A practical reader in contemporary literary theory

Edited by
Peter Brooker & Peter Widdowson



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First published 1996 by Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf Campus 400, Maylands Avenue Hemel Hempstead Hertfordshire, HP2 7EZ A division of Simon & Schuster International Group

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

This information is available from the publisher

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 01344 25677 (pbk)

1 2 3 4 5 00 99 98 97 96

A Practical Reader in Contemporary Literary Theory In memory of Raman Selden and Raymond Williams

A Note on the Text

Cuts in the essays that follow are indicated by [...]. Where appropriate, summarizing editorial statements are given for omitted passages. Where cross-references are made to Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Prentice Hall/ Harvester Wheatsheaf, 3rd edition, 1993), this is shown throughout as *A Reader's Guide* 3/e.

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Introduction: Theory and Criticism at the Present Time

In its title and design, as readers will see, this volume parallels A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory. What new emphasis this Practical Reader brings to theory and literary study we seek to explain below. Both books, first of all, reflect developments in the recent history of criticism and theory in higher education. 'A generation ago', says Fredric Jameson, writing in the early 1980s, 'there was still a technical discourse of professional philosophy ... alongside which one could still distinguish that quite different discourse of the other academic disciplines – of political science, for example, or sociology or literary criticism. Today,' he continues, 'increasingly, we have a kind of writing simply called "theory" which is all or none of these things at once.' This 'theoretical discourse' has marked 'the end of philosophy as such' and is 'to be numbered among the manifestations of postmodernism' – that eclectic and self-reflexive mode which for Jameson and others, friend and foe alike, has come to signal a new phase in the correlation between cultural forms and social and economic life.

Where, a decade on, has this development brought us? To the point, it might seem, where the transgression of boundaries between academic disciplines has been institutionalized, and 'theoretical discourse', in self-generating fashion, requires ever more guides, handbooks and Readers to help us through its unfamiliar and expanding terrain. The empire of 'English' – the key site of many of these changes – has been effectively decolonized, transformed by its continuing 'crisis' to the point, it sometimes seems, of complete metamorphosis, to emerge, in fact, if not always in name, as versions of textual or discourse analysis or of cultural studies. After the originary theoretical texts of the late 1960s and 1970s of the kind Jameson has in mind – from Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Althusser, Kristeva, for example – and after the Readers, Guides and Introductions of the 1980s which effectively put 'Theory' on the syllabus – publishing and teaching are now launched upon the quest for a second-generation textbook which will join theory with practice. Hence, K. M. Newton's *Theory into Practice* (1992), Steven Lynn's *Texts and Contexts* (1994), Le Bihan and Green's *Critical Theory and Practice* (1995), two

new series in 'Theory and Practice' from the Open University and Routledge and, obviously enough, the present volume.

Two other significant and contrary developments have occurred in the last decade, however. One has seen the capitalized and singular 'Theory' of Jameson's description devolved into 'theories': often overlapping and in fruitful dialogue, but also contesting – even within a seemingly given and homogenous field, such as Marxism or feminism or psychoanalysis. At the same time this impact has been retroactive; that is to say, where 'Theory' had seemed the new thing, it has become clear that it was always already the old thing too. Criticism, we realized, had always been theoretical, always dependent on general, informing ideas about the literary and about literary value and critical practice, always grounded in aesthetic and cultural ideologies.

In the contrary development, following a continuing mood of anxiety and outright hostility to 'Theory's' self-importance, its hermeticism, or uncontrolled pluralism, there has been a turn, most recently, to a more traditional stability and set of priorities. The verdict from this quarter is that 'Theory Has Failed'.³ This is not, as might be expected, the triumphant cry of an older generation of English men of letters, nor even of former radicals turned liberal-conservatives in a familiar story of co-option and incorporation. Increasingly, some younger academics (who one suspects have 'done theory' or had theory done to them as undergraduates) have heard enough of postmodernism's endless end of things and are set to challenge the dominance of theoretical discourse over the discourses of literature itself. The literary text, the experience of literature, a common(sense) way of talking and making personal judgements about it, need, from this point of view, to be defended and freshly mobilized. No less than the identity of English, Literature and Criticism, so it seems once more, are at stake.⁴

