The Literary Theory

A Compendium of Concepts and Methods

Herman Rapaport

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THE LITERARY THEORY TOOLKIT

A Compendium of Concepts and Methods

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WILEY-BLACKWELL
A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2011
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Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Rapaport, Herman, 1947–, author.
The Literary Theory Toolkit: A Compendium of Concepts and Methods / Herman Rapaport.
p. cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4051-7048-2 (hardback) 1. Literature-History and criticism-Theory, etc. I. Title.
PN441.R37 2011
801'.95–dc22
2010043549

This book is published in the following electronic formats: ePDFs 9781444395679; Wiley Online Library 9781444395693; ePub 9781444395686

Set in 10.5 on 13pt Minion by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited, Hong Kong
Printed in Malaysia by Ho Printing (M) Sdn Bhd

1 2011

Preface

What we call *literary criticism* has traditionally been the study of literary texts by readers with special competencies in the study of writings by major authors. These competencies include detailed knowledge of the author's life and times, excellent competence in the language within which an author has written, and knowledge of disciplines relevant to an author's work, for example, religion, philosophy, or psychology. In addition, the literary critic has expertise in reading a wide range of authors from a number of different historical periods and therefore is familiar with literary conventions (standard practices), allusions (cultural references), and genres (literary types). Literary critics are also expert in the study of literary devices like metaphor, metonymy, irony, and paradox, which they may see as significant to the patterning or structure of literary works. Most importantly, however, literary critics are intuitive readers who perceive semantic and syntactic implications that escape notice by most others and use these implications to develop suggestive and coherent interpretations. In and of themselves such forms of literary critical expertise do not make up any kind of theory, since they just represent an ensemble of practices that literary critics have found useful in literary analysis.

When literary critics talk about *literary theory*, they are referring to a critical analytic that is aware of itself as a *methodology* and that is capable of self-reflexively calling its own assumptions into question. *Theory* has its roots in the methodological study of interpretation that goes back at least as far as Aristotle's treatise "Of Interpretation," though unquestionably this was hardly its inception. Interpretation theory asks the question of how we can know the difference between a true and a false interpretation, a reading that is good from one that is bad. How do we know we are construing meanings accurately? What are the limits of inferring meanings or developing textual implications? How do we know that a sentence is to be taken

ironically and not straightforwardly? What if our interpretation is not authorized by the writer who has maintained a very different interpretation? And what if our interpretation uses analytical tools not known to the authors or their contemporaries? Although these are very basic questions of method, the fact is that the history of criticism and theory has not decided them once and for all.

This book can be used in two ways, (i) as a *compendium* of major issues and developments in literary criticism and theory that can be consulted much as one consults an encyclopedia, and (ii) as a *companion* to major issues in literary criticism and theory that can be read linearly in terms of units or areas. Chapter 1 is a comprehensive overview of criticism basics and those areas and trends in criticism and theory that are most relevant for students of literature today. Readers are encouraged to read it straight through from beginning to end, if what they are seeking is a reliable introduction to critical practice and the state of criticism and theory right now. That said, its sections can be read in any order, should one be interested mainly in consulting individual topics.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 stress mainly "critical" tools that concern narrative, poetics, and performance, respectively. Sections in these chapters provide readers with concepts, methods, and analytics that critics have found useful for conducting analyses of each genre. Care has been taken to include some avant garde literature in order to extend our literary curriculum somewhat so that it can embrace a few works that are more rather than less difficult to interpret.

Chapters 5 and 6 stress mainly "theoretical" tools that address texts as systems and social theory, respectively. Chapter 5 concerns questions of redefining structure or system in ways that have required a paradigm shift (a Corpernican Revolution, if you will) in the humanities with respect to how we analyze not only literature, but culture, history, economics, the social, and much else. Given that texts *are* signifying systems, how we analyze them depends upon what kind of system we imagine them to be and whether, from various theoretical perspectives, these systems are viable. Chapter 6 treats fundamentals in social theory that are rarely taught explicitly in language and literature departments but that need to be mastered if one expects to be successful in writing sociological literary criticism, something that has become quite dominant in some language and literature departments. The general sociological topics under discussion are ways of theorizing (i) the public sphere, (ii) ideology, (iii) power, and (iv) the social relation. These topics cover a very wide range of issues, among them,

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hegemony, alterity politics, theories of community, social contract thinking, and much else. To this material one should add the lengthy section in Chapter 1 on the theory of social constructedness (1.6), which is developed there because it is so absolutely central to literary studies at the present time. In this section the reader will also find sub-sections on race studies, ethnic studies, global studies, and other sub-fields in social theory relevant to the languages and literatures.

