *experience* of theory, which ought to engage the reader in a struggle over language and with language. What we asked theorists to do was to question the language of criticism—in other words, to *do* theory. Each theorist considered a different term prevalent in literary discourse, examining its history, the controversies it generates, the questions it raises, the reading strategies it permits. We also asked them to do so for an audience that was not conversant with recent theory. As a result, we are able to present essays in theory that demonstrate as well as articulate the basic issues that theory has raised.

Our concentration on the terms of criticism comes out of the conviction that the language we use in talking and writing about literature sets the boundaries within which we read. If we want to get at the assumptions that shape our reading practice, we should pay attention to the language we use as critical writers. In the terms of critical discourse, especially in the "ordinary language" of criticism, we can see at work the framing and shaping power of our particular brand of common sense. Almost all of the terms we chose are common and ordinary language, not technical terms or neologisms. They are terms that are particularly prone to the forgetfulness that comes with habitual use. We can put them into play as though they were neutral terms, exerting no particular pressure, commonly understood and beyond question. They do such good work for us that they make themselves invisible.

The essays in this volume pose problems for such an easy process. They insist that terms have a history, that they shape how we read, and that they engage larger social and political questions. They also assume that the meaning of the term is a matter of dispute, which is simply true in today's theoretical environment. The essays want to spotlight terms that function most efficiently when they are working behind the scenes. In some ways the model for our interest in the history of terms is the work of Raymond Williams, in such books as *Keywords* and *Marxism and Literature*. Williams's point is not simply that the meanings of terms change, but that their history impinges on their current use, and that the radical changes that terms undergo suggest that there is no stable and reliable

meaning for any term. Terms cannot be used as though they were neutral instruments. Terms such as "culture" and "race" have been put to so many uses in so many different social and interpretive settings that no use of them can be innocent. Using a term commits you to a set of values and strategies that it has developed over the history of its use. It is possible to use a term in a new way, but it is not possible to escape the term's past.

A brief example can be seen in the history of the term "unity," which is often used in critical discourse as though it described a timeless and unquestionable value in the arts. Great art is unified, the theory goes, and the more diversity it includes and organizes, the greater the art. But even a brief look at the history of the term suggests that there is little agreement on the nature or even the desirability of unity. We need only think of the difference between the rather rigid concept of unity in some neoclassical critics like Boileau and Corneille—for whom unity meant following a set of rules about the arrangement of time, place, and action in a play—and the more fluid and organic notion of unity in the Romantics—for whom unity was achieved not by following rules but by infusing the materials of the work with the author's personality. In our century, the American New Critics transformed "unity" into a procedural principle which mandated that an interpretation of a work account for all its details as interrelated elements of a thematic or formal whole. More contemporary theorists, as a critique of this procedure, have tended to see "unity" as a coercive reading strategy, requiring us to impose unity on texts—like Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—that seem to be blasting to smithereens. "Unity," from this perspective, can force us as readers who work under its auspices to accept it as a given and not question whether it is a necessary and inevitable quality of art.

In addition to emphasizing the historicity of terms, the essays in this volume also demonstrate that critical terms take part in larger social and cultural debates. Terms cannot simply be used and discarded—using them places you inside an argument, both in the sense that others might deny the importance of the term, and that they might disagree with your definition and deployment of the term. Furthermore, the argument is not a "purely literary" one; using a term engages you, whether you know it or not, in specific cultural and political arguments as well. If you read and interpret literature from the perspective that the term "gender" provides, you will cross with critics who see it as irrelevant to the study of literature (which, they might claim, transcends gender). You will also have to make clear exactly how the term functions for you, which will engage you in yet another debate with others who use the term differently. As a result, your use of the term had better be conscious and self-aware, taking account of the commitments that the term makes for you, because even without your awareness the term will make commitments—whether you like it or not. The term still exerts its power. But an unselfconscious use of a term can experience that power only as a limitation, a blindness that cannot be detected. A more critical use of the

term allows a clearer sense of what it enables as well as what it neglects and, thereby, provides a degree of control for the reader at work. Of course, it is impossible to gain perfect control of terminology. We make commitments whenever we use language, and they are too many and too complex to be fully mastered. But using a term critically at least increases our awareness of the commitments we do make.

This text does not, however, attempt to cover the entire range of current critical terms. Recent theory has produced too many new terms, and these are in the process of sifting into an already broad spectrum of traditional terms. Since we wanted our essays to be substantial investigations of the terms, total coverage of the field was impossible. We chose not to deal with terms that function as a specialized vocabulary within a particular theoretical program—words like Derrida's "trace" or Foucault's "archaeology." Rather, we focused our attention on words widely used within critical discourse. Some of them, like "writing" and "author," are ordinary language words that have become centers of theoretical speculation and controversy. Others, like "culture" and "discourse," are terms whose relationship to literary study has changed in the light of recent theory. Traditional terms of literary analysis—those that might be included in a handbook of literature, such as "symbol" or "point of view"—are generally not included in this text, but only because of space limitations. These terms, which have now come almost to serve as the vernacular language of criticism, themselves deserve serious attention. They are on one level simply useful heuristic devices, yet they bring along with them commitments as complex as the terms we focus on here. Terms like "character" and "plot" will not be superseded, but they must be—and, indeed, are being—thought through in order to make sense of the assumptions they bring into play.

