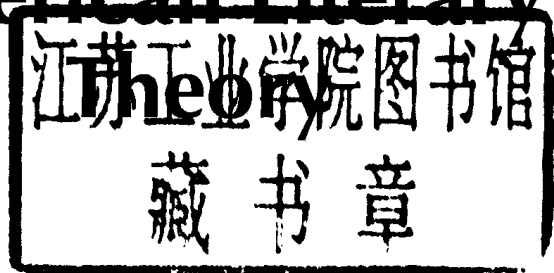


U N D E R S T A N D I N G

CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN
LITERARY
THEORY

Michael P. Spikes

UNDERSTANDING
**Contemporary
American Literary**



Michael P. Spikes

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

The volumes of *Understanding Contemporary American Literature* have been planned as guides or companions for students as well as good nonacademic readers. The editor and publisher perceive a need for these volumes because much of the influential contemporary literature makes special demands. Uninitiated readers encounter difficulty in approaching works that depart from the traditional forms and techniques of prose and poetry. Literature relies on conventions, but the conventions keep evolving; new writers form their own conventions—which in time may become familiar. Put simply, *UCAL* provides instruction in how to read certain contemporary writers—identifying and explicating their material, themes, use of language, point of view, structures, symbolism, and responses to experience.

The word *understanding* in the titles was deliberately chosen. Many willing readers lack an adequate understanding of how contemporary literature works; that is, what the author is attempting to express and the means by which it is conveyed. Although the criticism and analysis in the series have been aimed at a level of general accessibility, these introductory volumes are meant to be applied in conjunction with the works they cover. They do not provide a substitute for the works and authors they introduce, but rather prepare the reader for more profitable literary experiences.

M. J. B.

PREFACE

This book is an introduction to the thought of six major figures working in and influencing the field of American literary theory and criticism over roughly the past twenty-five years. While their work reflects a wide range of perspectives—deconstruction, black studies, new historicism, feminism, political critique, neopragmatism—it by no means mirrors all of the most important movements during this time. Indeed, each of the areas represented by these six is itself, while bound together by certain loose principles and commitments, a largely heterogeneous mix of strategies and suppositions; no single individual, including the ones featured in this book, could adequately stand for any one of these areas as a whole. Thus, my emphasis in this study is on each theorist's unique contributions rather than on his or her place in a larger school. In fact, several of these figures could just as easily be identified with other critical movements than the ones discussed here.

It would be impossible, in the limited space that this study allows, to review every text by each of these prolific theorists. Thus, I have restricted myself to examination, sometimes partial, of major books; uncollected essays and introductions to anthologies have generally been ignored. Only selected essays from collections are analyzed, and only their key arguments are the focus. Much scholarly commentary, some positive some critical, has been written on all six theorists. I present only occasional samples of this commentary, not endeavoring to register all the praise or objections that their work has elicited. My goal here is to offer brief, basic guides to the careers, key texts, and central assumptions of six authors whose work has, in recent years, significantly shaped literary criticism and theory.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A Brief History of Literary Theory in the Twentieth Century

How do readers decide what the words of a literary text mean? How does one distinguish a valid from an invalid interpretation? Is the text's meaning the same thing as the author's intention? What is the relationship between an author's biography and the message of his or her work? What is the relationship between a reader's biography and the way he or she interprets a text? To what extent is a text's meaning determined by the cultural and historical contexts in which it was produced and in which it is read? How do literary works connect with each other? How do they connect with works of theory and criticism, philosophy, psychology, theology, law? Is there a difference in kind between literature and these other forms of discourse, or does all language signify in essentially the same way?

These are some of the important issues which constitute the subject matter of literary theory. The focus of the theorist is *how*, rather than *what*, texts mean. Theory establishes principles enabling particular acts of practical criticism. Though clearly distinct functions, criticism and theory are intimately and implicitly connected: to have a theory of interpretation is at least to suggest, if not fully articulate, specific interpretations, while to give specific interpretations is at least to suggest, if not actually spell out, a theory of interpretation. This connection is so firm that

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in practice the two terms are sometimes elided, one or the other standing in for both. There are books and essays almost exclusively theoretical in their focus and others almost exclusively critical, but most frequently the two forms intermix, the theorist/critic formulating strategies of interpretation which he or she applies to specific texts and the critic/theorist providing at least some rationale for his or her interpretations. All six of the figures examined in this book fall in the theorist/critic category. Their work emphasizes theoretical constructs, but these constructs are extensively applied to the reading of particular texts, both literary and nonliterary.

