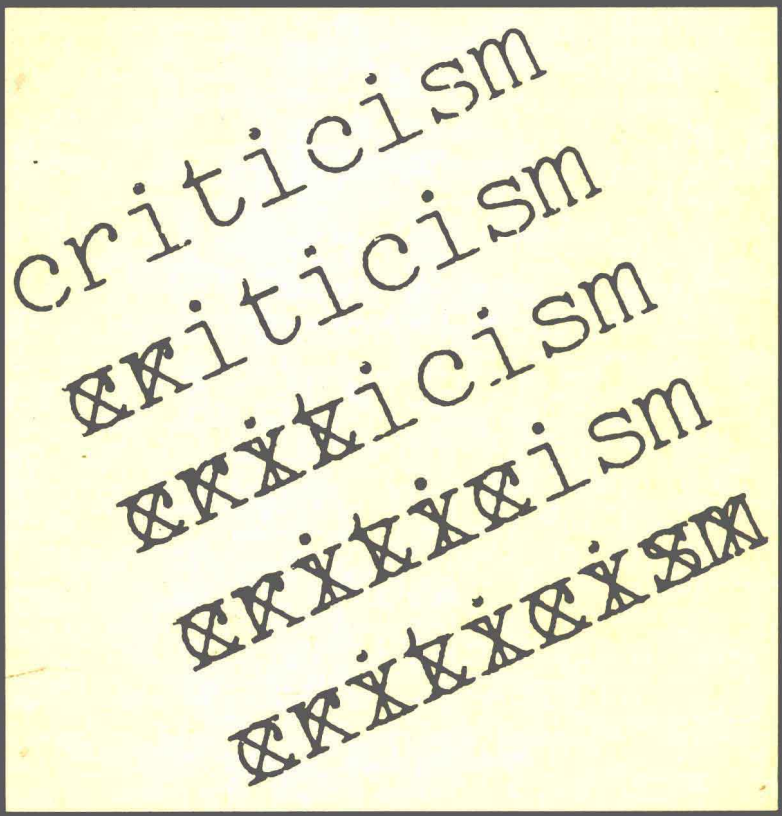
# Criticism and Critical Theory

## Edited by Jeremy Hawthorn

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second series

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# Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies

second series

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# Preface

In 1970, when *Contemporary Criticism* was published as a volume in the Stratford-upon-Avon Studies series, many teachers of literature such as myself responded to its appearance much as a parched traveller in the desert might have been expected to react to the offer of a glass of water. Those of us who had been students of literature in the 1960s had spent so much of our time arguing about criticism, agreeing upon the need for more theoretical discussion about its province, function, and value. And yet at that time so little overt discussion of such matters was available in textbook form, and much that was available was not up to date with recent developments. The received opinion of an older generation often appeared to be that one learned about criticism by doing it; our feeling that we were none too happy about 'doing it' before we had a clearer idea of what exactly it was that we were supposed to be doing seemed to be treated either as evidence that we were unfit to enter the noble profession of Letters, or as the sad but inevitable result of opening up university education to excessively large numbers of young people.

Our paranoia was doubtless exaggerated: after all, those who contributed to *Contemporary Criticism* were certainly not all of our generation. But anyone who was involved in a struggle to introduce a syllabus on literary criticism (or, worse still, on critical theory) in the late 1960s or 1970s will know that it was not just a question of paranoid exaggeration.

A volume entitled *Criticism and Critical Theory* published in 1984 risks being welcomed more as that same glass of water might be reacted to by a drowning hydrophobic. In the last 14 years more than one bookshop has set aside a special shelf for works of critical theory, and this shelf may today contain more books than shelves set aside, say, for studies of the eighteenth-century novel or of similar traditional areas. For some this signals a very dangerous trend – a movement away from a concern with actual literary (or other) work, and towards a dilettante interest in theory for its own sake: self-indulgent and self-enclosed.

