The question of 'literary theory

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Abstract

What is 'literary theory'? How has it developed? What does it do? Why is it necessary, and/or what is it good for? What are the arguments for it and why the resistance to it? Is it, in fact, an 'it at all, a single definable entity or phenomenon? All of these questions sound as if they belong in an exam; none of them are easy to answer, certainly not in so short a space as a foreword or introduction. But I want to begin by outlining very broadly a few responses.

Introduction

In their challenging, ground breaking An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory: Key Critical Concepts, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle offer the following comment: 'Literary theory is an unavoidable part of studying literature and criticism. But theory - especially when it takes the form of "isms" can often be intimidating or else, frankly boring' (1995). Without risking a definition of 'literary theory', Bennett and Royle manage succinctly to identify their subject's conventional location and reception. While the authors scrupulously avoid all immediate determination of the phrase in question as an interesting rhetorical strategy resistant to a somewhat normative institutional practice, nonetheless they provide an insight into that which we are calling 'literary theory' as possibly understood to exist and having a recognized and recognizable situation and role which belongs and is subordinate to the function, organization and place of the university.

Therefore, while Bennett and Royle are correct in their identification of the intimidating and boring aspect of this badly-named thing, it has to he said that, from their comment we can risk the strong reading that 'literary theory' has assumed its identity specifically in the context of higher education. ('Why are, however, another question, and another matter, which has far less - if anything - to do with academics who teach it as a subject defined by a curriculum than with the: organization and the politics of the institution. This is especially the case when the reaching of 'theory' has resolved itself into the dissemination and explication of 'isms' (see the commentary on 'post-structuraism' in the essay on deconstruction). Of course, as Matlin McQuillan has argued, 'high theory as a form of knowledge like any other-exists to be

encountered, learned and taught' (1999;"384). A corollary Of this IS at pedagogical practice implies Selection' (McQuillan, 1999, 384), and in this process selection there is, equally, an act of the accommodation of those aspects of theoretical discourse which are most easily assimilated. Part of this assimilation is naming and, with that, the imposition of an identity and the concomitant erasure of differences. The application of those names which share the suffix 'ism' are thus involved in assembling a family portrait. The various praxes of critical analysis become subsumed within the pragmatics of a 'general likeness' rheumy of knowledge and use-value necessary for the practical day-to-day operation of places of higher education - and this is especially the case in England today where there is, more and more. an emphasis on 'learning outcomes' and 'transferable skills' - while, simultaneously, constructing an aura around the various discourses of so-called 'literary theory' by which these discourses are maintained at a certain distance, familiarized and yet never quite at home.

Literary theory is, then, and in as brood and neutral a definition as possible, the name given to a range of disparate critical practices and approaches which are used by members of the humanities in the exploration of literary texts, films and aspect of contemporary and peer cultures. Literary theory is also a name given to the teaching of such practices and approaches in the university, particularly in English departments. Literary theory is an umbrella term which gathers together conveniently and for the purpose of identification or definition various texts concerned with the study of literature and culture by. Amongst others, feminists, Marxists, and those who teach literature, but are interested in certain branches of linguistics, psychoanalysis or philosophy.

Historically, literary theory as a convenience term or label, defines work influenced by the practices, discourses {language and its power relations within specific disciplines and texts of feminism. Marxism, psychoanalysis, linguistics, semiotics (the study of signs) and continental philosophy of the last 40 years, including all the various disciplines, fields and, again, discourses , ideas and approaches gathered together under the label 'structuralism' or 'post-structuralism'. This last term is a particular example of a now widespread 'ism' generated during the late 1960s in the Anglo-American academic world for the purpose- of identifying a quite often radically heterogeneous range of analytical practices of critics, philosophers, historians and psychoanalysts from France which were first being encountered universities In Great Britain and the United States. Literary theory, owned as belonging to both literary criticism and literary studies, has come into being as a subject on the curriculum during the same period. It may well be the case, as some critic claim, that literary theory has

been around as long as there has been literature, even if it has been termed 'poetics' for example. However, aside from the fact that such remarks are not really helpful, it remains the case that the advent of courses concerning themselves with 'theory' first occurs in the 1970s. Literary Theory has been therefore the name given to a number of different, differing, occasionally overlapping or related ways of reading and interpreting, and is defined thus for economical purposes, first within the university, and subsequently beyond the university, in publishers' catalogues, in reviews, journals and news media.