In order to comprehend the full significance of these six thinkers' projects, it is helpful to place them in the context of the history of theory and criticism in this century. Entire books, some of which will be cited in the following pages, have been written on the story, or specific aspects of the story, of modern literary analysis. Necessarily, then, the observations in this short introduction will be sketchy and limited, ignoring many important thinkers and movements and only summarily and incompletely presenting others. Even such a truncated overview can, however, give a general sense of the course the field has followed in recent years and help clarify the roles the subjects of this book have played and continue to play in the extension and direction of that course.

As Vincent B. Leitch points out in *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties*, perhaps the finest and most complete history to date of contemporary theory in the United States, many of the leading American theorists in the early part of this century were either avowed Marxists or political

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leftists of various other stripes. Leitch cites John Macy's *The Spirit of American Literature* (1913), Van Wyck Brooks's *America's Coming of Age* (1915), and Vernon L. Parrington's multivolume *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927–30) as examples of sociologically oriented studies with politically liberal leanings.¹ Perhaps the two most important early marxists, according to Leitch, were V. F. Calverton and Granville Hicks. In *The Liberation of American Literature* (1932), Calverton interprets the native literary canon in terms of such standard Marxist categories as the class system, economic determinism, and social forces and contradictions. He holds that criticism should be firmly grounded in a socialist vision, always sensitive to the connections between literature and the culture at large.² Hicks, though in his later years a staunch anticommunist, argues in *The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War* (1933) for the importance of political action and the view that the best authors are those whose work exemplifies revolutionary marxist attitudes. However, he pays closer attention to the strictly aesthetic dimension of texts than does Calverton.³

Though sociological and political criticism were important in the first half of the century, the most influential and significant movement of this time was one which eschewed sociology and politics altogether: the New Criticism. As David Robey observes in "Anglo-American New Criticism," this movement "almost certainly constitutes the English-speaking world's major contribution to literary theory. . . ."⁴ The New Criticism was hatched in England in the 1920s in the work of I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot, and William Empson, and it flourished in this country in the 1930s,

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1940s, and beyond through the books and essays of such critics as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur, Cleanth Brooks, and W. K. Wimsatt.⁵ Though in recent years the New Critical approach has come under considerable attack from various quarters and has largely been eclipsed, its legacy still lives in residual forms even in today's university classrooms and most sophisticated theoretical texts.

The New Criticism, like all critical schools, was by no means a monolith of universally agreed upon ideas. It is possible, however, to identify a core of central tenets that most, if not all, New Critics generally adhered to and promoted.

(1) The poem ("poem" for the New Critics meant any literary work of art, though most of their attention was, in fact, devoted to verse rather than prose) is understood apart from its author's biography. As W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley argued in their seminal essay "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), the text's meaning is objectively built into the words on the page; therefore, knowledge of the author's intention is not necessary or relevant in recovering that meaning.

(2) Since the text's meaning is wholly contained in its words, it is not necessary to study the historical or cultural context in which the text was produced. The poem is "autotelic," an isolated verbal construct whose meanings can be derived from the poem by itself, apart from its historical or cultural situation.

(3) Wimsatt and Beardsley maintained in "The Affective Fallacy" (1949) that the poem's meaning should not be confused with the reader's personal responses to it. The focus of the critic should be on recovering the publicly accessible senses objectively contained in the text, not on recording any private, idiosyn-

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cratic reactions which the critic might foist upon it.

(4) Literary language differs from other forms of language. Scientific language, for instance, is denotative while poetic language is connotative. Poetry is richer and more nuanced than is the straightforward scientific tract.

(5) The New Critics saw such linguistic devices as metaphor, irony, and paradox—in which opposites are brought together in various ways to form dynamic and unified tensions—as fundamental components of poetry. The good New Critical poem is a complex network of diverse ideas and images that cohere to create an organic whole.

(6) The New Critical focus is on the linguistic devices and structures through which the poet communicates his or her meaning, but these formal elements are seen as conveying a special knowledge of the real world, namely, that life is a complex experience of reconcilable opposites.