This stereotype will not survive comparison with the evidence of the present volume. Three of the contributions are primarily concerned with single texts, and the others are very far from a disregard of specific textual

material. Moreover, few areas of intellectual debate are less self-enclosed than most of those now concerned with criticism and critical theory. Of course, there *is* criticism that is élitist, self-indulgent and self-fixated, just as there is theoretical discussion of the same characteristics.

But consider what E.D. Hirsch has agreed is ' "one of the most significant" critical movements of recent years' – the feminist movement in criticism.[1] Excellent as the *Contemporary Criticism* volume is, a present-day reader of it cannot but be struck by the fact that all of its contributors are men. 'Cannot but be struck' because the nature of critical debate over the past decade or so has forced us to be aware of such matters. It is clear that the feminist movement in criticism did not originate in literary criticism. It was part of a larger movement of struggle in society at large. Nevertheless, without the work of feminist literary critics that movement would not automatically have influenced the way we read and criticize literature. Furthermore, there is no doubt at all that works of feminist literary criticism have had effects that go far beyond the reading and criticizing of literature (or film, or other works of art). As Cheri Register has put it, feminist criticism is ultimately cultural criticism[2] – a point reiterated by Barbara Hill Rigney in her discussion of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in this collection. And to the extent that it is cultural criticism, feminist criticism can hardly be accused of being self-enclosed.

We know from the New Critics, however, that it could be – certainly would, in the past, have been – criticized for something else: for treating literature not 'as literature', but as symptom of or evidence for something else. If the contributors to the present volume do not spend much time agonizing about the difference between 'literary' and 'non-literary' readings of literature, this does not mean that they are uninterested in the issue of how much, and what, knowledge needs to be brought to the reading of a literary (or other) text. Indeed, the concern of many contributors with central problems of reading and interpretation actually highlights this issue.

In a very important article in *Contemporary Criticism* Ian Gregor argued for the need to progress beyond the New Critical treatment of the literary work as object ('Verbal Icon' or 'Well-wrought Urn') and instead to pay more attention to what in his opinion we obtained from E.M. Forster's discussions of character and plot in *Aspects of the Novel*: 'the feeling of what it is actually like to read a novel'.[3]

[1]Hirsch's comments are based on a statement of Jonathan Culler's, and are to be found in a review of Culler's *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 1982). See E.D. Hirsch Jr, 'Derrida's Axioms', *London Review of Books*, v, 13 (1983), p. 18.

[2]Cheri Register, 'American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction', in Josephine Donovan, ed., *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory* (Lexington, U.P. of Kentucky, 1975), p. 10.

[3]Ian Gregor, 'Criticism as an Individual Activity: The Approach through Reading', in Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer, eds., *Contemporary Criticism* (London, Edward Arnold, 1970), p. 199.

In its concern with the reading experience Gregor's article was prophetic of one of the dominant shifts of critical concern over the past decade and a half: that shift away from concern with the text as thing-in-itself towards concern with the reading of the text. But whereas Gregor pays no attention to the differential and even contradictory readings given by different individuals to the same work, focusing rather upon a generalized 'reading process', much criticism since 1970 has preferred to grapple with solutions to what Jonathan Culler has dubbed the single most salient and puzzling fact about literature: 'that a literary work can have a range of meanings, but not just any meaning'.[4] In contrast, the veteran New Critic W.K. Wimsatt, in his own contribution to *Contemporary Criticism*, listed six possible alternative focuses for literary study without using the words 'reader' or 'reading' once.

In the present volume the contributions from Robert Crosman and R.A. Sharpe confront problems associated with reading and interpretation directly. So too does John Corner's essay, taking the discussion beyond the limits of literary interpretation and meaning. But the contributions by P.D. Juhl and Iain Wright are also concerned with problems which become more demanding once one turns one's attention from texts towards the reading of texts. The title of Robert Crosman's essay asks a question almost unthinkable in literary-critical circles 14 years ago. What all of these essays tackle – directly or indirectly – is the question of differential readings. Do literary (or other) texts have one meaning which is related to the author's intention, as P.D. Juhl argues? What is the connection between meaning and interpretation: does the latter follow a correct perception of the former (as R.A. Sharpe argues), or does the latter rather produce the former? Has what Terry Eagleton has dubbed the 'Reader's Liberation Front' really liberated readers, or has it misled its naïve adherents?

