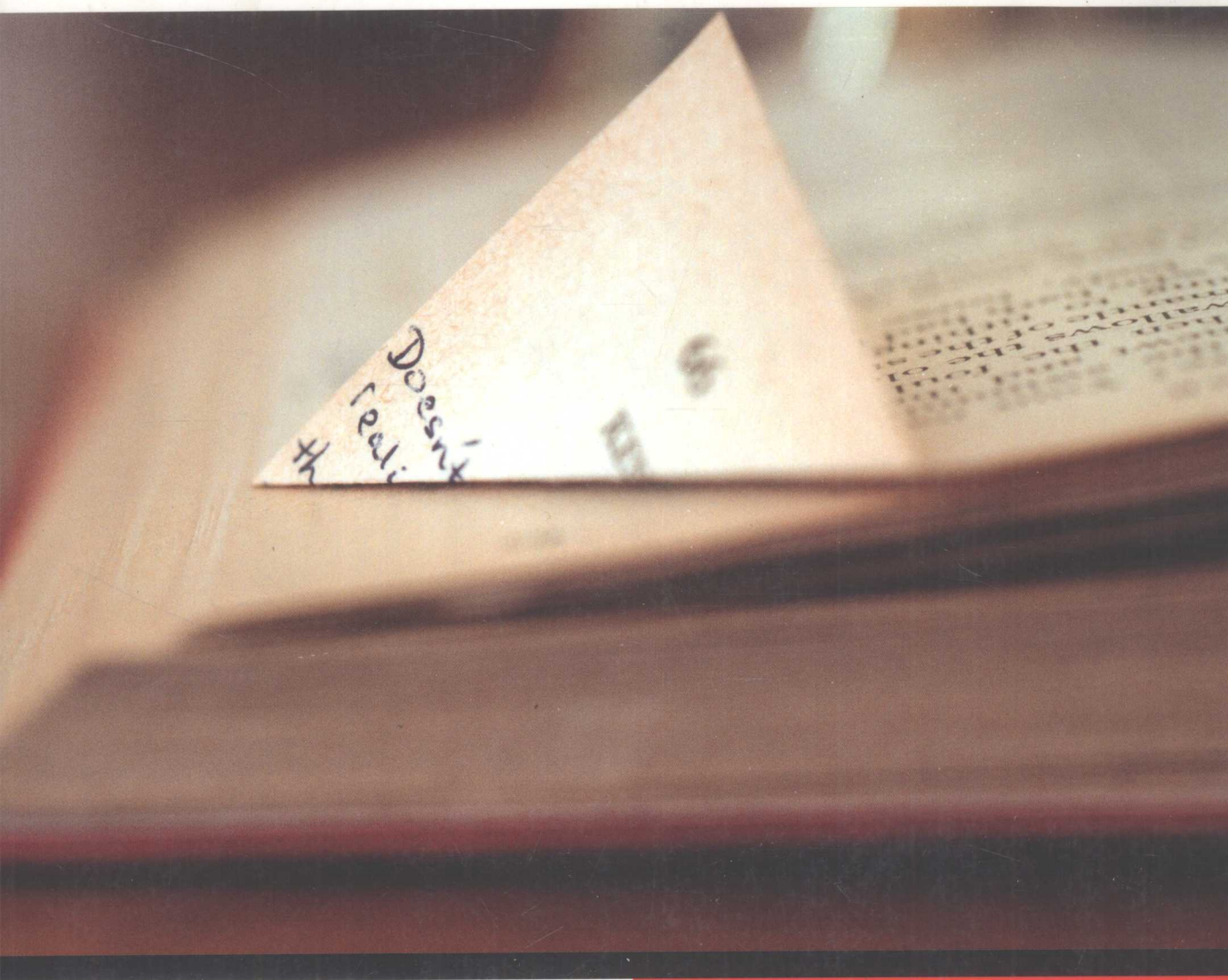


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AN OXFORD GUIDE

Literary Theory and Criticism

Patricia Waugh

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Edited by

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Foreword

The aim of this Oxford Guide is to provide an accessible, comprehensive account of modern literary criticism and theory for students and teachers often overwhelmed and bemused by the sheer diversity, volume, and heterogeneity of the intellectual sources of modern literary critical practice. Rather than presenting modern theories as a thoroughgoing break in thought, however, the volume seeks to place modern criticism and theory within the context of a broader intellectual history. Collectively, the essays gathered here explore the various currents, pressures, and directions in contemporary criticism and theory as aspects of the cultural present and as an ongoing conversation with intellectual precursors and earlier traditions of literary study.