(7) The critic is always to avoid what Brooks called “the heresy of paraphrase,” the mistake of reducing the poem to or equating it with a simple, abbreviated, thematic summation. His or her job is closely to scrutinize the words on the page in order to render a description of the complexities of the text’s language and thereby uncover the complex insights into experience that the poem yields.⁶

Working at approximately the same time as the New Critics was another important group, the Chicago Critics, also known as the Neo-Aristotelians. Like the New Critics, they advocated the study of literature as literature rather than literature as primarily a reflection of author biography, social backgrounds, or historical periods.⁷ This school of thought, whose leaders were a

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collection of University of Chicago professors including Richard Mckee, Elder Olson, and R. S. Crane, did, however, differ from the New Criticism in significant ways and, in fact, was outrightly dismissive of certain important New Critical assumptions.⁸ Whereas the New Critics, for example, focussed almost exclusively on the actual analysis of specific texts, the Chicago Critics, who were certainly interested in such analyses as well, also devoted a great deal of attention to the history of theory.⁹ And unlike the New Critics, the Chicago group relied heavily on a methodology derived from Aristotle. As a result of this reliance, they tended to concentrate, as the New Critics did not, on distinguishing various literary “kinds”—tragedy, comedy, epic, lyric, novel—and describing each kind’s special properties. They understood the individual text in terms of the ways in which it exemplified its kind’s characteristics.¹⁰ “One of the more controversial consequences of their [the Chicago critics’] assumption that literary meaning is to be found in the (generic) intention of the text,” Brian Corman observes, “is that like Aristotle, they subordinate the function of literary language to the larger structure of the work as a whole. . . .”¹¹ As Leitch points out, though this group is important in the history of American theory, the Chicago critics’ influence was not as pervasive and has not been as enduring as that of the New Critics.¹²

One of the most sustained and significant early challenges to the New Critical orthodoxy of isolating the individual work for analysis was Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, which appeared in 1957. Frye, like the New Critics and Neo-Aristotelians, believed that criticism should be about literature as a separate and distinct field of inquiry. In his “Polemical Introduction” to the

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Anatomy, he denounces attempts to “attach criticism to one of a miscellany of frameworks outside it” and champions the goal of finding “a conceptual framework for criticism within literature.” Writes Frye: “The axioms and postulates of criticism . . . have to grow out of the art it deals with.”¹³ Where Frye differs significantly from the New Critics is on the nature of these axioms and postulates. He is interested in constructing an overarching, strictly literary system in which individual texts and their component parts are not comprehended by themselves, as the New Critics would have it, but rather, somewhat like the Chicago critics postulated with the notion of literary kinds, in terms of their respective places within a larger system. For example, the hero of a narrative in Frye’s theory is not to be understood merely as he or she functions in a particular, isolated story, but rather as a character type with a specific role and identity determined by the type of text in which he or she appears. Terry Eagleton explains and illustrates: “in myth [in Frye’s view] the hero is superior in kind to others, in romance superior in degree, in the ‘high mimetic’ modes of tragedy and epic, superior in degree to others but not to his environment, in the ‘low mimetic’ modes of comedy and realism equal to the rest of us, and in satire and irony inferior.”¹⁴ Much like the natural scientist, Frye attempts in his *Anatomy* to classify and comprehend the objects of his field of study in terms of interrelated categories derived from that field itself.

Frye’s focus on literature as system paved the way for the introduction of structuralism into American theory. Structuralism was imported from France in the mid 1960s. The first significant sign of its influence can be located in 1966 with the

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publication in *Yale French Studies* of a special issue devoted entirely to this subject. The movement flourished from the early 1970s into the early 1980s, its leading practitioners and expositors including Seymour Chatman, Jonathan Culler, Claudio Guillen, Gerald Prince, Robert Scholes, and Michael Riffaterre.¹⁵ Most of structuralism's principal concepts can be traced back to Ferdinand de Saussure, a French linguist whose views are recorded in the landmark *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). Saussure sees language as a synchronic system of signs, that is, as a network of words and grammatical rules in place at a particular moment in time. He cuts language off from history, studying it not as it develops over the years but as it functions in the present. Essential to the operation of the linguistic system is the notion of differential interrelatedness. The units in a system take on meaning not in isolation but through their relations with other units, through the ways in which these units, though similar in certain respects, finally differ from each other: cat is cat in virtue of its difference from dog, horse, house, etc. Words do not refer to things in the world in a one-to-one, unmediated fashion; rather, they signify ideas about the world, ways of ordering and structuring it, which are generated within a relational framework.¹⁶ Cat is a concept, produced by its differences from other concepts, through which certain physical things in the world are endowed with sense and significance, made comprehensible.