Before moving on to the next question, 'How has it developed? 1 would like to point to what is, for me, a problem with me term 'literary theory'. As everything in the previous paragraph should suggest, (he nature of so-called literary theory is complex and multiple. There is more than one aspect or identity for/to literary theory. Hence the plural used in the title of this volume:

'Literary Theory' is problematic for me because it names a singular object or point or focus. However implicitly, 'literary theory' names a single focal point, rather than something composed, constructed or comprised of many aspects or multiple, often quite different identities. If we name several identities or objects as one, not only do we not respect the separateness or singularity of each or those subjects or identities, we also move in some measure towards erasing our comprehension of the difference between those objects and identities, making them in the process invisible.

Indeed some would say that the ace of providing a single name or single identity is done precisely to make thing simple for ourselves, or for whoever does the naming. If we can reduce, say, feminist literary criticism, Marxist literary criticism, psychoanalytic approaches to literature, to 'literary theory', we have a catch-all term which puts everything together effortlessly. The act or naming implies a great power for whoever controls the act, whoever has the ability. At the same time, the act of naming does a degree of violence to the different objects. In making the different identities all the same, we make them manageable, we contain them. We don't respect their differences, we make me a little bit easier for ourselves.

This may seem to be making too much of this question of a single identity, but the harm implicit in such an act cannot be underestimated. The importance of the point can be seen if we think for a moment, not of literary study but of attitudes towards cultures, or, even more Simply, if we name everyone who comes from some place other than where we arc from, foreigners. In doing so, we immediately engage in a way of thinking about the world which is

reliant on an ability to define, and separate, an 'us' from a 'them'. And as the example of 'literary theory' demonstrates, the act or separation is also an act of containment. All those feminists, all those Marxists, all those … well it's all just literary theory,

This leads me to the second question, though with a qualification, given that I wish to resist thinking about "literary theory in the singular. How has it developed? Let's begin straight away by saying that literary theory' is not an 'it' and precisely for me kinds of reason I've already suggested for at least implied. If we accept the argument that literary theory is composed of many strands. the question of how 'if developed can be: re-cast as 'how have theories developed?' various theoretical! approaches to literature have evolved and developed in pall bemuse in the twentieth century the Study of literature had itself developed from a limned range of perspectives, beliefs, and ideological or philosophical assumptions" which had not been questioned from other places and the proponents of which largely did not examine their own assumptions or grounds of articulation. This meant, in brief, that certain questions could not be asked about literature or even that only certain works were deemed worthy of study m the first place. Indeed, when I speak of 'theoretical approaches or otherwise use the potentially vacuous term 'theory', I wish merely to signal an analytical engagement with the process of reading from a number of different positions which respond to That which, in the names of criticism and reading, has been overlooked, elided, suppressed or silenced, consciously or otherwise.

Theoretical approaches developed, employing the language of other disciplines from outside the field of literary studies as a means of redressing the balance. of finding Ways of asking previously unarticulated questions, of responding patiently and attentively to those strange and strangely troubling moments in textual form and matter, and as a means of bringing back into focus texts which have been neglected, At the same time, theoretically informed approaches to the study of literature and culture provided various vantage points from which different 'voices' could be heard. Different identities other than these implicitly understood (Christian, humanist), Western, mille European in the conventional institutional approaches to literary study. Not all these: voices agreed with each Other, although out of the disagreement and debate came yet other inflections, further positions and identities. Yet mere ways of addressing what it is we call literature, as Ruth Robbins suggests in her essay, where she makes the point that there are various feminist discourses and philosophies, and that feminist themselves cannot, today as we enter the twenty-first century, be reduced to single feminism.