The terms in this volume, though, seem to us to call for immediate attention. They are used widely, often loosely, and with little agreement on their meaning. They are often deployed unselfconsciously, as a function of their common use. The selection of terms, however, is not based on a cool assessment of the needs of the current moment. It is, rather, a selection that suggests what we think should be the commitments of contemporary theory. Although the contributors to the volume bring to their tasks very different principles and practices, it is possible to discern some common, if not unanimous, themes.

I would suggest three important concerns around which the terms cluster. One set of terms, like "discourse," "structure," and "narrative," suggests that literature is best understood not as a self-contained entity but rather as a writing practice, a particular formation within the world of discourse. Terms such as "determinacy" and "intention" address the issue of interpretation directly, reflecting what many in the discipline see as a current crisis in our understanding of how meaning is produced. A third group of terms, like "race," "gender," and "ideology," places literature and its interpretation inside a larger cultural context,

suggesting that there are political questions at issue in the reading process. The terms chosen for the text give, we feel, a rough overview of the current concerns of literary criticism and theory. They are the terms that seem to produce the most powerful interpretive questions at this moment, so they demand our attention in order to understand what they empower and what they constrain.

Examining the first group of terms, we see that they empower an inquiry into literature as writing not elevated into a realm of pure art but, rather, remaining open to the same social entanglements and limitations that condition all writing. This position contests the formalist or New Critical emphasis on the appreciation of literature in purely aesthetic terms, as writing that lifts us out of history—out of ourselves, finally—into a timeless and universal realm of beauty and truth. The essays in this text on such terms as “writing,” “figurative language,” and “narration” raise questions that apply to literature but also to other forms of writing as well, and therefore suggest that literary writing does not enjoy a privileged status within the arena of discourse. Figurative language does not happen only in poetry, and narrative does not happen only in novels. A philosophical text can be informed by a narrative structure; a political text can rest on a powerful figure of speech. And if these features of discourse do not respect any putative boundary between literature and other forms of writing, neither do the political and worldly concerns of writing. Thinking of literature as writing emphasizes a text’s entanglement in language as a system of values: literature is part of the process by which the values of a culture are communicated. When we read, we encounter those values in a familiar form, so that they seem natural in their reliability, their power to make sense of experience.

Many critics have argued for the value of literature as a disruption of the very patterns that it employs. By its admittedly fictional status, the argument runs, literature reveals its own productive power. Literature draws attention to the value system, displaying it in operation. And once we attend to the fact that our frame of reference is socially produced, we can think through to the possibility of changing it. But this movement toward greater critical self-consciousness does not free readers from culture; rather, it situates them ever more finely. Readers always occupy a position from which they read.

Thinking of literature as writing also entails a commitment to the active and productive role of interpretation. As writing, literature is implicated in systems of language and culture that open it to the work of reading. Recent theory has emphasized the work of the reader who actuates the potential meanings made possible by the text and by the interpretive practices through which the reader works. Terms such as “evaluation” and “interpretation” in this text remind us that value and meaning are the outcomes of an active process, and that the process always occurs within a specific cultural and political context. It is the reader who produces meaning, but only by participating in a complex of socially constructed and enforced practices. Value and meaning do not transcend history and

culture, just as literature itself does not. Interpretation—the process of producing textual meaning—is therefore rhetorical. It does not live in a realm of certain truths; it lives in a world where only constructions of the truth are possible, where competing interpretations argue for supremacy. Terms perform at least two functions within interpretation: they set the boundaries within which interpretation may proceed, and they help enforce the rhetoric of an interpretation by setting the terms of the debate. In a context in which we begin with the premise that no single “correct” interpretation is possible, since interpretation is always rhetorical, we find that terms serve the function of shaping our reading process and of enforcing the rhetorical power of the writing that comes out of that reading. Terms, that is, wield power in an open interpretive field.

The terms of the text also suggest, as I have emphasized, the participation of literature in culture and politics. Literature is a formation within language, which is the prime instance of the cultural system. The production of literature always occurs within a complex cultural situation, and its reception is similarly situated. Authors and readers are constituted by their cultural placement. They are defined inside systems of gender, class, and race. They operate inside specific institutions that shape their practice. They have been brought up inside powerful systems of value, especially powerful because these systems present values as inevitable rather than as ideological. As a result, acts of reading are always culturally placed, angled at the text from a specific point of view. Readers cannot legitimately claim to speak from outside or above the culture in some abstract and objective position that allows access to the hidden but authentic truth. Reading relies too much on the values and habits of mind that culture ratifies to claim an anthropological objectivity.

