

LITERARY THEORY
THE BASICS
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LITERARY THEORY

THE BASICS

This bestseller, now in its second edition, contains the latest developments in Literary Theory. Covering the nineteenth century to the present day, *Literary Theory: The Basics* includes political and cultural interpretations and gender orientated approaches to literary texts.

Fully updated with recognizable case studies and some topical additions, key areas covered are as follows:

- structuralism and poststructuralism
- ecocriticism
- queer theory
- post-humanism.

Chapter summaries and suggestions for further reading are all included in this user-friendly guide.

Hans Bertens is Professor of Comparative Literature at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. His books include *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (1995) and *Contemporary American Crime Fiction* (2001, with Theo D'haen).

INTRODUCTION

There was a time when the interpretation of literary texts and literary theory seemed two different and almost unrelated things. Interpretation was about the actual meaning of a poem, a novel, or a play, while theory seemed alien to what the study of literature was really about and even presented a threat to the reading of individual poems, novels, and other literary texts because of its reductive generalizations. In the last thirty years, however, interpretation and theory have moved closer and closer to each other. In fact, for many people involved in literary studies interpretation and theory cannot be separated at all. They would argue that when we interpret a text we always do so from a theoretical perspective, whether we are aware of it or not, and they would also argue that theory cannot do without interpretation.

The premise of *Literary Theory: The Basics* is that literary theory and literary practice – the practice of interpretation – cannot indeed very well be separated, and certainly not at the more advanced level of academic literary studies. One of its aims, then, is to show how theory and practice are inevitably connected and *have always* been connected. Although the emphasis is on the 1970s and after, the first three chapters focus on the most important views of

literature and of the individual literary work of the earlier part of the twentieth century. This is not a merely historical exercise. A good understanding of for instance the New Criticism that dominated literary criticism in the United States from the mid-1930s until 1970 is indispensable for students of literature. Knowing about the New Criticism will make it a lot easier to understand other, later, modes of reading. More importantly, the New Criticism has by no means disappeared. In many places, and especially in secondary education, it is still alive and kicking. Likewise, an understanding of what is called structuralism makes the complexities of so-called post structuralist theory a good deal less daunting and has the added value of offering an instrument that is helpful in thinking about culture in general.

This book, then is both an introduction to literary theory and a history of theory. But it is a history in which what has become historical is simultaneously still actual: in the field of literary studies a whole range of approaches and theoretical perspectives – those focused on meaning and those focused on form, those that are political and those that are (seemingly) a-political, the old and the new – operate next to each other in relatively peaceful coexistence. In its survey of that range of positions *Literary Theory: The Basics* will try to do equal justice to a still actual tradition and to the radicalness of the new departures of the last three decades. We still ask ‘what does it mean?’ when we read a poem or novel or see a play. But we have additional questions. We ask ‘has it always had this meaning?’ Or, ‘what does it mean to whom?’ And, ‘why does it mean what it means?’ Or, perhaps surprisingly, ‘who wants it to have this meaning and for what reasons?’ As we will see, such questions do not diminish literature. On the contrary, they make it even more important.

In recent years, a number of critics have expressed a certain impatience with what is now simply called ‘theory’ – and which has, as we will see, ventured far beyond strictly literary territory. There is no denying that theory in its eagerness to uncover hidden patterns and bring to light hidden assumptions has sometimes pushed things to rather implausible extremes, or that theory’s desire to be radical has occasionally seemed a goal in itself. Especially after 9/11 and subsequent events theory’s more

extravagant claims seemed to some commentators armchair exercises that had little or no relation to what we saw on our television screens.