Such questions have to a certain extent been crystallized by the extension of such debates to film and television. In Britain over the past decade and a half what we can call academic–institutional politics have had an interesting involvement in the intellectual debates around such questions. Whereas the study of film has very often emerged out of literary studies, and has (to risk a very large generalization) in consequence followed a somewhat text-biased path of development, the study of television has more often been associated with sociological traditions of work which have been far more biased in favour of research into audiences, institutions, and agencies of production and control. The contrast between these two different traditions has been very fruitful: it has pointed to different sorts of weakness on both sides, and has led to serious consideration of the ways in which the strengths of both could be brought together. And the juxtaposition of theoretical work in the different fields of study has often

[4]Jonathan Culler, 'Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading', in Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, eds., *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton, Princeton U.P., 1980), p. 51.

been extremely thought-provoking. As an example one could cite the issue of the political implications of different theories of 'reading'. Extreme pluralist/individualist theories of reading associated with literature (forms of deconstruction, for instance) have frequently claimed for themselves a very radical or Leftist status;[5] in contrast, the pluralist/individualist theories which have been labelled 'Uses and Gratifications' in mass-media studies are often overtly anti-Marxist, and are rather characterized by their adherents as liberal–humanist in inclination.

The inclusion of essays concerned with film and broadcasting in this volume bears testimony to the growth of interdisciplinary work in institutions of higher education in the 1970s and 1980s – in Britain especially in the polytechnics. Such interdisciplinarity is not only intellectually fruitful: it also serves to remind us that many seemingly abstract and technical issues in critical theory do have very important (and, sometimes, immediate) connections with issues of pressing social and political importance. In his introduction to *Contemporary Criticism* Malcolm Bradbury remarked wryly that the judge in the British 'Lady Chatterley' trial might be thought of as a crypto-New Critic in the light of his refusal to listen to evidence about Lawrence's intention or about his achievement in other works. Students of literature today are likely to be aware that a discussion of 'intention' links not just to debates about the meaning of *Paradise Lost*, but also to questions about the ideological determinants of television news reporting.

Colin Mercer's isolation of four main problems in critical theory at the start of his contribution focuses attention on to the way in which the political and the critical (whether or not literary) have been yoked together (sometimes with violence) with increasing regularity in the past decade or so. To take but one of the problems Mercer looks at – that of ideology – we can recognize that whatever the excesses attributable to participants in debates around this subject, the debates themselves have had a fruitful effect on the discussion of literature, film and television. And as a result, larger questions concerning crucial issues of knowledge and consciousness in history have been highlighted.

The dimension of history is mentioned by Mercer as the site of other, wide-reaching problems, a fundamental premise which is implicitly accepted by Iain Wright in his article. Many different academic and intellectual disciplines have been much preoccupied by debates around the vexed issue of the relationship between formal and historical approaches. Like the partners in a tempestuous sexual relationship, both of these make periodic attempts to survive on their own, but such attempts are usually short-lived. Here it is perhaps important to distinguish between formal and formalistic approaches: a criticism that has no sensitivity to formal issues is unlikely to have any real understanding of history, whilst an ahistorical criticism will be likely to perceive formal matters in an

[5]See, for instance, the highly loaded usage of the word 'radical' throughout Christopher Norris's book *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London, Methuen, 1982).

unhelpfully mechanical and absolute manner. Thus although different varieties of Structuralism have on occasions managed to dehistoricize many areas of intellectual inquiry – even managing to win victories in the heart of enemy territory and to establish bridgeheads in Marxism – their victories have not been lasting.