It is the purpose of this text to examine terms in order to discover the positions they provide for us as readers. These terms commit us to particular values, and if we are aware of those commitments, we can legitimately *take* the positions we inhabit. Every reading promotes the values that make it possible. A reading is a rhetorical act within a huge cultural debate; it is a matter of taking sides. Taking sides does not involve an apocalyptic moment of choice between two neatly opposed schools of thought—socialism or individualism, patriarchy or feminism, closed or open models of interpretation. Rather, taking sides develops over time, through a series of decisions and commitments in specific reading situations that develop into a cultural style, a way of negotiating experience. Terms remind us that reading is social and therefore political. Readers need to know how the use of a term enlists them into the debate.

After the three sections of terms in the text, there follows an essay by Frank Lentricchia which, as its title suggests, takes the place of an afterword. A traditional afterword sums up the points made by the book, providing a sense of closure. Instead, this essay dramatizes and demonstrates the issues the book raises by presenting a reading of a poem, Wallace Stevens’s “Anecdote of the Jar.”

Just as we chose not to present in these essays introductions to theory but rather instances of theory, Lentricchia offers a reading that is informed by the issues raised by current theory. His essay acts out the options and problems raised by various theoretical schools and approaches as they are encountered by "someone reading." He also demonstrates that no reading is, or should desire to be, innocent of political involvement. "Anecdote of the Jar" is not an otherworldly artifact, even if it seems to claim that status for itself; it sharpens our awareness of the structures of power that made it possible and make our reading of it possible.

The essays in this book are out to bring those structures to the surface. The terms by which reading proceeds are the instruments of those powerful structures, setting out the lines in which reading proceeds. It is therefore interesting to note that the etymology of "terminology" designates it as the study of boundaries. A "term" is a boundary line, a line of demarcation. It defines a field in which work can be done, within the limits of the term. But like all boundaries, even those meticulously surveyed, terms are social and arbitrary, not natural and inevitable. What divides my property from my neighbor's is not a natural boundary but a social system within which certain definitions of property prevail. It is important to remember that terms function in the same way. They limit and regulate our reading practices. But they do not do so by divine fiat. Their limitations can be brought to consciousness, their regulations can be overcome, as Lentricchia's essay suggests. It is not the job of this text to regulate those boundaries more carefully. Rather, these essays attempt to de-naturalize the limits that our critical system imposes.

If to define is to close off questions and meanings, then the essays in this collection are not definitions. They question the terms, searching for their powers and their weaknesses. Terms are inevitable—no discourse could go on without them. But they can be used in various ways, unselfconsciously, as though their meaning were self-evident, or consciously, with the awareness that using a term shapes reading and interpretation. Awareness is not freedom, but freedom from terminology is not the goal. A more modest and attainable goal is learning to negotiate the complexities of life in language. Learning how terms work is a part of learning how meaning is produced, and this, in turn, is part of the process of entering into that productive activity.

I

# Literature as Writing





# Representation

*W. J. T. Mitchell*

**P**ROBABLY the most common and naive intuition about literature is that it is a “representation of life.” Unlike many of the terms in this collection, “representation” has always played a central role in the understanding of literature. Indeed, one might say that it has played the definitive role insofar as the founding fathers of literary theory, Plato and Aristotle, regarded literature as simply one form of representation. Aristotle defined all the arts—verbal, visual, and musical—as modes of representation, and went even further to make representation the definitively human activity:

From childhood men have an instinct for representation, and in this respect man differs from the other animals that he is far more imitative and learns his first lessons by representing things.

Man, for many philosophers both ancient and modern, is the “representational animal,” *homo symbolicum*, the creature whose distinctive character is the creation and manipulation of signs—things that “stand for” or “take the place of” something else.

Since antiquity, then, representation has been the foundational concept in aesthetics (the general theory of the arts) and semiotics (the general theory of signs). In the modern era (i.e., in the last three hundred years) it has also become a crucial concept in political theory, forming the cornerstone of representational theories of sovereignty, legislative authority, and relations of individuals to the state. We now think of “representative government” and the accountability of representatives to their constituents as fundamental postulates of modern government. One obvious question that comes up in contemporary theories of representation, consequently, is the relationship between aesthetic or semiotic representation (things that “stand for” other things) and political representation (persons who “act for” other persons). And one obvious place where these two forms of representation come together is the theater, where persons (actors) stand for or “impersonate” other (usually fictional) persons. There are vast differences, of course, between Laurence Olivier playing Hamlet and Ronald Rea-