Care has been taken to include a wide array of well known literary examples drawn from all historical periods. What is called practical criticism, the application of critical theory to specific texts, is a major feature of this book and it therefore may serve as a useful companion within courses in which an array of texts are being surveyed. Some emphasis has been placed on literature written before 1800, and readers will notice that attention has been paid to John Milton, whose work has the function of a guiding thread that runs through various parts of the book. Milton is ideal for my purposes, if only because Milton's premise of rewriting the Adam and Eve story in the epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, is easy to grasp from the perspective of plot; because Milton is such a major practitioner of the art of literature and is therefore a cornucopia of wonderful literary examples; and because he wrote in a way that makes it easy to detach bits and pieces of his work for close examination. Also, over the past decade Milton has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity among readers, which suggests that he may be of intrinsic interest generally.

With respect to literature written after 1800, and much of that is, in fact, also covered, I have made some effort at points to emphasize work that is avant garde in nature. There are two reasons for this. One is that there has been a major renascence in avant garde literary writing in both Great Britain and the United States, much of it in the area of poetry, but much of it in narrative and performance writing, as well, and this by now vast literature has been generally underrepresented in most university curricula. So in a text such as this one, some exposure to this new work is in order. Given that this sort of work is difficult to interpret and requires tools of analysis that are non-traditional, it is useful to observe how innovations in critical theory can be used to address works that people by and large have difficulty accessing, something that speaks to the practicality of such critical analysis.

Readers may notice that this toolkit differs from many introductions to critical theory in that it includes a section on performance that covers not only the emergent field of performance studies but aspects of traditional theatre and some of the more interdisciplinary aspects of performance,

some of it based in the visual arts. Often overlooked in language and literature and even theatre departments is the immense work in performance that has been underway since the 1960s, particularly in New York City, where directors like Richard Foreman and groups like the Wooster Group have been producing breakthrough theatre for many decades. Furthermore, there has been much innovative work in the area known as performance art, which is often very language based, and therefore deserves acknowledgment. Then, too, many courses that include drama pay little or no attention to the craft of acting, which is a deficiency that is addressed in this chapter, as well.

Lastly, I need to comment on why so much of the theory in this toolkit is indebted to European developments, and particularly those that have occurred in France from the 1960s onwards. For the history of the Anglo-American reception of so-called French theory, readers may eventually want to consult my book, *The Theory Mess* (2001), which talks about the rather messy state of affairs that resulted when so-called high theory from Europe began to be disseminated in Great Britain and the United States. Problematic about the influx of Continental theory was (i) that it required a sophisticated education in types of philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, and Marxism that hadn't been much taught in Anglo-American universities, (ii) that it called into question less sophisticated work that had gained respect in the UK and US, something that produced resentment and backlash, and (3) that when Continental theory arrived from abroad, it did so as a confusing and unmanageable torrent of vast corpora by major figures (Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan, Emmanuel Levinas, etc.) and movements (The Frankfurt School, Hermeneutics, Structuralism, Phenomenology, Tel Quel, Semiotics, etc.). Of course, the question was whether this vast amount of critical theory coming from abroad could or even would be assimilated and instituted. That *The Literary Theory Toolkit* is still attempting that assimilating and instituting tells us something about the success or failure of past efforts, though it also speaks to the fact that Continental developments in criticism and theory form a major watershed in the intellectual life of the West. Just because we are in a new millennium we shouldn't imagine that suddenly everything we learned about critical theory in the late twentieth century doesn't count and can be ignored. In fact, much of what was developed then has as yet to be thought through and applied. In other words, that tool bag is much bigger and far more interesting than many people suspect, provided one puts in the effort of rummaging around and finding the tools.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Emma Bennett of Wiley-Blackwell for initiating and shepherding this project along. Her tenacity got me back on course. I am also grateful to those at Wake Forest University who read parts of the manuscript, and in particular to my medievalist colleague, Gale Sigal, who read it in light of its workability as a course companion. I am also very indebted to the three lengthy reader's reports I received, which helped me get the manuscript into final shape. Much of what is presented in this book is a summa of many years of teaching in the various survey courses I've taught both in the United States and the United Kingdom in the areas of literature and criticism. Of course, it is because of the participation of students in those courses that this book could be realized. Lastly, I want to thank Aaron Rapaport, who by way of example got me back into the swing of writing while we were out in California, and Hanno and Angelika Rapaport for welcoming me to set up shop in their London flat, where I revised much of the text.

