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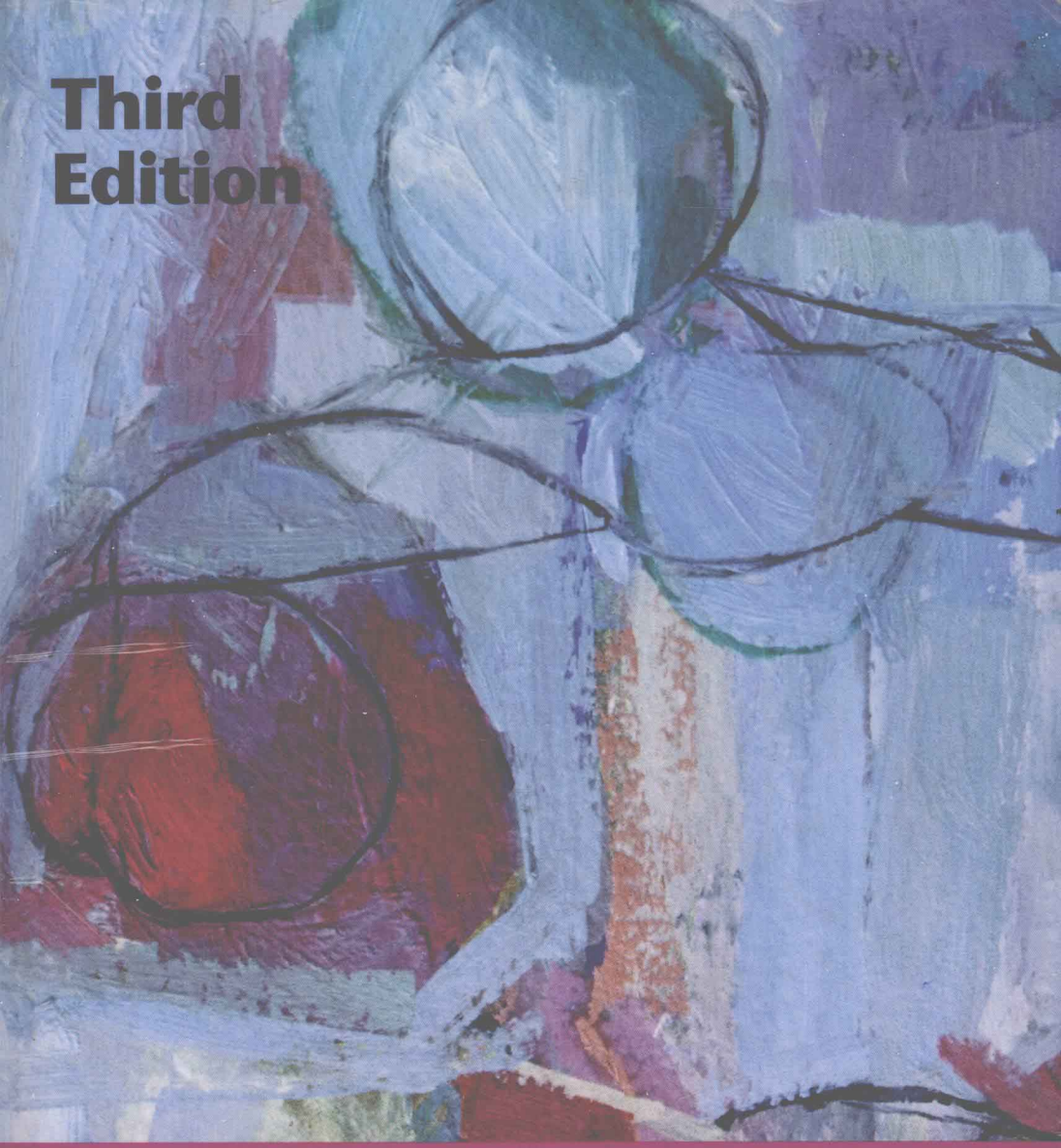

LITERARY CRITICISM

an introduction to theory and practice

Charles E. Bressler

LITERARY CRITICISM

An Introduction to Theory and Practice

Third Edition

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Foreword

Early in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, we learn about Tom Sawyer's gang and his "deep laid" plans, for Tom and his inner circle of friends dedicate one memorable occasion to working out such details: the name of the gang, its objectives, its general line of business—its modus operandi. But there are problems, namely, problems of interpretation. After all, not everybody defines "gang" the same way. These interpretive problems are not insurmountable, so we discover, but they are real, at least for a few enchanted moments in the narrative:

