

The Nature of Literary Theory

Before moving on to describe some of the strategies for using this book, I would like to discuss the nature of theory in general and the problems associated with literary theory in particular. First, I want to make clear that literary theory is distinct from literary criticism, the latter being the practical application of the former. This book is concerned primarily with the theoretical principles and concepts that form the foundation for practical methods and strategies used in literary criticism. Since the 1970s, when literary theory entered a new phase dominated by philosophy, history, politics, and psychoanalysis, a number of introductory texts have emerged that seek to explain the tenets of the main theoretical trends – Marxism, Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Feminism, Cultural Studies, New Historicism, and so on. These many and varied trends have complicated greatly the task of understanding both the nature of theory and of the literary text.

Literary theory can be understood, as I have suggested, in terms of principles and concepts, strategies and tactics needed to guide critical practice. But at the same time, many literary theories have as an expressed goal the desire to inspire and guide social and political action. Moreover, students of theory might see a rift in the historical development of the late twentieth century between text-based theories like the New Criticism, Structuralism, and Post-structuralism and historicist theories like Marxism, Feminism, New Historicism, and Post-colonialism. In both of these very broad contexts, theory is understood as fundamentally different: in one, it is restricted to the analysis of language, rhetoric, signs or other systems of signification; in the other, it is directed towards a critique of social, cultural, and historical conditions and the way these conditions are reflected in and altered by cultural forms like literary texts.

The differences in method and object of study are often complicated by ideological differences. For example, a New Critical or Deconstructionist approach to literature might strike some readers as conservative or apolitical, while a Marxist or feminist approach might appear radically progressive or even insurrectionary. The methodological and ideological differences multiply once individual theories are examined closely, for each theory has its own complex history of relations with more general theories of society, politics, language, knowledge, history, psychology, and gender.

There is one common element, however; practitioners of all the various theories tend to think in a certain way. Broadly speaking, thinking theoretically might be considered a paradigm for thought itself, at least that form of thought used to understand complexities in the physical and metaphysical worlds. A working definition might run as follows: theory is the capacity to generalize about phenomena and to develop concepts that form the basis for interpretation and analysis. The mode of thought suggested by this working definition involves the ability first to think generally about a given set of phenomena (language, social relations, women's experience, the novel as a form); second to develop theoretical concepts (or models) based on assumptions and principles governing the inclusion of elements within the set and the relations between those elements; and, finally, to use these concepts as the starting point from which to interpret and analyze specific instances within a set.

A natural scientist will use theory in ways that will yield precise, verifiable, repeatable results; a literary scholar will use it in order to make informed and plausible interpretations that may not be precise, verifiable, or repeatable. To speak of "using" literary theory is to speak of how to recognize and effectively address theoretical problems when they arise in the process of reading. In fact, knowing that one is reading a "literary" text is the first step in this process. The other steps vary, of course, according to which theory is being employed and, indeed, according to how the same theory is applied by different critics. It would be difficult, in contemporary literary theory, to achieve the kind of stability, uniformity, consistency, and universality that science achieves across social and cultural contexts. Theory inevitably reflects the social world in which theorists operate; but whereas scientists act on the assumption that scientific theory is unaffected by ideology, literary theorists make the point that theory is a product of ideology, that all

theorists operate from specific ideological positions. The same can be said for the literary text, which is the product of a particular person or persons in a particular society and culture at a particular time. Literary theory can help us understand both the particular contexts and the ideological points of view that help shape literary texts. We can discern, within practical limits, a good deal about the social and political attitudes of the producers of such texts and the kinds of experiences they make available to the reader.