All questions of what has been termed 'Itinerary theory' come down therefore, as Martin McQUillan suggests, to questions of reading, even if the concerns of various reading-tare neither the same, nor reducible to an agreed understanding. Not just reading in the narrow sense of picking up a novel and gleaning the Story from it, rather 'reading' suggests a manner of interpreting our world and the texts which comprise that world. No one single manner of reading will do, so heterogeneous is the world. SO diverse are its peoples and cultures, so different arc the texts, whether literary, cultural or symbolic by which we tell ourselves and others about ourselves, and by which others speak to us about their difference from us, whether from the present, from some culture, or from the past, from whatever we may think of as our Own culture, Reading thus becomes heavily encrypted, if not haunted word, Apparently Singular, yet 'containing multitudes as It were, reading names as an act which cannot be reduced to a formula and therefore rendered in some abstract fashion as a theory. Every reading wilt, of necessity, is different from every other and this not least because every act of good reading to use J. Hillis Miller'oft-deployed phrase - is always a response to the singularity of the text being read. At the same time, no reading ever comes to an end, and if there is something shared, if there is resemblance between the various discourses of so-called literary theory, it is this: a recognition of the responsibility which reading entail when understood as a figure of incompletion, perhaps, an open system.

If reading then cannot be reduced to a. theory but is understood in McQuil· lan's and my own use as a complex renaming of what goes by the names 'theory', 'high theory' or 'literary theory', then 'theory' must perforce be comprehended differently, as both different from itself and in itself. 'Theory', as Tom Cohen has remarked, 'never quite meant "theory" to begin with, but a difference sort of praxis, One that, for the moment, we may call anti-mimetic, epistemo-political (1998, 7). To unpack this a little: whatever has gone by the name 'Literary theory' or is identified as such has concerned itself not with a view of literature as an undistorted representation of the 'world-as-it-is'. 'What nice, faithful, true descriptions of the English countryside Austen and Hardy provide us with' reads according to a notion of mimetic-aesthetic fidelity which occludes both the knowledge - the epistemological bases and assumptions - by which we recognize both the apparently prevailing 'truth' of descriptions by Hardy or Austen (Or Lawrence. or Forster, or …) and It's political dimensions (the recognition of and identification with a landscape as English, that is to say, marked in some mystified manner by the traits of supposedly shared national identity). Whatever the differences of so-called 'theory', the practitioners of these different, differing analytical praxes

share, however roughly, this 'epistemo-political' concern with the power or what reading effects, and what words can do in all their materiality. What is called 'Literary Theory' has no pretense co being a theory of anything. Indeed, in being grounded in analytical acts, the questions of reading with which we are here concerned seek either implicitly or explicitly to exceed, escape Of otherwise resist the generalizing and totalizing contours, the very idea, of a theory.

So-called theoretical approaches to literary study have developed and established themselves in part in the academic world, though not without often bitter struggles which still persist. as a means of comprehending, acknowledging and respecting heterogeneity and difference, rather than seeking to reduce the difference to One identity which is either a version of ourselves, a version of the same, or- otherwise as another which cannot be Incorporated into a single identity. This is what 'theoretical! Approaches to literary)' and cultural studies can do, what they are 'good for' to put it both baldly and pragmatically, it is also why they are necessary': as the beginning step in a process of revising how one sees, how one rends. Such approaches arc also necessary because they provide the means, as already remarked, for alterative voices, even dissenting voices, instead of being spoken for by some single authoritative voice, to challenge the power of those who had previously assumed the right to speak for all, whether in the form of a single, dominant political party or politician, Or through the voice of critic such as F. R. Leavis, who presumed to tell us mal there was a 'great tradition' in English literature ad what exactly did or did not belong to that tradition. The analytic approaches considered in this volume contest not only the composition or the tradition hut also the right of any one voice or group of aligned voices to argue for a single tradition, while, at the same time, share a primary focus, from their various locations, 'on what is powerful, complex and strange about literary works' (Bennett and Royle, 1995, ix).

One of the reasons why the various analytical practices with which we are concerned have proved challenging and provoking and have.' caused on some occasions hostile resistance is their insistence on addressing epistemological or ideological dimensions of the text in the act of reading, At the same time, such approaches to literature have led to both the broadening of the literary canon, the texts we study, and to the raising of questions, concerning, for example, race, gender, national identity, Which previously had not been asked - which could not be asked because of the implicit ideological and philosophical assumptions behind the $study of so called great literature. Forty years ago it would hardly have been understood as appropriate to raise the issue of either Shakespear's, or Dicken's depiction of Jew, Or women,

Today, Caliban can no longer be considered merely as a somewhat fantastic figure, the offspring of a witch; Instead, his role and the Tempest in general are explored in relation to questions of race, of miscegenation, and the cultural history of England's colonial expansion.