But a return to modes of critical interpretation that are not, in one way or another, informed by some form of theory is impossible. As I have already noted, most literary critics would claim that all interpretation is governed by certain assumptions and that interpretation can only seem theory-free if we are unaware of those assumptions – if we are, in effect, blind to what we are doing. If we prefer awareness, our interpretational practice will inevitably be marked by the theoretical interventions of the last thirty-odd years. We could, of course, choose to work with the assumptions of traditional interpretation, but we would (ideally) have thought long and hard about them and have realized that these assumptions, taken together, in themselves constitute theories with regard to reading and literary value. We can't go home again. Or, to be more precise, we can perhaps go home again, but not with the illusion that our home is theory-free. Theory, then, is here to stay and the great majority of literary academics would not want it otherwise. They believe that theory has dramatically sharpened and widened our understanding of a great many fundamental issues and expect that theory, in its restless grappling with ever new issues, will continue to enhance our understanding (even if it may in the process also come up with things that severely test our intellectual patience). A case in point is the relatively new field of ecocriticism, to which this second edition of *Literary Theory: The Basics* devotes a new chapter. Ecocriticism also illustrates theory's flexibility. More than earlier theoretical ventures it recognizes the importance of empirical, even scientific, evidence for its political project, in this case that of raising our ecological consciousness.

This new edition of *Literary Theory: The Basics* is revised, brought up to date – for instance in the chapters on postcolonial and queer studies – and, as I have just mentioned, expanded with a new chapter in order to reflect the current state of literary studies. And since the theories that have emerged within literary studies have been so thoroughly assimilated by a good many other disciplines a book on literary theory has much to say about the wider world of the humanities and beyond.

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READING FOR MEANING

Practical criticism and new criticism

ENGLISH MEANING

If we want to understand English and American thinking about literature in the twentieth century a good starting-point is the nineteenth-century figure of Matthew Arnold (1822–88), English educator, poet (once famous for his rather depressing but much anthologized 'Dover Beach'), and professor of poetry at Oxford University. Arnold's views, which assigned a very special role to literature, and further enhanced its prestige, were not wholly new. In fact, his central idea that, apart from its aesthetic and pleasing qualities, literature also had important things to teach us, was already familiar in antiquity and we see it repeated time and again over the ages. So we find Thomas Jefferson, future president of the future United States of America, observing in a 1771 letter that 'a lively and lasting sense of filial duty is more effectually impressed on the mind of a son or daughter by reading "King Lear" than by all the dry volumes of ethics and divinity that were ever written'. However, Arnold is not interested in the more practical aspects of the idea that literature is a source of instruction – literature as a set of how-to books – but places it in a spiritual context.

Writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, Arnold saw English culture as seriously threatened by a process of secularization

that had its origins in the growing persuasiveness of scientific thinking and by a 'Philistinism' that was loosed upon the world by the social rise of a self-important, money-oriented, and utterly conventional middle class. With the spiritual comforts of religion increasingly questionable now that the sciences – in particular Darwin's theory of evolution – seemed set on undermining the authority of Bible and Church, Arnold foresaw a crucial, semi-religious role for poetry especially:

More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.

(Arnold [1880] 1970: 340)

'The future of poetry,' Arnold tells his readers, 'is immense, because in poetry . . . our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay.' This radical claim for poetry – made in an 1880 essay called 'The Study of Poetry' – is in fact the culmination of claims that Arnold had for decades been making on behalf of what he called 'culture' and which in a book called *Culture and Anarchy* he had defined as 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' (Arnold [1869] 1971: 6). As this makes clear, that 'best' is not necessarily confined to poems, but there is no doubt that he saw poetry as its major repository. The special importance that he accords to poetry is not as surprising as it may now seem. It accurately reflects the status of preeminent literary genre that it enjoyed in Arnold's time. Moreover, in giving poetry this illustrious, almost sacred, function Arnold builds on ideas that earlier in the nineteenth century had been formulated by Romantic poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), who had attributed a special, visionary status to poetry, and on a long tradition, going back to the classics, that likewise gives literature, and especially poetry, special powers. It was only natural, then, for Arnold to put forward poetry as the major embodiment of 'culture'.