Roland Barthes, perhaps the best known and most influential of the French structuralists, draws heavily on Saussurean notions in his 1963 essay "The Structuralist Activity," an excellent summation of the structuralist vision. Capitalizing on Saussure's insight that items are meaningful only through their interrela-

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tions, Barthes asserts that for the structuralist objects acquire sense and significance in the context of general conceptual models, what he calls "paradigms."¹⁷ For example, the planet Saturn gains its identity, its meaning and significance, not alone but in relation to all the other planets within the solar system. "What characterizes the paradigmatic object," writes Barthes, "is that it is, vis-a-vis other objects of its class, in a certain relation of affinity and dissimilarity; two units of the same paradigm must resemble each other somewhat in order that the difference which separates them be indeed evident. . . ."¹⁸ Everything, he maintains, is a paradigmatic object of some sort; nothing, verbal or nonverbal, is meaningful outside an organized scheme of differences. That is to say, Barthes believes that reality makes sense only when conceptualized as a language. He goes on to note that one of the main tasks of the structuralist is to discover "the rules of association" (the grammar) which order and structure the differentially related units (the vocabulary) within a system.¹⁹ Much structuralist literary criticism, in fact, consists of establishing such rules of association among elements in a given text or group of texts. For example, Tzvetan Todorov, another of the French structuralists, attempts, in a 1969 study, a grammatical analysis of the key components of Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. As Eagleton explains, "characters are seen as nouns, their attributes as adjectives and their actions as verbs. Each story of *The Decameron* can thus be read as a kind of extended sentence, combining these units in different ways."²⁰ Similar scientific, linguistic dissections and orderings of texts and their component parts are carried out in American structuralist works, for example, in Gerald Prince's *A Grammar of Stories* (1973) and

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Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative (1982).²¹

Even as structuralism was being introduced in America, its critique was already under way in the work of a French philosopher whose ideas have proved to be more influential, whose texts have been more often cited, mined for reading strategies, and hotly contested, than perhaps any other theorist in the last thirty years: Jacques Derrida. In 1966 at a conference held at Johns Hopkins University, Derrida delivered a paper entitled "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in which he squarely attacked certain structuralist tenets and ushered in the critical school of thought which has come to be known as deconstruction.²² In this essay, and even more clearly and in greater detail in a series of other texts—*Of Grammatology*; *Speech and Phenomena*; *Positions*; *Writing and Difference*—which first appeared in this country in translation in the 1970s and early 1980s, Derrida carries the Saussurean-structuralist principle that units in a system have meaning not in isolation but through their differential relations to its extreme conclusion. If the meaning—what in structuralist parlance is known as the "signified"—designated by a particular word is produced by its differences from the meanings of other words, then that meaning, Derrida argues, must be a tissue of the "traces" of those other meanings. Each signified is built out of the signifieds it differs from. Without those contrasting signifieds, it would not be what it is. This implies that, paradoxically enough, a signified is what it is not, contains within itself its opposites. There must be present in each signified other signifieds it differs from in order for that signified to be itself. Saussure and the structuralists fail to recognize this fact, Derrida thinks, by tacitly assuming the

existence of unitary, separable items which can be related to each other. Derrida undermines the structuralist notion of an organized system, showing that there are no distinct, wholly separable positions to be ordered and occupied.²³ Deconstruction, in Derridean terms, is the act of detecting opposite meanings contained in a seemingly single and straightforward meaning, of scrambling established structures by demonstrating that items in those structures overlap and intercirculate.

A specific illustration will perhaps help clarify some of these notoriously complex and difficult ideas. A typical Derridean move is to identify some traditional hierarchical system—presence/absence, nature/culture, speech/writing, male/female—in which the first term has customarily been seen as superior to and the origin of the second while the second term has been viewed as secondary to and derivative of the first, and then demonstrate that, as a result of the radical instability of the terms in the system, the order of priorities can be reversed, the system deconstructed. In the case of the nature/culture hierarchy, for instance, Derrida notes that traditionally culture has been taken to be a supplement to nature: nature comes first and culture comes afterwards; culture is grounded in and added to the natural state. Derrida contends, however, that actually the concept of nature contains *within* it the concept of culture in that (1) nature is a concept produced, as are all concepts, by culture, and (2) nature is defined, its identity constituted, as that which is *not* culture. Nature is dependent upon there always already being culture before it in order for it, nature, to be what it is; it is cultural man who produces the idea of nature, and without the idea of culture as a contrast to nature, nature would not mean what it means. In short, nature