Paradoxically, the second generation of textbooks share some of this concern, if in somewhat different terms. What they signal is less an obeisance to 'Theory' than a need to show theories at work. K. M. Newton, for example, presents his volume *Theory into Practice* (1992) as a 'supplement' to his own earlier *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader* (1988). The second book is a response, he says, to students who find that the high level of abstraction of much theory makes it difficult to grasp and deploy, and who constantly ask 'where they can find theory being applied to practice' (p.1). The preface to the Open University series talks in a similar vein of the editors' wish 'to help bridge the divide between the understanding of theory and the interpretation of individual texts'.⁵

Still others, it is clear at the same time, see textbooks of this kind as more of the old poison than a cure. Readers and textbooks are said to simplify and so distort difficult theory, to collapse the proper distinction between philosophy and criticism in the interests of 'applying' their own edited selections, or to obscure the literary text behind a wall of 'readings'. In other words, they hinder rather than help, substituting themselves for the real thing. It is time, it is then said, that this tendency was reversed.⁶

The central issue here, of course, is the relation between theory and criticism. What, after all, is 'theory', let alone 'Theory? And if we truly live and think in a

world of theories in the plural, what is the common, distinctively 'theoretical' activity which marks out and identifies this work? And how then does the kind of thinking designated as theory impinge on more empirically based or 'practical' textual analysis? What does theory do, or what should it do? In our view, the function of *literary* theory is to explain and generalize both literary discourse and critical practice, making strange what has become naturalized and taken for granted. Theoretical discussion reveals and debates the assumptions of literary form and identity, the interleaved criteria of aesthetic, moral and social value on which critical modes depend and which their procedures enact and confirm. As a consequence, it may come to transform critical practice. This is not to imply, however, that theory has a privileged role in a hierarchy of conceptual, critical and creative work, since the proper relation between theory and practice is a dialectical one in which they test and transform each other. Nor is it to say that theory in any sense exists outside of the kinds of assumptions and ideologies it discloses. As Terry Eagleton has commented, 'just as all social life is theoretical, so all theory is a real social practice'. Theory, or the concepts and questions different theories produce, might suddenly illuminate a literary text or critical essay, like an anglepoise turned their way, but theoretical work is nevertheless still part, as the last three decades have shown, of contemporary cultural history and the intellectual and social narratives inscribed there.

To talk of the 'failure' of theory therefore is seriously misleading – as if we had been brought to the stark choice at a crossroads that offers us one way, a (false) route along the high road of autonomous theory, and another along the (good) low road of an accessible language of criticism and a direct encounter with the literary text. As it turns out, the first path is named 'metaphysics' and the second 'new criticism' and we have been there before. In reality, there is no such fork or crossroads; theory shadows criticism as a questioning and interiorized companion and the conversation between them goes on, whatever their apparent separation. No justification should be needed, therefore, for an attempt to encourage this conversation further, to make criticism's theoretical assumptions explicit, to assess one theory by another, to ask how a theoretical framework influences the interpretation of literary texts.

The more interesting and important judgement is not that theory, as such, has failed, but that the radical, politicizing theory of the post-1960s years has failed to produce a criticism to match its radicalizing intentions. Instead of a theoretically aware, interventionist and socially purposive criticism, the age of theoretical discourse has produced works of wayward or leaden abstraction, or self-promoting dogma, books like sledge-hammers to crack textual nuts. So, at least, it sometimes seems, and not only to theory's opponents. Yet the answer, as above, to bad theory and criticism lies in neither a separated realm of 'pure' theory nor a return to a 'theory-free' Romantic or New Criticism, for all their familiarity and practical, pedagogic convenience. As the authors of *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* put it, 'even the apparently "spontaneous" discussion of literary texts is dependent on the *de facto* (if less self-conscious) theorizing of older

generations ... full of dead theory which is sanctified by time and has become part of the language of common sense'. Equally, the kinds of radical theory and political criticism which have sought to expose, transform or overturn this common sense have themselves adapted and changed through a series of set-backs and new initiatives over the last two or three decades. The work of a figure such as Raymond Williams, who has been a major example and influence upon the developments sketched above, should tell us that this intellectual and cultural narrative cannot be read as a simple story of 'failure', if it is this at all.