What does Arnold have in mind with 'the best that has been thought and said in the world'? Strangely enough, *Culture and Anarchy* is very outspoken, but not very clear on this point. Arnold has no trouble making clear by what forces and in which ways that

'best' is threatened: the evil is summarized by the 'anarchy' of his title, which includes the self-centered unruliness of the working-class and 'the hideous and grotesque illusions of middle-class Protestantism' (63). He is, however, not very precise in his definitions of 'the best'. This is partly because he assumes that his readers already know: he does not have to tell them because they share his educational background and his beliefs. But it is also due to its elusiveness. Arnold can tell us where to find it, for instance in Hellenism – the Greek culture of antiquity, with its 'aerial ease, clearness, and radiancy' (134) – but can only describe what it expresses: an attitude towards life, a way of being in the world. Included in this attitude we find 'freedom from fanaticism', 'delicacy of perception', the 'disinterested play of consciousness', and an 'inward spiritual activity' that has 'for its characters increased sweetness, increased light, increased life, increased sympathy' (60–64). What culture would seem to amount to is a deeply sympathetic and self-effacing interest in, and contemplation of, the endless variety that the world presents. For Arnold, poetry probes life more deeply, is more sympathetic towards its immensely various manifestations, and is less self-serving than anything else, and so we must turn to poetry 'to interpret life for us'. Because poetry has the power to interpret life, we can also turn to it if we want to be consoled or to seek sustenance. With the persuasiveness of religious explanations seriously damaged, poetry has the now unique power of making sense of life, a sense from which we can draw comfort and strength. Moreover – and here we see the idea of 'instruction' – culture allows us to 'grow', to become more complete and better human beings. As Arnold puts it in *Culture and Anarchy*: 'Religion says, *The kingdom of God is within you*; and culture, in like manner, places human perfection in an *internal* condition, in the growth and predominance of our humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality' (47).

THE PROBLEM OF CHANGE

Let me for a moment turn to one of Arnold's major examples of the culture he extols: 'Hellenism', the complex of intellectual and emotional attitudes expressed in the civilization of ancient Greece. Like all university-educated people of his time, Arnold was

thoroughly familiar with classical history and literature. So familiar, in fact, that in some ways he sees Greek epics and plays that are more than 2,000 years old as contemporary texts. The classics and the ideal of culture that they embody are timeless for Arnold. This is a vitally important point: 'the best that has been thought and said in the world', whether to be found in the classics or in later writers, is the best for every age and every place.

From Arnold's perspective, this makes perfect sense. After all, culture and its major means of expression, poetry, must take the place of a religion that equally was for every age and every place. But this introduces what many literary academics now see as a serious problem. Arnold does not consider the possibility that what is 'the best' for one age may not be 'the best' for another, when circumstances have completely changed, or that what within a given period is 'the best' for one party (say, the aristocracy) is not necessarily 'the best' for another (starving peasants, for instance). Arnold's culture and the poetry that embodies it demand an intellectual refinement and sensitivity and a disinterested other-worldliness that under a good many historical circumstances must have been a positive handicap. Arnold would probably not deny this but he would argue that, all things being equal, there is only one cultural ideal – embodied in 'the best' – that we should all strive for.

The way I am presenting this – with starving peasants pitted against the aristocracy – could easily create the impression that Arnold is an elitist snob. But that is absolutely not the case. Arnold's ideal of culture is certainly exclusive, in the sense that it defines itself against money-grubbing vulgarity, narrow-minded fundamentalism, upper-class arrogance, and so on, but it does not seek to exclude anyone on principle. If we allow ourselves to come under the influence of 'culture', we can all transcend the limitations imposed on us by class, place, and character, and acquire the cultured sensitivity and respectful, even reverent, attitude towards the world that 'culture' holds up for us. In fact, this is what Arnold would like all of us to do: to escape from the place and the time we live in and to transform ourselves into citizens of an ideal world in which time does, in a sense, not pass and in which we are in some ways – the ways that count – all the same. After all, in Arnold's view 'culture' is of all time: it exists in an autonomous sphere

where time- and place-bound personal, political, or economic considerations have been left behind. We can only fully enter the realm of culture if we choose, at least temporarily, to disregard the here and now of personal ambition, political manoeuvring, and economic gain.

LIBERAL HUMANISM

Although that may not be immediately clear, this view of culture has important implications. Arnold is of course aware that culture will always to some extent reflect its time and place of origin – in the sense that for instance medieval and early modern literature will assume that the Sun revolves around a static planet Earth – but with regard to what it *really* has to tell us it stands apart from time and place, that is, from history. With regard to its essence, culture *transcends* history. We must assume, then, that its creators – the poet supreme among them – also transcend time and place – at least as long as the act of creation lasts. A timeless culture must be the creation of timeless minds, that is, of minds that can at least temporarily disregard the world around them. This brings us to an important question: where does a creative mind that has temporarily soared free of its mundane environment find the insights that will allow it to contribute to ‘the best that has been thought and said’? The answer must be that the source of that wisdom can only be the individual creator. Poets find what is valuable and has real meaning in *themselves*; they just *know*.