For example, if one is interested in the social or cultural context of a Dickens novel, a Marxist theory would be useful in explaining the author's ideological position and his attitude towards class formations and social problems like poverty; it would also help determine whether the novel in question was read as social criticism or whether it was received primarily as harmless comic realism meant to shore up the social status quo. However, it is important to stress that within a given theory there may be several divergent points of view and methodologies. Thus, one reader of Dickens's Hard Times might apply Leninist assumptions and principles and speak mainly of economic disparities and class conflict, while another might draw on Louis Althusser's poststructuralist "post"-Marxism in order to discuss the formation of the social SUBJECT under ideological pressures.

Another way in which literary theory differs from theoretical practices in scientific domains is that it is more likely to be bound up in myriad ways with more general (i.e., non-literary) theories (of knowledge, of the mind, of interpretation, of desire, of power, and so on). Any attempt to define literary theory that does not explore and describe the relations between general theories and particular (i.e., literary) theories – or between and among particular theories – is bound to be incomplete; the outcome of such an attempt will be a theory cut off from the general PROBLEMATIC in which it has a context and a history. Unlike scientific theories, in which new discoveries tend to displace old ones, literary theories proliferate, with multiple and contesting versions of a given general theory (for example, Marxism or Psychoanalysis) existing simultaneously and with equal claims to validity. This exercise could be repeated with other general theories as well as with the more specialized theories that evolve from them. But, as with the differences between theories, the differences that arise within the conceptual or historical development of a single theory have to do with the construction of new or the modification of existing assumptions and principles.

The activities of thinking and working theoretically remain fairly constant. Even theories that attack the very possibility of generalization are grounded on the general principle that generalities are useless. This leads me to address the problem of style in theory. Many readers are put off by the obscure terms, difficult locutions, allusiveness, self-reflexiveness, and linguistic play that they find in so much theoretical discourse. Deconstruction, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Marxist theory, Postcolonial theory – all are targets of criticism for stylistic extravagance, logical incoherence, or doctrinal rigidity. To some extent, a specialized vocabulary or a special mode of argumentation or even phrasing is vitally important for theorists addressing new problems which cannot be adequately treated within a discursive framework that is itself, in many cases, the target of critical analysis. I refer here to a framework of Enlightenment thinking, characterized by a universalized subject of knowledge, an empirical orientation to phenomena, and a belief in the universality and instrumentality of reason. In such a critical project, a clear and forthright style could be said to reflect an epistemological self-assurance with respect to the material world that Enlightenment thinkers desired so strongly to master. Contemporary literary theorists for the most part refuse to allow their arguments to fall into this comfortable framework. To be sure, some theorists use obscure terminology or affect a difficult style in order to follow a fashionable trend or mask a trivial or incoherent argument; in such cases, readers are not mistaken in referring to jargon or obscurantism.

Literary interpretation, like any other mode of intellectual inquiry, is subject to the more or less intangible influences of political outlook, gender, social class, race and ethnicity, religious belief, and a host of other social and cultural determinants. Recent developments in the

history of science have revealed that even the ostensibly objective methods of science are not immune to such determinations. These developments may result, in time, in substantial modifications to how science is conducted, but for the vast majority of scientists and lay people, scientific method continues to achieve objective results. If literary theory does not seek “objective results,” what then does it seek? To answer this question, I want to consider the putative object of literary theory: literature.