I am grateful to: Llewellyn Publishers for permission to print a modified version of "The Scale of the Number Four" table in *Three Books on Occult Philosophy* by Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, trans. J. Freake, edited and annotated by Donald Tyson. St. Paul, MN. Llewellyn Publishers, 2005; Anne Tardos, Executor of Jackson Mac Low's estate, for granting permission to reproduce Jackson Mac Low, "People Swamp," in its entirety; Laura Mullen for permission to quote at length from her poem, "Torch Song (Prose Is a Prose Is a Prose)"; to Jaime Davidovich for permission to reproduce a video still from "The Live! Show"; and, finally, to Hans Breder of the Hans Breder Foundation for permission to reproduce stills of "My TV Dictionary," "Boxed In," and of the performance artists Karen Finley and Coco Fusco with Nao Bustamante.

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The Literary Theory Toolkit: A Compendium of Concepts and Methods, First Edition.
Herman Rapaport.

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1.1 Basics of Literary Study

Comprehension versus Interpretation

Comprehension concerns the conceptual assembly of textual information in a way that is precise and literally accurate. In order to discuss a literary work, the critic needs to know how personages are described and characterized, how settings are depicted and what details they include and possibly exclude, what actions take place and in what order, and what sorts of figural details and narrative devices the author has included. A good comprehension of a literary work will also include the ability to identify points of view, major themes, and key allusions (references to historical occurrences, myths, or passages in other influential texts, for example, the Bible). Everything that falls under the term comprehension has to do with gathering and assembling of evidence that can be used for justifying interpretations. For literary critics comprehension exceeds mere competence in that it leads to noticing details that others have missed. Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* is masterful in its capacity to select minute details that have major historical significance in the development of representational styles in the West. An even closer reader of literature was Paul de Man in his seminal article "The Rhetoric of Temporality" in which he demonstrates complexities with respect to how allegory and symbol function in the late eighteenth century.[1]

In university, the teaching of literature tends to stress skills in *interpretation*. This exceeds mere literal comprehension and requires the ability to

[1] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953). Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

see problems and offer hypotheses. For example, why is the order of events in a story told in a sequence that is unchronological, and why in the case of John Milton's *Paradise Lost,* do we not begin with the materials of Book 6 (Satan's revolt in heaven), which is much closer to the epic's real beginning? Books 1 and 2 start us out right after the rebellious angels have fallen down into hell *after* their revolt. Or, why does William Faulkner in the novel *The Sound and the Fury* not have Caddy Compson narrate a section of her own? How does this silencing of woman function in the novel? As sexual repression, if not sexism? As the deliberate formation of a lacuna in the text that impedes our ability to totalize the narrations that *are* given? As a perspective Faulkner expects us to construct for ourselves, which then makes it much more a part of ourselves? To answer such questions requires *interpretation.* Here one is required to perceive a significant problem, conceptualize that problem, analyze textual evidence, and offer some hypotheses and solutions.