Ahistorical or anti-historical critical theories tend to flourish in two rather different situations: firstly when periods of stability and steady expansion in society are such as to allow people to forget that things do change, and secondly when things change so rapidly and unpleasantly that a refuge in purely formal speculations can offer the illusion of an escape from history. If the New Criticism (at least in the time of its post-war hegemony) prospered in the former situation, more recent attempts to dispense with history have mushroomed in the latter one.

With history we come full-circle back to the problem of interpretation. Robert Weimann's epochal article 'Past Significance and Present Meaning in Literary History' neatly illustrates a complex of problematic issues in its title.[6] Arguments about meaning and interpretation often involve consideration of the relationship between past and present, a relationship both causal and interpretative.

Many of the critical debates which have dominated literary-critical discussion over the past decade and a half can be reduced to a core problem: 'How do we reach agreement?' Few retain any confidence that a quiet discussion of objective evidence followed by the reasoned question 'This is so, isn't it?' will result in general accord. 'Reaching agreement' dominates our world and not just our literary criticism, of course. From negotiations about nuclear weaponry to much less pressing considerations of the means whereby opposing views can be reconciled the reaching of agreement – even where it is an agreement upon how we cope with our disagreements – is, justifiably, the obsession of our age. In their preface to *Contemporary Criticism* Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer stated that their aim in collecting the essays in the volume together was a double one: 'to look at the state and function of criticism at the present time, and to offer an exploration of the various methods of critical procedure that are now prevalent.' The emphasis here is more on mapping the field than on resolving boundary disputes, and this I think is an accurate representation of the mood of the time: three years after *Contemporary Criticism* the journal *Cultural Studies* published an article entitled 'Literature/Society: Mapping the Field'.[7] Perhaps the fact that Robert Crosman can refer both to Nixon and Reagan whilst discussing how we deal with the fact that different readers interpret the same text differently is an indication of the extent to which public events over the last decade and a half have made all

[6]Weimann's article was first published in *New Literary History*, but has been reprinted in a number of volumes, including Robert Weimann, *Structure and Society in Literary History* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1977).

[7]No author given, 'Literature/Society: Mapping the Field', *Cultural Studies* IV (spring 1973), p. 21.

of us more conscious that we need to devote more attention to learning ways of reaching agreement – or at least living with disagreement.

Susan Horton has seen the 'neatly antithetical critical positions' of E.D. Hirsch and Stanley Fish to be helpful to all of us in clarifying the way in which we approach texts and interpretation: the former recommending that we discriminate between a determinate, singular and univocal meaning on the one hand and a multiple significance that can vary from reader to reader on the other, and the latter maintaining that meaning can never be univocal or singular, 'since it is always generated out of particular readers' encounters with a text'.[8]

The New Critical confidence that as we are all dealing with the same text we should be able to reach agreement about it has given way to an agreement (and it is worth stressing that Hirsch and Fish and their respective adherents *do* seem to agree on this) that if meaning is left to individual readers then agreement on a single meaning will not be possible. It would seem that contemporary history has convinced many or most of us that human beings do not, generally, agree with one another. Hirsch solves this problem by granting supreme authority to the single intending author (which raises problems for our pursuit of the meaning of texts without such a simple genetic origin: a folk song, a television programme, or even perhaps the *Iliad*). Fish seemed to counsel us to learn to live with a plurality of meanings, without being too helpful on the specific problems faced by those who mark essays or grade exams.

Does all this remove criticism from a proper concern with individual texts to an ethereal realm of pure critical problems? As I have already suggested, not on the evidence of this volume. In addition to those contributions centrally concerned with a single literary text, Christopher Butler's essay addresses the question of whether new forms of literature require, or produce, new forms of critical explanation (or, rather, whether the pleasure which they give does so). Certainly, the flourishing of interest in the reading process cannot be divorced from the nature of that modernist and post-modernist literature and art that foregrounds the 'reading' process in a self-conscious manner. And far from their critical or theoretical concerns actually cutting off either Terry Lovell or Maud Ellmann from the texts about which they are writing, the opposite can be seen to be the case: a determination to tackle certain critical or theoretical issues can make the critic's relation to and interaction with a text more intimate and more rigorous.