Our own emphasis in the present volume is upon criticism rather than theory; more precisely, on exhibiting the way theory works upon and within criticism. The claims of any critical mode or model can be assessed in theoretical terms, of course, or – as here – in a comparative study with another different approach to an author or specific literary text. But to stress the importance of critical activity or textual analysis this way does not mean that we seek to return to some earlier, less complicated, less poststructuralist or less postmodern moment; nor to an assumption of the integrity of the isolated, autonomous text. Contemporary theory, following as ever its different agendas, has taught us too much about the importance of ideology and language, about intertextuality, about the formation and reformation of the subject in contemporary culture, and about literary study's own situatedness for a new formalism to be possible or desirable. Rather, criticism must discover its working practices, its interpretative strategies and purpose, its conception of its object of study, its academic and cultural role, by way of such theory. These strategies and intentions will be focused in the work of literary criticism; at best in the consciously theoretical and necessarily dialogic analysis of literary texts. The task we assign to the present Reader is therefore, in one way, a traditional one; an aid to the study of literature and the function of criticism, recast in and beyond the era of Jameson's postmodernism. His all-consuming 'Theory' is alarmingly nothing or everything. We would prefer literary study to draw upon, and do, something. This book is one way of encouraging this; of instilling ways of reading and thinking about literary texts which are open to theoretical debate and consciously involved in the world of literary and cultural values. In short, we hope it will be a contribution to the making of an engaged, theoretically informed criticism for the present time.⁹

In higher education – during a period in which debates about theory have had to take their place in line with day-by-day discussions of the pressing, material issues of interdisciplinarity, modularization, expanding student numbers, cuts in core funding and student pauperization – two factors, at least, have impeded rather than assisted the kind of goal we have in mind. First, students have been introduced to theory via theoretical essays which are conceptually and often stylistically far removed from their own experience of reading and writing about literature and which, in their unfamiliarity, difficulty and variety, have been perplexing and intimidating. As a result, the teaching and learning of theory have become acutely problematical: can students engage in a meaningful seminar discussion of complex, often abstruse theoretical texts when they have little or no experience of theory or theoretical discussion, a limited acquaintance with the debates that literary theory

addresses, and little knowledge perhaps of the literary texts to which theory often does no more than allude? Do teachers respond by simply lecturing on theory? But to what end? In fact, the choice is never quite this simple because students, like theory, are not all the same and different theoretical positions are accessible, stimulating and useful, or impossible, at different stages — not only to students but to teachers and critics. Nevertheless, when the singular 'it' of theory is pluralized and the student body simultaneously multiplied, existing structural and pedagogic problems can simply be compounded. A second problem is that the teaching of theory has often proceeded independently of courses on the familiar literary genres and the assessment of these, a formal separation of areas of study which effectively boxes theory into a ghetto, especially in modular schemes. The worst result of this misplaced autonomy, however, has been the kind of easy-going pluralism which assumes all approaches are equal and that you can shop around as the fancy takes you, or the cynical pragmatism which apes what is taken to be the module tutor's fancy.

We have tried, in this volume, to redress some of these effects by supplying what we believe has been lacking, and by attempting strategically to meet the difficulties other Readers and textbooks have encountered. The result is a *practical* Reader intended to serve both as a working introduction and a textbook for undergraduates and for more advanced study. Our first aim is to present students with examples of contemporary theoretical positions and to do this by grouping essays in criticism by renowned theorists, chapter by chapter, around widely used literary texts and well-known authors. In conception and content, therefore, this volume differs from earlier Readers organized around edited blocks of theory, and from those, now numerous, collections of essays which 'represent' different theoretical or critical approaches, or which – like Raman Selden's *Practising Theory and Reading Criticism* (1989) – offer illuminating but pastiched readings of literary texts 'in the style of' theory or criticism X or Y.