Another aspect of theoretical discourse which encounters objection is its difficulty, The obviously political question aside, there is, as Michael Payne points out (1991, VII) the sense, especially expressed by chose who are 'anti-theory' that it is, well, hard to read, drawing as it does on the specialized languages of other disciplines. As I discuss below, such a reaction has more to do with the challenge felt to the identity of literary studies as a 'single community' on the part of members of that community, than it has to do with theoretical discourse itself. Theoretical discourse often is difficult, not simply because o(the ways in which theories of literature an expressed but also because of the questions differing approaches of the Literary text demand we ask, often of ourselves and our understanding of what we think of literature, as 'good' or 'great literature, and how we Come to think of the literary in such a manner in the first place.

In the next part of this introduction, and in order to introduce the study of literary theories in the broader context of literary study in the universe, l turn to particular debates, using the work of Terry Eagleton as an example. Beginning with an epigraph, I draw on Eagleton's agricultural or rural metaphor as a means of introducing the debates around so-called 'literary 'theory'. Looking at how Eagleton has returned over the years from his position as a Marxist 10 question the need for theoretical approaches, I move from this and from Eagleton's own arguments to a consideration of the significance of theory and it's sometimes fraught relation to the more conservative elements in the institution of literary study.

Following Eagleton's metaphors as a means of addressing the movement of 'theory', I develop the idea of critical analysis as something which crosses over the border of literary studies from other place. In doing so, I suggest that the various identities of theories being perceived as "foreign' to some 'native' identity of literary studies, have had to undergo some form of naturalization process, Some reinvention of their identities in order to allow them into the field of literary studies. Yet, this being the case, it is now necessary to recognize What has happened and to find ways of reading, looking again at literary theories so as to return to the theoretical a sense of the radical difference of theories in order to question the very process of institutionalization which Terry Eagleton had been concerned with, back in 1976.

FROM THE COUNTRY TO THE CITY

... yet one more stimulating academic 'approach', one more well-tilled field for students to tramp ..

The epigraph - that sneaking rhetorical device which insinuates itself into the page between the title and the body of the text, and yet which has the hubris to assume the role of summarizing, encapsulating, the argument of the entire essay or book in n nutshell - is taken, as you'll see, from Terry Eagleton, In J976. Eagleton is bemoaning the possible, perhaps even inevitable, institutionalization and canonization of Marxist politics in the form of a literary approach to texts. Politics diluted to a method. In Eagleton's view, (he translation from the realm of politics to that of literary studies signaled some form of entry into academia, which was also n form of domestication for Marxism. To enter the 'United States of Criticism', if not of 'theory', meant that the discourse or practice in question had been suitably vetted, vetoed if and where necessary, and granted the requisite visa for entry into the land of literary studies. Therefore, Gary Day was inaccurate when he stated that theory imposes wor1ds ... it generates conformity' (Day, 1998. 25). If anything, we can sec from Eagleton's response that it is perhaps the world imposed by the academy on ideas which runs the risk of both instituting and generating conformity.

Eagleton's organic metaphor of the field and students tramping across the Marxist farmland is instructive, not least for the fact that such;) figure is readable, despite Eagleton's ostensibly oppositional political discourse, as being rooted, so to speak, in the epistemological soil of a discourse which is markedly English. It ties the practice of Marxism, once located within the study of literature and English departments, to an agrarian way of life, perhaps even one that is feudal. Marxism, once the wild and glorious countryside of ideological practice, has been transformed into manageable soil. Interesting also is the pessimistic manner in which the critic invokes hoards of ramblers pursuing their path unthinkingly across arable and fertile land. It does not seem to occur to Eagleton in his vision of the study of literary criticism and theory that there might be a form of crop rotation at work here, where a Jethro Toll-like figure (the agricultural theorist, nor the band) sets out the theory of circulating the seeds of Marxism, feminism and-so 00) in-order to produce a-varied crop and-so maintain-the fertility of the soil at the same time, through the process of rotation. Be that as it may, the field has been entered. The topographical image serves a useful starting point here. It speaks of lilt land, suggesting an act of trespass. The boundary line broken, the well-ordered soil is churned up; the field will need to be reworked.