Literary interpretation occurs when critics begin asking questions about what they have observed. How critics pose questions and formulate problems tells us how original and insightful they are. In fact, what distinguishes a seminal book or essay from a run of the mill study is the originality of the way in which a problematic is conceptualized and the surprising results to which it leads. In recent decades, we have seen many studies that have recycled the same questions and problems by way of applying them to new works, and with predictable results. The study of how yet another literary heroine subverts patriarchy may contribute somewhat to the understanding of yet another literary text, but as an interpretive project it would hardly indicate much originality of mind, given the many essays and books that have executed this very same project albeit with other primary texts. The same could be said about the many studies coming out right now in which critics look for hybrid social identities in order to show how characters in literature "negotiate" race or ethnicity in a represented social context. In the past, critics who were looking for ambiguity or archetypes in literary texts were engaging in very much the same sort of prescribed literary interpretive practice: the imitation of institutionally sanctioned projects pioneered by innovative thinkers in the profession. Major examples of original critical projects in the twentieth century would include Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble.*[2]

[2]Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

READING

Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (1953)
Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978)

1.2 Common Critical Practices

Four common types of critical practice are: close reading, contextual analysis, the application of a critical approach, and social critique.

Close Reading

Close reading concerns close attention to textual details with respect to elements such as setting, characterization, point of view, figuration, diction, rhetorical style, tone, rhythm, plot, and allusion. Often, close reading concerns the dichotomy between what the text literally says and what can be inferred. For example, we know in the case of Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* that Emma Bovary is keyed to the color blue near the outset of the novel, but what does the author mean by this? What are we supposed to infer? Is the color blue thrown in by accident or does it actually point to something that has symbolic meaning? To know the answer to such a question, one has to notice, first of all, that the color choice is so consistent that it's likely Flaubert intended it. Next, one may notice from the context of what is being related that Emma's immature girlish interest in Catholicism is being thematized, which relates to the likelihood that in this context the color blue is likely to be symbolic of the Virgin Mary to whom Flaubert may well be comparing Emma with some irony, given that Emma will hardly turn out to be anything like the Virgin. Of course, this is an *interpretation* because a sequence of observations and logical connections had to be made by the reader in order to construct it. The proof of the interpretation, insofar as interpretations can be proven, is that it has explanatory power. It not only tells us what the color blue probably refers to, but how it functions to ironize Emma, to portray her one way while expecting the reader to see through that portrayal as misleadingly literal. Because there is so much evidence in the novel that supports this ironizing

tendency, the interpretation of the color blue seems credible, since it is consistent with what is at work elsewhere in the novel and since it connects elements that otherwise would go unexplained. We generally call this most typical sort of interpretation *close reading*, because the interpreter is looking very closely at even the most minor textual details in order to develop explanations for the question of why things are presented the way they are.

Contextual Analysis

Contextual analysis could be called the "connect the dots approach," because essentially the technique involves the establishment of a context (or contexts) within which to situate and determine the meanings of a work by drawing direct connections between elements within the work and elements within the context. This is the approach used by literary historians who generally work up the following contexts for analyzing a literary work: (i) philological history of the language; (ii) the literary tradition that has influenced the work and to which the work "belongs"; (iii) the biography of the author; and (iv) the social, political, and cultural contexts likely to have a bearing on the work's meanings. This type of study presumes that a work cannot mean anything in isolation. For example, the language of a literary work pre-exists it and determines what the words and sentences of, say, a novel, poem, or play would mean. Given that language changes over time, we would need to know the state of the language at any given time when a work was written in order to properly decode its meanings. Shakespeare's plays, for example, are usually accompanied by copious footnotes that define words, many of which have fallen out of use or that meant something different at the time Shakespeare was writing.

Literary tradition is an important context too in that it donates the norms and forms that authors adopt and modify to suit their inclinations and needs. Shakespeare, Sidney, and Milton inherited the genre of the sonnet from Petrarch and his followers, and therefore it is useful to compare elements in their work to what can be found in the context of the sonnet tradition. After all, the differences may tell us something about what the authors intended and hence how to better construe the meanings. Knowing the biography of the author can help, as well, if what one is looking for is the primary intention an author had in composing a work. Henry James, for example, was quite self-conscious about leaving accounts of what experiences led him to formulate an idea or premise for writing one of his great

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