> "Now," says Ben Rogers, "what's the line of business of this Gang?"
>
> "Nothing only robbery and murder," Tom said.
>
> "But who are we going to rob?—houses, or cattle, or—"
>
> "Stuff! stealing cattle and such things ain't robbery; it's burglary," says Tom Sawyer. "We ain't burglars. That ain't no sort of style. We are highwaymen. We stop stages and carriages on the road, with masks on, and kill the people and take their watches and money."
>
> "Must we always kill the people?"
>
> "Oh, certainly. It's best. Some authorities think different, but mostly it's considered best to kill them—except some that you bring to the cave here, and keep them till they're ransomed."
>
> "Ransomed? What's that?"
>
> "I don't know. But that's what they do. I've seen it in books; and so of course that's what we've go to do."
>
> "But how can we do it if we don't know what it is?"
>
> "Why, blame it all, we've got to do it. Don't I tell you it's in the books? Do you want to go to doing different from what's in the books, and get things all muddled up?"

It is difficult to argue that Tom Sawyer, under any circumstances, is a reliable reader of literary texts. Yet amidst this already "muddled up" but delightfully humorous conversation, Tom is right about one thing: books carry a certain cultural authority. They can and do influence the way a person understands human experience, even if that same person makes no claim to be an avid reader. Tom Sawyer is certainly not the model reader, nor was he

ever the model student. But his cocksure knowledge of books, however boyishly obtained, is telling nonetheless.

Readers are still intensely interested in understanding "what's in the books." It is a task, in fact, made all the richer and at the same time more difficult, given the great variety of critical approaches to literary texts, and the decades of theoretical debates, political wrangling, and culture wars. In her book *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins has accurately described such conflicts in the discipline as "academic shootouts" (230). Even in the late afternoon of theory, however, the dust has not settled. Terry Eagleton's admonition is as true now as it was when he first offered it: "Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion of one's own" (*Literary Theory,* viii). But just what constitutes "theory" and its various uses is still a hotly debated subject, yet one worth pursuing.

Not all critics share Eagleton's views on the subject. Denis Donoghue asserts, "If theory is merely experimental or, as we say, heuristic, we do well to take it to mind if not to heart, and give it a run for whatever money we risk on it. But if it is offered to us as a creed or a vision or a doctrine, we should approach it much more skeptically and estimate the consequence of taking it to heart and soul." In Shakespearean criticism, for instance, Donoghue contends that Eagleton's commitments to "theory" have amounted to what he calls a "New Thematics": the "queering" of "one discipline—literary criticism—with the habits of another—social science or moral interrogation" (*The Practice of Reading* 66–67). This one tension is only representative of the many that exist in response to "what's in the books," that persistent question.

Charles Bressler's *Literary Criticism, Third Edition,* invites readers not only into the debate but also into the larger literary conversation. Like the two previous editions, this one is written on the assumption that too often literary theory is a subject only for professional critics and academicians. While this new edition makes it even more possible for students to work with complex theoretical configurations, it is not at all phobic about literary power. Bressler's goal is to introduce students to the practice of literary reading in all its variety, not to indoctrinate.

Chapter 1 addresses two of the most central questions in the college literature classroom: How we read and why? To help students answer these questions, Bressler provides a working definition of literature, including its epistemological and ontological components. His discussion also attempts to relate literary study to the relationship between public and private values.

Chapter 2 traces the historical developments of literary criticism, from Plato to the present. This chapter is designed to help students relate to and participate in the historical debate about such important subjects as representation, truth, beauty, nature, form, meaning, gender, class, and audience,

among others. Chapter 2 explores some of the important early influences on what is now modern and postmodern literary theory. What is important about this chapter is that it alerts students to the intellectual risks of developing a merely contemporary diet of ideas.

Chapters 3 through 11 of *Literary Criticism, Third Edition,* investigate the main critical "schools" that have developed to the present: respectively, New Criticism, Reader-Response Criticism, Structuralism, Deconstruction, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Feminism, Marxism, Cultural Poetics (or New Historicism), and Cultural Studies, which has been expanded to include a more detailed discussion of Postcolonialism.

Literary Criticism, Third Edition, is designed to equip teachers and students to enter into a more meaningful conversation about literary texts. To this end, this revised edition includes a new, updated glossary of critical terms, new student essays, an updated bibliography, and a list of useful Web sites and links. The Internet listings will provide students new and exciting avenues for literary research. All of the revisions to the new edition are intended to help students sharpen their critical thinking skills and develop a voice in critical discussions. To enable students to become more informed readers of literature, the third edition also includes a Questions for Analysis section at the end of each chapter. This section reinforces the point that all good research writing and discussion begins with one good, well-focused question.