The aim of this volume, then, is not just to indicate the range of methods, approaches, and theories that are important in literary (and other) studies today. It is also to draw attention to tensions, points of conflict, contradictions and disagreements within literary studies and in contiguous areas – not to celebrate or luxuriate in these, but to further the

[8]Susan R. Horton, *Interpreting Interpreting: Interpreting Dickens's 'Dombey'* (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins U.P., 1979), p. vii.

task of confronting them and their implications. If there is more criticism and critical theory on today's bookshelves than there was, the need for criticism to be self-aware and theoretically alert and alive has not diminished.

Jeremy Hawthorn

## Note

All criticism that I know about is concerned with questions of interpretation and meaning. Thus 'reader response criticism' is badly named, because it implies that such criticism is solely or primarily concerned with the emotions of readers. In fact, what 'reader-response critics' have in common is the premise that since texts are known only through reading, the atom of literary study is not a text in isolation, but a text-plus-reader, and thus some attention to the reader is necessary. 'Reader-response criticism' is such a silly name for this premise that many critics deny they belong at all to the movement, and thus the debate over whether or not a particular critic is or is not a 'reader-response critic' can waste much valuable time. 'Reader critic' might be a better shorthand term.

Harold Bloom achieves the position that texts are different when read by different readers in what seems to me a roundabout way. First he posits that there is such a thing as 'reading', which ordinary readers do, but that great poets 'misread' their predecessors in order to justify their own poetic programme: 'In order to become a strong poet, the poet reader begins with a trope or defense that *is* a misreading. . . . A poet interpreting his precursor . . . must *falsify* by his reading.' Next, however, Bloom invites ordinary readers to do what he describes 'strong' poets as doing: 'I hope by urging a more antithetical criticism, one that constantly sets poet against poet, to persuade the reader that he too must take on his share of the poet's own agon, so that the reader also may make of his own belatedness a strength rather than an affliction.' (*Misreading*, see note 4, p. 80.) For Bloom, '*mis*reading' is individual, active, creative, valuable, while 'reading' is collective, passive, sterile, dull. Thus, although preserving the old reading/misreading polarity, Bloom valorizes the second term, leaving one to wonder why he keeps the pejorative prefix 'mis'. Perhaps it is simply there to attract attention (no small virtue).

Avoiding the simple polarity of readers/misreaders, Stanley Fish divides readers into 'interpretive communities'. Within each community interpretive rules are in force that enable members to determine what constitutes right reading, and what is misreading. What the nature of these communities is, how a reader discovers what one he is in, and whether he is free to leave, are questions that Fish does not answer (see note 7). A recent attempt to name and describe an actual 'interpretive community' (the profession of college and university literature teachers), Steven Mailloux's *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 1982) seems to me to have very limited success: even within the supposed community, each interpretive crux turns out to be a dispute about which rules to apply, and so the communities multiply by dividing. Building consensus (if that is our goal) seems to me a matter both of conventions and of negotiation, and I have the indispensible notion of 'negotiated' meaning from David Bleich, *Subjective Criticism* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins U.P., 1978).

Norman Holland is very good at showing how actual readers' psychological makeup influences their interpretation of literary texts: see *Poems in Persons* (New York, Norton, 1973) and *5 Readers Reading* (New Haven, Yale U.P., 1975). Two recent collections of a spectrum of approaches to reader criticism are Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins U.P., 1981) and Suleiman & Crosman, cited in note 3. Both contain extensive annotated bibliographies of criticism that because it considers the role of the reader in the interpretation of literary texts can if one chooses be called 'reader criticism'.