This was in fact to be the case with Eagleton himself. For, only seven years after his concerned and somewhat cynical caveat, mere occurred the publication of a book which served, to a great extent, to change the outlook on literary study for a generation of students in Great Britain, Literary Theory: An Introduction. As is well known, Eagleton was the author of this book. Instead of standing by like some alarmed woodsman watching in disbelief as packs of day-trippers disported themselves in so cavalier a fashion across his land, here is me same author helping in the reconstruction of the lands ape. The landscape has changed, however, and we will find ourselves no longer, like Tess, rooting (or the dirt-covered crops of critical thinking, but being brought face to face with an imposing architectural structure

Beginning with the assertion that, if there is something called literary theory then there must equally be something called literature, about which theory can circulate, about which it can make its theoretical statements (1983, I), Eagleton traces the question or what is to be considered 'literature'. He concludes his introduction by stating, correctly, that what we term 'literature' relies for its identity on a complex and interrelated series of value-judgments relating to 'deeper structures of belief, the 'roots' or which are as apparently as unshakeable as the Empire State Building' (1983, 16). I'm not sure whether buildings have roots (I know they have foundations), but at least Eagleton's comment has the virtue of resisting obfuscation and occlusion concerning the 'materiality or language' (Cohen, 1998, 7), unlike Gary Day's remark that 'literature is the place where language can breathe and expand… literature visualizes' (1998, 25). However, if literature, Or rather its ideological, cultural and institutional maintenance, is now akin to the structure which supports an undeniably urban architecture, the implication is that 'theory' is there in order to comprehend the structure, the structures of the text and the deeper structures' out of which the structure of literature grows or is constructed. What is the purpose or a theoretical approach to the structure beyond merely seeing how the structure functions? Eagleton concludes his book, in a discussion of political criticism, by asking a similar question: 'What is the point of literary theory?' (1983,194). The brief answer is that literature is not value free, nor is it merely a question of aesthetic evaluation, as though aesthetic questions were themselves somehow outside the realm of the political or economic. As Eagleton puts it, 'the history of modem literary theory is part of the political and ideological history of our epoch ... literary theory [is] ... in dissociable bound up with political beliefs and ideological values. Indeed literary theory is

less an object of intellectual enquiry in its own right than a particular perspective in which to view the history of our times' (1983, 194-5).

Continuing, Eagleton points out-that 'Departments of literature in higher education, then, are pan of the ideological apparatus of the modern capitalist State' (1983, 200). The purpose of the various methods of criticism and theory is to work to expose the ideological apparatus, to show its workings and structures, and to question an immovable notion of literature', to understand 'literature' not as being distinct from other cultural forms or having some immutable and universal value, but as itself being the product of broader discursive and ideological practices. The feminist theorist, Eagleton argues by example, 'is nor studying representations of gender simply because she believes that this will further her political ends. She also believes that gender and sexuality arc central themes in literature and other sorts of discourse, and that any critical account which suppresses them is seriously defective' (1983, 209). Thus the purpose of the theoretical analysis of literature is not solely for the purpose of looking at literature in another way, taking one more 'approach'. 'Literature' and its conventional study arc wholly conventional constructs of the societies in which we live and the systems of belief which maintain the operation of those societies. The theorized - and for Eagleton, politicized - study of the literary is not an end in itself, but, rather, a means of making oneself capable of seeing beyond literature, to see how literature functions and is made 10 (unction in silent and invisible ways.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THEORY

I don't want to spend too much more time with Terry Eagleton (not because the debate is done; this is, however, an introduction, and we need to move on), bur because of his central significance to 'literary theory', it is necessary and instructive to take the measure of literary theory through brief consideration of Eagleton's move from worried skeptic in 1976 to advocate of the theoretical in J983, which is a wholly understandable move for the politicized critic. In a sense, this also helps to explain, in retrospect, Eagleton's adoption of various critical-political positions throughout his writing career; from Marxist to Althusserian Marxist, to postcolonial marxisc. Eagleton's breathless and trenchant politicall commentaries on the literary and its institutionalized positions have demonstrated the political necessity not only of adopting theoretical positions but also of shaping one's political response in different ways strategically as a means of resisting becoming solidified into a single position, which