It is not the goal of this book to substitute for any important primary readings. Instead, this text intends to engage students in a series of mutual introductions to primary and secondary works in literary studies. It is hoped that students then will decide "what's in the books," with the added awareness that it is only through rereading them over a lifetime that makes answers even possible.

Daniel H. Strait
Asbury College
Wilmore, Kentucky

To the Reader

Like the first two editions, this new edition of *Literary Criticism* is designed as a supplemental text for introductory courses in both literature and literary criticism. In all three editions, the purpose of this text has always remained the same: to enable students to approach literature from a variety of practical and theoretical perspectives and to equip them with a theoretical and a practical understanding of how critics develop their interpretations. Its overall aim is to take the mystery out of working with and interpreting texts.

Like the first and second editions, the third edition holds to several key premises. First, I assume that there is no such thing as an "innocent" reading of a text. Whether our responses to a text are emotional and spontaneous or well reasoned and highly structured, all of our interpretations are based on underlying factors that cause us to respond in a particular way. What elicits these responses, and how a reader makes sense out of a text, is what really matters. It is the domain of literary theory to question our initial and all our further responses, our beliefs, our values, our feelings, and our eventual, overall interpretation. To understand why we respond to a text in a certain way, we must first understand literary theory and criticism.

Second, since our responses to any text have theoretical bases, I presume that all readers have a literary theory. Consciously or unconsciously, as readers we have developed a mind-set that fits or encompasses our expectations when reading any text. Somehow we all seem able to make sense of a text. The methods we use to frame our personal and public interpretations directly involve us in the process of literary criticism and theory and automatically make us practicing literary critics, whether we know it or not!

My third assumption rests on the observation that each reader's literary theory and accompanying methodology is either conscious or unconscious, complete or incomplete, informed or ill-informed, eclectic or unified. Since an unconscious, incomplete, ill-informed, and eclectic literary theory more frequently than not leads to illogical, unsound, and haphazard interpretations, I believe that a well-defined, logical, and clearly articulated theory will enable readers to develop their own methods of interpretation, permitting readers, in fact, to order, clarify, and justify their appraisals of a text in a consistent and rational manner.

Unfortunately, many readers cannot articulate their own literary theory and have little knowledge of the history and development of the ever-evolving principles of literary criticism. It is the goal of this book to introduce such students to literary theory and criticism, its historical development, and the various theoretical positions or schools of criticism that will enable them as readers to make conscious, informed, and intelligent choices about their own methods of interpretation.

Like the first two editions, this new edition introduces students to the basic concerns of literary theory in Chapter 1, which now includes a more expansive definition of *literature* itself. Chapter 2 places literary theory and criticism in historical perspective, starting with Plato and ending with modern-day theorists. Chapters 3 to 11 have all been revised, adding new terminology where appropriate. These chapters present the eleven major schools of criticism that have been developed in the twentieth century: New Criticism, Reader-Response Criticism, Structuralism, Deconstruction, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Feminism, Marxism, Cultural Poetics or New Historicism, and Cultural Studies, with an expanded discussion of Postcolonialism, including African American and Gender Studies. To maintain consistency and for ease of study, each of these chapters is identically organized. We begin with a brief **Introduction** followed by the **Historical Development** of each school of criticism. The **Assumptions** section, which sets forth the philosophical principles on which each school of criticism is based, is next. The **Methodology** section follows and serves as a "how-to" manual for explaining the techniques used by the various schools of criticism to formulate their interpretations of a text based upon their philosophical assumptions. All chapters in the third edition have received careful editing, with added terminology and scope of coverage. Throughout each of these sections, all **key terms** are in boldface type and are included in the new **Glossary** that appears at the back of this edition.

After the Methodology section, there is an expanded **Questions for Analysis** section in Chapters 3 through 11. This feature provides students with key questions to ask of a text in order to view that text from the perspective of the school of criticism under discussion. Some of the questions also ask students to apply their new-found knowledge to a particular text. Following this section is the **Student Essay** introduction, which poses critical questions to prepare students to read the example essay at the end of the Chapter. As in the first two editions, this undergraduate **Student Essay** provides an example for analysis, in which a student applies the principles and methods of interpretation of the school of criticism under discussion to one of nine primary texts in the **Literary Selections**. All of these primary texts can be found at the back of this edition.

Following the Student Essay warm-up is an updated **Further Reading** section. More comprehensive than in the first two editions, these selected

references complement the more extensive **References** section found at the end of the text. After the Further Reading section, an updated **Web Sites** section appears that provides additional avenues of exploration for each of the schools of criticism. It is often the case that these World Wide Web addresses include links to other sites, thus providing opportunities to venture into the ever-expanding world of literary theory.