Arnold was by no means unique in his view of the creative individual. It was shared by the large majority of his contemporaries and by the countless writers and critics who in the course of the twentieth century would more or less consciously follow his lead. More importantly, it is still the prevailing view of the individual – not just the creative ones – in the Western world. This view of the individual – or *subject*, to use a term derived from philosophy – is central to what is called *liberalism* or *liberal humanism*, a philosophical/political cluster of ideas in which the ultimate autonomy and self-sufficiency of the subject are taken for granted. Liberal humanism assumes that all of us are essentially free and that we have at least to some extent created ourselves on the basis of our individual experiences. It is easy to see that this view of

the subject is pervasively present in our culture and in our social institutions. The legal system, for instance, starts from the assumption that we have a certain autonomy. If your lawyer succeeds in convincing the court that the murder you thought you could get away with was not a conscious act that you could have decided against, you will be declared insane. Likewise, democracies do not set up elections with the expectation that people will wander mindlessly into a voting booth and make a completely arbitrary choice between the candidates. Our social institutions expect us to be reasonable and to be reasonably free. Because of that freedom, we ourselves are supposedly the source of the value and the meaning we attach to things. As liberal subjects we are not the sum of our experiences but can somehow stand outside experience: we are not defined by our circumstances but are what we are because our 'self' has been there all along and has, moreover, remained remarkably inviolate and stable. Not surprisingly, in much of Western literature, and especially in lyric poetry and realistic fiction, individuals present themselves, or are portrayed, along these lines. In the realistic novels of the mid-nineteenth century, characters again and again escape being defined by their social and economic situation because they are essentially free. Since what they are – their 'self' – is largely independent from their situation, the circumstances in which they find themselves can be transcended. Realism suggests that the characters that it presents find the reasons for their actions and decisions inside themselves. Because this liberal humanist view of the individual is as pervasively present in our world as it was in the nineteenth century, it also characterizes much of our contemporary literature.

For many present-day critics and theorists this is a deeply problematic view. In the later chapters of this book we will encounter various objections to this liberal humanist perspective. Let me here just point at one possible problem. What if access to Arnold's 'the best' depends for instance on education? If that is the case, Arnold's campaign for a 'culture' that supposedly has universal validity begins to look like arrogance: we would have the educated telling the uneducated that they are barbarians. Arnold might object that ideally all of us should get the same – extended – education. But educational opportunities are not evenly distributed over this world; there are, even within every nation, sharply different levels

in education. A sceptic might easily see Arnold's campaign for his idea of culture as a move in a struggle for power and status: for the power to define culture, to decide what the 'best' is, and for membership of the cultural elite. In fact, even if we grant Arnold's claim and accept that his idea of culture does indeed represent the most humane, most tolerant, most morally sensitive perspectives that human civilization has come up with, we would still have a problem. Would we have the right to impose that culture on people who couldn't care less?

In short, there are serious problems with Arnold's humanist conception of culture and poetry. I should, in all fairness to Arnold, say that it has taken almost a hundred years for these problems really to register and that even now his views are still seductive. Isn't it true that many of us, at least at some point in our life, want to see literature as a high-minded enterprise by and for sensitive and fine-tuned intellectuals that is somehow several steps removed from the trivial push-and-pull of ordinary life? It is an alluring prospect: to have a place to go where in a hushed silence, the sort of silence that we very appropriately find in a library, we meet with the kindred, equally sensitive people who have written the works we read. It is a place where time does not pass and where in some ways – the ways that count – we are all the same. We, the readers, are of course only the passive consumers of what they, the writers, have actively produced, but doesn't that difference tend to fall away? Especially so since the texts we read are in the act of reading lifted out of their historical context and so to a certain extent cut loose from their creators?