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The Practice of Theory

The history of literary theory is a history of changing notions of reading and interpretation and changing notions of what constitutes literature and the literary. In this book, the term literary theory is used to cover an array of principles and assumptions that govern theoretical reflection on the nature and function of literary works. One of my working assumptions, as I have already suggested, is that literary theory often develops out of the application of a more general theory (of art, culture, language and linguistics, aesthetics, politics, history, psychology, economics, gender, and so on) to literary works in the interests of a specific critical aim. Literary theory thus grows out of this experimentation with concepts, terms, and paradigms taken from other spheres of intellectual activity. This emergence and the nature of the relations that are subsequently formed contribute to the disciplined nature of most literary theories. In literary studies, this idea of discipline is concerned with (i) the criteria and limits of critical practice, and (ii) the nature and function of the literary object within its historical and social contexts. Literary theory does not possess absolute criteria with regard to the nature, meaning, and significance of literary texts. What it does possess is a set of principles and assumptions that go into reading such texts. If there is “truth” to be had from literature, it is very much bound up with the historical experiences that produce the author and the reader. Like literature, literary theory is always the product or effect of historical conditions, even when a given theory appears “ahistorical”; chief among these conditions are a context of received ideas, intellectual traditions, academic conventions as well as the complex matrices of social and political relations and forces. The university is where these conditions are most often found together nowadays. The “special” status of the literary text, then, is attributable not to its essential qualities but rather to the reader who reads it according to (more or less) coherent theoretical principles, which are rarely acquired nowadays outside the university. When a new or neglected text comes to light, the scholar’s curiosity and skill – sharpened and improved by experience and discipline, by specialized training in strategies of reading and interpretation – are brought to bear in ways unique to the academic reader. An undergraduate English major, a graduate student, a professor of literature all read in similar ways texts that have been created by the specialized reading practices they share. General readers are more or less cognizant of these special ways of reading; conversely, professional readers have become increasingly aware of and sensitive to the ways of reading (no less special, to be sure) to be found among general, non-academic readers. Some academic readers pride themselves on abolishing the distinction between the two kinds of reader; but this perhaps laudable critical gesture flies in the face of evidence everywhere around us, not least in the gulf between seminar reading lists and airport bookshops.

Throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, literary theory found it necessary to develop new approaches to the analysis of traditional literary works as well as social and cultural texts that traditionally had been “claimed” by other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences but which are now being “read” by literary and cultural critics. This trend emphasizes both the profound importance of interpretation and the breakdown of barriers between discrete disciplines, a breakdown that has led to the sharing of theories and interpretive practices and to the formation of new interdisciplinary fields of inquiry. Literary theory has long been in the avant-garde of the trend towards interdisciplinarity. Innovative thinkers like Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Pierre Bourdieu have contributed to the creation of interdisciplinary spaces for the analysis of complex cultural formations of knowledge and power that

cannot be adequately described, much less analyzed, from the perspective of a single discipline. Interdisciplinarity entails relations of combination, contiguity, intersection, and imbrication between and among coherent disciplines. But there is also a self-critical element to interdisciplinary approaches, since the possibility that disciplines can be breached easily and productively calls into question the nature and necessity of the boundaries that delimit what counts as a discipline. The implications of interdisciplinary inquiry on the construction of curricula, canons, and professional review processes are at this date still far from clear.

Many literary theories can, with surprisingly little modification, be applied to a wide range of cultural forms, events, structures, and spaces. For the literary text is not necessarily a work of literature (whatever it is we mean by this term); it can be any “thing” or any signifying practice capable of being subjected to interpretation. The typical student in a modern university today is well aware that films and advertisements, video games and the internet, musical compositions and fashion, historical events and soccer crowds (the possibilities are truly endless) – all can be “read” in much the same “literary” way that one might read a novel by Jane Austen or a play by William Shakespeare. The AMBIVALENCE of the literary text effectively models the critical challenge literary theory offers to disciplinary boundaries. In part, this is the result of Poststructuralism, which made the analytical tools of literary theory available to a wide variety of disciplines. When theorists outside literature departments adapt literary theories to the study of “non-literary” social and cultural texts, they typically modify the methods and strategies of interpretation to fit the signifying systems under analysis. What is uniform is a consciousness of medium (of using language or images or sounds or spaces) and general methods of interpretation and critical understanding. The discipline of Cultural Studies emerged in the 1980s (more or less) in response to this notion that culture and its products can be read and interpreted in a literary way; and many other theoretical disciplines have been transformed by this idea of the literary. The richness and flexibility of interpretation is one of the principal reasons that literary theory has had such a profound impact on our contemporary ways of perceiving society, cultural production, and human relationships.

Reference:

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