Where possible, then, we have wanted to present critical essays by leading theorists. Hence our use of essays by Lacan and Derrida rather than by a Lacanian or Deconstructionist critic; our use of essays by Wolfgang Iser, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and influential Marxist or feminist critics and cultural materialists rather than by those who work within these traditions or in a debate with these figures. In this way, we hope to answer one obvious kind of question - how would Derrida actually read a literary text? – and to provide an authoritative example of the assumptions and procedures associated with a particular approach. This does not mean, however, that these essays comprise perfect or definitive models, to be replicated or parodied along an assembly-line or supermarket shelf of critical styles. Rather, they are grouped in sets of different possible and often antagonistic readings of a given literary text in what we want to be understood and used as 'exercises' which facilitate the exploration of these differences. Theoretical questions can, of course, be pursued at an abstract and generalized level, but literary theories need, in our view, to be demonstrated and tested in relation to literary texts. We want, once more, to encourage and enable the development of a theoretically informed criticism, to promote the teaching and study of theoretical, critical and literary texts in dialogue together. No one textbook, as other editors will have realized, can do all that this requires. But we believe the practical orientation of the following exercises means that they can provide a forum and a base to return to from the further reading which it is a serious part of our purpose also to encourage. As such, the individual essays we have included are open to elaboration and interrogation in their immediate relations to a particular text and its accompanying set of essays; but they are open too, beyond this textbook, to the challenge of other theory and criticism as well as the literary texts which students will encounter elsewhere.

Clearly, the literary texts which provide a focus for these exercises are not randomly selected. This is a further co-ordinate such a collection has to consider. We realize that a list of ten texts will be seen as either too long or too short, and that some might see this list of ten as reinforcing a canon of largely British or Anglo-American authors and texts; as tokenist in its representation of women, issues of colour and sexuality; as buttressing the hegemony of modernism and of prose fiction. So, why these texts? Certainly, we believe these ten texts are interesting and worthy of study; but this is not to say that in our view they comprise a perfect literary curriculum, or even a suitcase of desert-island books. Several factors have, in fact, governed our selection, and not all of them were of our own making. First, this book is intended for a student readership in Great Britain, the United States and the English-speaking world. We could not assume those students would, for example, know or come to read Rabelais and therefore be in a confident position to read Bakhtin on Rabelais. Second, we wanted to include texts or authors representing different periods and genres, and to include examples which addressed questions of gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Third, and fast approaching a point of gridlock, we wanted ideally, as we say, to present critical essays on these texts or authors by leading theorists. Aside from the determinate financial restraints which make the inclusion of work by some authors impossible, we were guided here by three considerations: the contents of A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory, which we wanted this book to support and complement; the need to represent earlier seminal positions (in Eliot, Leavis, Woolf and New Criticism, for example); and to include, of course, examples of the major schools and movements in later theory and criticism by theorists/critics who could be fairly thought to exemplify this new diversity of positions.

At the same time, these factors were overdetermined all along by another incontrovertible and revealing fact. Georg Lukács did not write on George Eliot; Barthes did not write on Oscar Wilde; Stephen Greenblatt has not written on *Beloved*; Foucault, Lyotard and Baudrillard barely refer to individual literary texts. And so on. Otherwise, major theorists, critics and schools or movements have gravitated towards the mainstream texts and authors in their own national literatures, or to those who, as a result of this critical attention, come to represent a high profile counter-canon. Thus, of course, are canons sustained and reconstituted. Superficially at least, our choice of texts follows this process, seeming to help maintain a dominant literary taste. But it also, and more importantly, questions this: by enlisting

innovative and challenging perspectives upon mainstream texts and upon those writers who have extended or reconfigured the canon – Oscar Wilde, Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie, for example – together with the new theoretical and cultural agendas associated with their work.

The result is a textbook which groups essays representing key theoretical debates around canonic or new, but well-known and much-taught, texts and authors. 'Literature', said Roland Barthes, is 'what gets taught'. Here, by implication, not only literature, but theory and criticism too are what get taught. Which returns us finally to the main purpose of this collection. Beyond decisions on the contents, the problem facing editors of Readers is a pedagogic one: how to introduce new and difficult ideas or new approaches where guidance and commentary are deemed necessary and useful, but to present this in such a way as to encourage independent critical thought. Our solution - in the contextual information of the 'General Introduction' to each exercise and the following Headnotes to individual essays – is to steer a course between the à la carte and table d'hôte menus of direct teaching and student-centred learning. In the latter we invite students to tease out a difficulty or contradiction, trace a keyword, extrapolate an implied theoretical position, compare essays or sketch an alternative approach. In using the book, teachers may or may not themselves choose to follow precisely these questions, but they provide enough guidance, we think, for students to use the book independently, inside or outside the classroom or in relation to other courses: to use it, indeed, as a 'workbook' in the best sense of the now often dubiously rationalized doctrine of 'independent learning'.