There are numerous anthologies, readers, and textbooks on theory now available. However, pressures on the academic curriculum often constrain coverage and selection, and, of late, emphasis has tended to fall on critical ideas and trends which have developed in the last twenty-five years. The effect is sometimes to make contemporaries appear to be more innovative or paradigm shifting than they might seem once ideas are contextualized historically and with attention to the variety of intellectual traditions which have fed into what is now often referred to simply as 'theory'. Courses in literary theory and textbooks on criticism often appear to be offering a deracinated pick-and-mix assortment of ideas and writers whose intellectual relations or engagements may remain shadowy and confusing. Quite to the contrary, therefore, the aim of this volume is to provide a comprehensive account of intellectual traditions and critical movements which will enable readers to build their own sense of the map of modern literary critical practice and to form their own appreciation of the sense of the new.

Of course, any attempt to trace intellectual traditions is fraught with its own problems. Michel Foucault pointed out in the first French edition of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, published in 1969, that 'the notion of tradition ... is intended to give a special temporal status to a group of phenomena that are both successive and identical ... it makes it possible to rethink the dispersion of history in the form of the same; it allows a reduction of difference proper to every beginning, in order to pursue without discontinuity the endless search for the origin'. Foucault rightly repudiates the concept of tradition as an insidious promise of recovered continuity or reconciliation which denies the specificity of the past and the present. His notion of an *epistēmē* perhaps comes closer to the

approach to critical history represented by this volume. An epistemic approach to understanding intellectual histories grasps that 'the *epistēmē* is not a sort of grand underlying theory, it is a space of dispersion, it is an open field of relations and no doubt indefinitely specifiable ... it is a complex relation of successive displacements'.

The aim of this Oxford Guide is to provide an accessible comprehensive account of modern literary criticism and theory for students and scholars often overwhelmed and befuddled by the sheer diversity, volume, and intricacy of the intellectual sources of modern literary critical practice. Inevitably, the volume is not a substitute for a thorough-going break in thought, however, the volume is intended to place modern criticism and theory within the context of a broader intellectual history. Collectively, the essays gathered here explore the various currents, pressures, and questions in contemporary criticism and theory as aspects of intellectual history and as alluring conversation with intellectual history's and earlier traditions of literary study.

There are numerous anthologies, readers, and textbooks on theory now available. However, pressures on the academic curriculum often constrain coverage and selection and, of late, emphasis has tended to fall on critical ideas and trends which have been cool in the last twenty-five years. The effect is sometimes to make contemporary appear to be more innovative or paradigm-shifting than they might seem once their are contextualized historically and with attention to the variety of intellectual traditions which have led into what is now often referred to simply as 'theory'. Courses in literary theory and textbooks on criticism often appear to be all right, but neglected poets, authors, associations, editors and writers whose intellectual relations or engagements may, given shadowy and confusing, little to the contrary, therefore, the aim of this volume is to provide a comprehensive account of intellectual traditions and critical movements which will enable readers to better their own sense of the map of modern literary critical practice and to form their own appreciation of the state of the now.

Of course, any attempt to trace the intellectual tradition is fraught with its own problems. Michael Postan's point out in the first French edition of *The Development of Knowledge* published in 1966 that the notion of tradition 'is intended to give a special importance to a group or generation that are both successive and identical ... it makes it possible to rethink the dispersion of history in the form of the same; it allows a reduction of different proper to every beginning in order to pursue without discontinuity the endless search for the origin. Tradition thusly reproduces the concept of tradition as an endless promise of recovered continuity or recovery, illusion which denies the specificity in the past and the present. The notion of an essential perhaps comes closer to the

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