# Contents

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# 1

# Is There Such a Thing as Misreading?

*Robert Crosman*

Once upon a time, and a very good time many think it was, no one in his right mind, at least no one in the academy, would seriously have asked this question, certainly not in print. 'Misreading', after all, is a province of 'misunderstanding', and the project of understanding – the task of *not mis*understanding – is a vital and perpetual human enterprise. Misunderstanding, international relations experts assure us, is what threatens to blow the world up. Talk, communication, *understanding* is our only hope for human survival on this planet. And in our personal lives, too, only understanding makes it possible for us to love our mates and our children, work with our colleagues, and judge the issues of the day as responsible citizens. Misunderstanding, and hence misreading, is as manifest as it is deplorable.

Besides, we have direct *experience* of misreading. If there were no such thing as misreading, how could any of us ever have followed a road-map incorrectly, or have driven the wrong way down a one-way street, or inadvertently swallowed something in our medicine chests marked 'For External Use Only'? Each of us has direct experience that confirms the commonsensical reply: 'Yes, indeed, there *is* such a thing as misreading.'

And yet the concept of misreading, like its golden twin 'right reading', has in the past dozen years achieved the key status in intellectual discourse of an essentially contested concept. In this, as in much else, our age is unique. In all the history of literacy, when readers agreed on nothing else, they nonetheless agreed on the existence of the *category* of misreading, however that category might be filled.

In literary studies – in Anglo-American literary studies, anyway – the first hint of that category's weakening was in the doctrines of New Criticism, particularly in the concept of 'the intentional fallacy', which asserted that in interpreting a text it was misguided or futile to look beyond that text for its author's private intentions. 'If the poet succeeded in doing it', William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley wrote, 'then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem – for evidence of an intention that did not become

effective in the poem'.[1] New Critics did not absolutely abandon the category of 'misreading', but by separating a text's meaning from its author's intention, they discarded the principal tool of earlier generations for discovering what that category contained. The criteria for judging an interpretation of a text became for New Criticism the interpretation's 'richness', 'subtlety', or 'satisfyingness'. It was hard to think of these vague or emotional qualities as objective. Misreading thus became a problematic concept. Which of several readings was the most 'successful' might be settled by a rhetorical free-for-all, but the criteria for deciding 'right readings' were not clear.

E.D. Hirsch noticed this fact and argued it eloquently in his 1967 book, *Validity in Interpretation*. Stripped of its authorial intention, Hirsch argued, the word 'meaning' ceases to mean anything, and there is no misreading:

> When disagreements occur, how are they to be resolved? Under the theory of semantic autonomy they cannot be resolved, since the meaning is not what the author meant, but 'what the poem means to different sensitive readers' [T.S. Eliot]. One interpretation is as valid as another, so long as it is 'sensitive' or 'plausible'. . . . If the meaning of a text is not the author's, then no interpretation can possibly correspond to *the* meaning of the text, since the text can have no determinate nor determinable meaning.[2]

Just a whiff of Hirsch's powder cleared the boulevards. Within a few years, no one could be found who would confess to being a New Critic. Yet Hirsch failed to achieve his real objective: a return to the Gold Standard of authorial intention, whose inaccessibility, ambiguity, and frequent irrelevance Wimsatt and Beardsley had demonstrated about as well as Hirsch had demolished the New Critical substitutes.[3] Or perhaps it is not quite true to say that Hirsch's counter-revolution failed; it might be truer to say that he helped fragment the field of literary study further. In Renaissance literary studies, for example, the 70s saw a decline in New Critical 'readings' of texts, and a return to work of a generally more historical nature, though less often biographical than contextual in method (*Paradise Lost* in the context of a 'tradition' of Protestant poetics, etc.). Yet critical high-flyers, especially those influenced by French thinkers like Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida, abandoned even the genteel pretence of looking for the *meaning* of the text, and began, in the name of freedom and critical

[1]William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy', in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, Kentucky U.P., 1954). The essay was first published in *The Sewanee Review* in 1946.

[2]E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Yale U.P., 1967), pp. 4–5.

[3]Authorial intention as a workable objective criterion of judging meaning is demolished yet once more in my essay 'Do Readers Make Meaning?', in S. Suleiman and I. Crosman, eds., *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton, Princeton U.P., 1980), pp. 149–64.