A last word on our position. All criticism, we believe, is dependent on theory, and this in turn we see as comprising notions of literary and social form and value, ideas of order and power, subjectivity and sexuality. These are the vital knowledges of a literary education, learned and unlearned in reading, discussion and written criticism. The problem with presenting a range of perspectives and positions in a Reader of this kind is that it may reinforce the undifferentiated pluralism it is meant to counter. But critical approaches and theories of literature and criticism are not all compatible or equal for the student or for the professional academic critic. Criticism is about 'choosing'; about taking and developing positions in the fullest sense. And this is neither a matter of indifference in the end for students, nor in the beginning for the teacher or editor.

The contents of the Reader, and what we have said above, imply an attitude, first of all, towards mainstream traditions in literature and theory. Quite simply, in our view, these are neither to be rejected nor revered but critically examined (read and re-read) from a perspective located, inevitably, both inside and outside an available and changing culture. This double life characterizes the position or, better, the attitude of 'critique'; a mode and mentality derived in the main, in our own case, from traditions in Marxism and political criticism, coupled at once with the mixed influence of tendencies in poststructuralism, postmodernism, social semiotics and dialogics, and a persistent belief in the virtues of textual analysis. The result is eclectic yet committed. It is the *attitude* of critique, however, not the details of a

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personal formation, that we wish to inscribe and foster in this book. We spoke earlier of the function of criticism at the present time, alluding half jokingly to Arnold's famous essay of that title. But the kind of criticism we are invoking – self-conscious, theoretically aware, textually focused, sceptical of established opinion, alive to the part that literature and a critical mentality can play in positive cultural change – would indeed, we think, be a criticism worth taking seriously at the present time.

The *Practical Reader* will, we hope, be a modest contribution to this high aim. We ask many questions in the course of it, at moments indeed seeming to spin out an almost comical surfeit. Not all of these questions need be answered. Students will select their own from those we have put and ask others, and so come in their turn to question the critics – and the editors. We too, after all, are open to question. That, in so many words, is our position.

Notes

8

- Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in Peter Brooker, ed., Modernism/ Postmodernism (Longman, 1992), p. 165.
- See Peter Brooker, 'Why Brecht, or is there English After Cultural Studies', in Michael Green, ed.,
 Broadening the Context (John Murray, 1987), and Antony Easthope, *Literary into Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 1991). One of the major influences on this self-consciousness in conceptions of
 'English' and 'Literature' has been Raymond Williams. See essays in his *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1977) and *Writing in Society* (Verso, 1984).
- 3. See Patrick Parrinder, *The Failure of Theory. Essays on Criticism and Contemporary Fiction* (Harvester, 1987); Bernard Bergonzi, *Exploding English* (Clarendon Press, 1991); Peter Washington, *Fraud. Literary Theory and the End of English* (Fontana, 1989).
- 4. On this development, see Steven Earnshaw, The Direction of Literary Theory (Macmillan, 1996), and Simon Dentith, 'Teaching and "Theory" Again', English, 44, 178, Spring 1995, pp. 71–8. Both writers are thoroughly alert to the radicalizing claims, at least, of theory, and Dentith concedes it has an informing influence upon literary study. Nevertheless, he wishes to assert that 'the primary purpose of an English course is to get students to engage with "literature" and not with theory'. Theory, he says, must be 'subservient' to this engagement and to 'a process of self-discovery' (pp. 73, 77).
- 5. Tony Davies and Nigel Wood, eds, The Waste Land (Open University Press, 1994), p. ix.
- This is the view of Catherine Burgass, 'Theory and Practice', from unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 1995.
- 7. Terry Eagleton, The Significance of Theory (Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 24.
- 8. Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 3.
- 9. We would enlist collections such as A. Easthope and J. O. Thompson, eds, *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory* (Prentice Hall/Harvester, 1991); and J. Collins, H. Radner and A. Preacher Collins, eds, *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (Routledge, 1993) in this aim, though they do not put things in these exact terms. In the second volume the editors talk of the need for 'critical readings', 'textual analysis' and the 'engaged interventionist analysis' of popular film texts. This formulation echoes an earlier moment of film study, but they do not advocate 'a simple return to the good old days of film theory in the 1970s ... grounded in semiotics, Marxism and psychoanalysis'. This cannot be, they say, since the altered 'cultural terrain' of film and film study has also changed the nature of cultural analysis (pp. 3–4). An analogous development has occurred in literary studies.