Since *Literary Criticism* is an introductory text, the explanations of the various schools of criticism should not be viewed as exhaustive but as a first step toward an understanding of some rather difficult concepts, principles, and methodologies. Similarly, the student essays should not be viewed as literary masterpieces but as undergraduate attempts to employ differing literary theories. Instructors and students alike should feel free to critique these essays and explore both their strengths and weaknesses. After reading each of the chapters in this new edition, it is hoped that readers will continue their own investigations of literary theory by exploring advanced theoretical texts and the primary works of both theoretical and practical critics.

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Charles E. Bressler
Houghton, New York

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Defining Criticism, Theory, and Literature

Literary theory has permeated our thinking to the point that it has defined for our times how discourse about literature, as well as about culture in general, shall proceed. Literary theory has arrived, and no student of literature can afford not to come to terms with it.

Thomas McLaughlin, *Critical Terms for Literary Study*

EAVESDROPPING ON A LITERATURE CLASSROOM

Having assigned her literature class Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and knowing O'Connor's canon and her long list of curious protagonists, Professor Sally Blackwell could not anticipate whether her students would greet her with silence, bewilderment, or frustration when asked to discuss this work. Her curiosity would soon be satisfied, for as she stood before the class, she asked a seemingly simple, direct question: "What do you believe O'Connor is trying to tell us in this story? In other words, how do you, as readers, interpret this text?"

Although some students suddenly found the covers of their anthologies fascinating, others shot up their hands. Given a nod from Professor Blackwell, Alice was the first to respond. "I believe O'Connor is trying to tell us the state of the family in rural Georgia during the 1950s. Just look at how the children, June Star and John Wesley, behave. They don't respect their grandmother. In fact, they mock her."

"But she deserves to be mocked," interrupted Peter. "Her life is one big act. She wants to act like a lady—to wear white cotton gloves and carry a purse—but she really cares only for herself. She is selfish, self-centered, and arrogant."

"That may be," responded Karen, "but I think the real message of O'Connor's story is not about family or one particular character, but about a philosophy of life. O'Connor uses the Misfit to articulate her personal view of life. When the Misfit says Jesus has thrown 'everything off balance,'

O'Connor is really asking each of her readers to choose his or her own way of life or to follow the teachings of Jesus. In effect, O'Connor is saying we all have a choice: to live for ourselves or to live for and through others."

"I don't think we should bring Christianity or any other philosophy or religion into the story," said George. "Through analyzing O'Connor's individual words—words like *tall, dark,* and *deep*—and noting how often she repeats them and in what context, we can deduce that O'Connor's text, not O'Connor herself or her view of life, is melancholy and a bit dark. But to equate O'Connor's personal philosophy about life with the meaning of this particular story is somewhat silly."

"But we can't forget that O'Connor is a woman," said Betty, "and an educated one at that! Her story has little to do with an academic or pie-in-the-sky, meaningless philosophical discussion, but a lot to do with being a woman. Being raised in the South, O'Connor would know and would have experienced prejudice because she is a woman. And as we all know, the Southern male's opinion of women is that they are to be kept 'barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen.' Seemingly, they are to be as nondescript as Bailey's wife is in this story. Unlike all the other characters, we don't even know this woman's name. How much more nondescriptive could O'Connor be? O'Connor's message, then, is simple: Women are oppressed and suppressed. If they open their mouths, if they have an opinion, and if they voice that opinion, they will end up like the grandmother, with a bullet in their head."

"I don't think that's her point at all," said Barb. "I do agree that she is writing from personal experience about the South, but her main point is about prejudice itself—prejudice against African Americans. Through the voice of the Grandmother we see the Southern lady's opinion of African Americans: They are inferior to whites, uneducated, poor, and basically ignorant. O'Connor's main point is that we are all equal."

"Yes, I agree," said Mike. "But if we look at this story in the context of all the other stories we have read this semester, I see a theme we have discussed countless times before: appearance versus reality. This is O'Connor's main point. The grandmother acts like a lady—someone who cares greatly about others—but inwardly she cares only for herself. She's a hypocrite."

"I disagree. In fact, I disagree with everybody," announced Daniel. "I like the grandmother. She reminds me of my grandmother. O'Connor's grandmother is a bit self-centered, but whose old grandmother isn't? Like my grandma, O'Connor's grandmother likes to be around her grandchildren, to read and to play with them. She's funny, and she has spunk. And she even likes cats."

"But, Professor Blackwell, can we ever know what Flannery O'Connor really thinks about this story?" asked Jessica. "After all, she's dead, and she didn't write an essay titled "What 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' Really Means." And since she never tells us its meaning, can't the story have more than one meaning?"