It is too good to be completely true, even if it is not necessarily wholly untrue. How can we, apart from everything else, possibly know whether the seemingly kindred spirits that we meet in that timeless place do indeed share our perspectives and concerns? What guarantee is there that we do not only see our concerns in such sharp relief because we ignore what we do not want to see? Perhaps Arnold is right about Hellenism's 'aerial ease, clearness, and radiancy', but where in that phrase are the murder and mayhem of so many of the Greek classics? Can the Greeks, or can Chaucer, or Dante, or even Shakespeare, who all lived in worlds dramatically different from our own, really have been in some important way similar to ourselves? Perhaps 'delicacy of perception', the

'disinterested play of consciousness', and the other qualities that Arnold attributes to his ideal culture are indeed of all times, even if in different periods and places they will have been framed by different historical circumstances. But since we cannot travel back in time we will never know. In the final analysis, Arnold's historical continuum between Hellenism and the high culture of his own time – the poetry that must interpret life for us – is an act of faith.

LITERATURE AS CIVILIZATION'S LAST STANCE

When Matthew Arnold died, in 1888, English literature was fairly well established as an academic subject in both England and America. Interestingly, in British India English had already since the 1830s served to familiarize the 'native' elite with 'Englishness' and to anglicize them to the extent that they were prepared to have themselves anglicized. However, English literature as it was studied in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century could not very well be regarded as a serious intellectual discipline. Academic English was largely devoted to the history of the English language and to its older forms, such as Middle and Old English (the absolutely unintelligible language of *Beowulf*). The study of literature was largely the province of well-educated men of letters who preferred high-minded evaluations and discussions of an author's sensibility to critical analysis and attention to the structure – the actual workings – of literary texts.

What really changed things and moved them in a direction we can more readily recognize is the intervention of a young American poet, T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), who had moved to England before the outbreak of World War I, and the British government's desire to find a place for the study of English literature somewhere in its educational schemes. While Eliot, with whose views I will deal in a moment, was primarily influential in the universities, the government-controlled Board of Education gave English literature a solid place in secondary education. It is worth noting how closely the so-called 'Newbolt Report' of 1921 that the Board had commissioned follows in Arnold's footsteps: 'Great literature', it tells us, is 'a timeless thing'. It is 'an embodiment of the best thoughts of the best minds, the most direct and lasting communication of experience by man to man'. But this is, interestingly, not all that literature can

show to recommend itself to a Board of Education. Literature, the Report suggests, could also serve to 'form a new element of national unity, linking together the mental life of all classes'. Great literature, with its focus on a spiritual realm of unselfish harmony where all petty quarrels are forgotten or have become irrelevant, could overcome social conflict and anti-patriotic sentiment. What the Report in fact suggests, although it never says so in so many words, is that social and economic inequality pales next to the equality we can find in the study – or perhaps the mere reading – of great texts.

It is always easy to criticize the ideals of the past and we should perhaps not come down too hard on these English educators or on their American counterparts, who somewhat earlier had put forward the study of English – and some American – literature as an important binding principle in a nation trying to assimilate large numbers of immigrants. Apart from everything else, they may also have had the spiritual well-being of British and American students at heart. Still, the idea that literature might be instrumental in forging national unity has some consequences we must look at because it introduces a criterion that is absent from Arnold's view of poetry as the interpreter of life. If literature is supposed to promote national unity it makes good sense to throw out those texts that emphasize disunity – tension between social classes, between religious denominations, between regions – or that are openly unpatriotic. For Arnold such texts, if they were sensitive and intelligent enough, were perfectly admissible. In fact, Arnold's 'disinterested play of consciousness' will inevitably – although of course not exclusively – lead to critical assessments of the outside world. But if literature is used to foster national unity, in other words, if it is used to create or keep alive a national identity, critical assessments of the nation's mercenary politics or its cultural vulgarity will no longer be very welcome.

ARNOLD'S ACADEMIC HERITAGE: THE ENGLISH SCENE

As I have just noted, in the more academic sphere the most influential spokesman for Arnold's vision was the young expatriate American poet T.S. Eliot who had settled in London before the First World War. In the early 1920s Eliot did what Arnold had largely