itself is then accommodated by the 'ideological state apparatus". Eagleton's shift is part of an attempt to prevent the fall of theory into the hands of those who he sees serving the institutional and ideological needs of dominant discourses and structures. Theory in the 'wrong hands', any that of the 'dominant political order' {Eagleton, 1990, 37), becomes merely one more tool, one more weapon, involved in acts, to paraphrase Eagleton, of intensive colonization (1990, 36, 37). Who gets colonized? We do, says Eagleton, as subjects disciplined and contained within various social modes of production, in which modes of production literature serves, as an apparatus for colonization of the subject (l.9.9.0.-31). What this means is that, in being told that literature has a restricted range of timeless humanist values, which it is your purpose to comprehend through a literary education, you are being asked to accept these values as a form of truth. Thus, as a reader, you are 'colonized' through being asked to accept such values as your own. 'Theory', if divorced from often political contexts, can be transformed - if it has not been altogether rejected - into a merely formal method of proving the same or similar values as those produced by conventional criticism. On the One band, the result may be, as Bennett and Royle suggest above, intimidation and boredom. On the other hand, the will-to formalism has been generated within and as a symptom of an increasingly commoditized higher education system, where laming so-called 'theory' has gone hand in" hand with the production of courses which put, as it has been charmingly and accurately described, 'bums on seats ' (McQuillan et al., 1999, xi). This is not an either/or situation; intimidation, boredom and success, statistically speaking, can all quire happily accommodate one another in the same space.

However, if it is the cast that 'Theory's claims of radicalism arc greatly exaggerated, then by the same token the radical effects of Theory are greatly undervalued' (McQuillan et al., 1999, xi). Retaining the radicalism of the theoretical is, (or Eagleton, a means of comprehending the cultural, historical and material aspects of literary texts, while also providing forms of resistance [0 'colonization', ideologically speaking. The image of colonization is an impor-t:1JU one, (or it suggests the use of force to take over what is assumed to be a sovereign state. it speaks to the image in my ride of border crossings. Theory, (or Eagleton, and, indeed for me, provides a means nor only of understanding how borders get crossed, how locations become colonized and made to speak almost unconsciously in a voice we never realized we had (see Martin McQuillan in this volume on the novels of Jane Austen); the significance of 'theory' J (or Eagleton in 1990, is that it helps maintain 'radical ideas' in the face of the attempted erasure of those very same radical ideas in both Britain and the USA (t 990, 38).

Arrival

Those analytical and reading practices called 'theory' have always been understood, in various guises and manifestations, (0 have arrived from elsewhere. Most immediately, theory, in the forms of poststructuralist psychoanalytic literary criticism', 'deconstruction', is usually identified, in introductions, encyclopedias, guides and so on, as the result of the import of French theoretical discourses prevalent in thel960s, which subsequently became translated into English and into department of English There were also some German incursions, in the form of one version of reader-response theory, the influence of members of the Frankfurt School and other hermeneuicists, but the simple narrative of theory is: that its origins were markedly Francophone, if not specifically Parisian. Like so many tourists on a trip to Britain and the USA, theoretical discourses arrived, dressed themselves up in Anglo-American guise and had the nerve to Stay, long after the visa expired. What occurred is, as they say, history, bur English and criticism have never been the same since, and the change in the national identities of literary study has lasted now for more than thirty years. This is, of course, one possible, somewhat f3mili:1r narrative of the arrival of a range of analytical approaches. As: such, it has no greater claim to truth than any other narrative we might care to tell. Whether or not it is 'theory's founding myth', as Gary Day has somewhat archly overstressed it (03),,2000), I am not in a position to say. However, what is undeniable is that, on both sides of the Atlantic, a sea change began to rake place in English studies. However, this provisionally identified initiating instance of intellectual transition and, more specifically, the forms of resistance and struggle over the sites of criticism 'which have subsequently taken, and continue to rake, place (see Bennington, 1999, 103-22; Cohen, 1998, 1-7; Easthope, 1988; Kamuf, 1997) belongs to a much broader historical narrative of tension between Anglo-American and continental episteme-political discourses and institutions concerning matters of modernity and nation of which the struggle for criticism is merely symptomatic (sec Ackroyd, 1993; Easrhope, 1999; Math)', 2000)

Two commentator on the import of theory and the subsequent changes in literary studies arc Michael Payne and K. M. Newton, who provide us with historical-cultural accounts of continental analytical discourse, in the US and the British Isles respectively. First, Michael Payne:

Fundamental and far-reaching changes in literary studies, often compared to paradigmatic shim in the sciences, have been taking place in the last thirty years. These changes have included enlarging the literary canon not only 10 include novels, poems and plays by writers whose race, gender or nationality had marginalized their work but also to include texts by philosophers, psychoanalysts, historians, anthropologists, social and religious thinkers, who previously were studied by critics merely ns 'background' ... Many practicing writers and teachers of literature, however, see recent developments in literary theory as dangerous and anti-humanistic. (Payne, 1991, vi-vii)

Now K.M. Newton:

... theory or critical principles that have some theoretical base underlie any form of reading, even the most naïve of a literary text ... The reason that there is so much controversy and debate in literary studies ... is that critics and readers feel they belong to a single community, even though they may have made quite different choices as to how they read literary texts ... [However.] literary criticism ... is like a parliament ... in which two panics dominated ... \Vhat has happened to the 'parliament' recently is (hat this two-parry dominance has been threatened because numerous small parties have entered the parliament, depriving any single parry of an overall majority- ... Literary criticism is thus revealed as a struggle for power among parties ... The debate also has significance for society in general in that it raises questions that have implications beyond the purely literary sphere. (Newton, 1997, xv, xviii, xix).

Between Terry Eagleton, Michael Payne and K. M. Newton, you might get the sense that what is called literary theory is something to be feared; indeed many do fear it, often without knowing exactly what it is, other than it does derive from numerous disciplines outside literary studies, such as feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis and philosophy, and, worst of all, continental philosophy, not the good old, home-grown varieties of the analytical tradition in Britain Or pragmatism in the USA.

Another fear, already mentioned, both within and outside universities, is that (theory' is difficult, as Michael Payne suggests in pointing to the worries of the detractors (see Payne, 1991, vii), What could represent more of an affront than language about literature, about material which is supposedly part of a cultural heritage - that which puts the English in English Literature and also in English Departments - yet which is hard to understand? Canonical Literature should be taught either historically, from Beowulf to, well, Virginia

Woolf and cultural studies should be abandoned; or literature should be taught because of its timeless, formal and aesthetic qualities which transcend cultural and political issues; what we need is a sense of value. You can find letters of objection similar in content or tone in, for example, The New York review of Books, the Times Literary Supplement, the Times Higher Education Supplement, The Chronicle of Higher Education, even in non-specialist newspapers, such as The Guardian or the Los Angeles Times. What is the reason for this? Largely it's a question of media misrepresentation, because, to assume an Eegletonian tone for a moment, the newspapers and other forms of media are all part of the dominant order, they all serve in the colonization of the subject, of which Eagleton speaks.

Literary theory as the English translation of continental analytic praxes is, then, something '0 be afraid of, like so many illegal immigrant, like the 'contamination' of the English language with modish foreign words or, as far as some Britons are concerned, with the importation of Americanisms'. The fear of such discourse on the part of many, whether inside or outside (he university, is precisely a fear of the foreign, the alien, the intruder, that which gets across the national boundaries, that which crosses. the borders and comes to live in the homeland of English Literature, eventually taking it over, and changing its terrain forever. To borrow K. M. Newton's analogy, even the consensus politics of English literature is no longer a safe discourse between ruling parries, assaulted as it is by those who no longer speak t be same language. Literary Theory, So called, speaks in tongues, a Babelian hoard not even waiting at the checkpoints to have its passports stamped. Perhaps the most far-reaching challenge which the reading practices in their many forms gesture is the inadequacy of the representation of the literary on the part of traditional and institutional beliefs as the 'best' that can be known and taught, to paraphrase Mathew Arnold. And the extent to which 'theory' has already crossed the border, infiltrated the mother country of English Literature, is marked by, on the one hand, the native distrust of whatever 'theory' may be mistaken to be, and, on the other, the way in which the institution of higher education, as a representative of Eagleton's dominant social order, has sought to quiet the difference of analysis down, to domesticate it, to reify it in English departments.

One way in which 'theory' has been given its rabies shots, put into quarantine, and then, having been taught to sit up and pay attention, let into its new homeland, is through the establishment of courses on literary theory. This is an effective form of containment, because it marks 'theory' off from, say, Shakespeare or the Victorian novel as merely one more subject to study. In this form it has become that which Eagleton in 1976 feared it would: a series of

approaches (if this is week six it must be feminism). Even with the best will in the world on the part of those of us who teach on Literary Theory courses, the danger of such an approach is double: on the one band, we isolate 'theory' from its engagement with literature, because if the course is about 'theory', then to a certain extent, we have to crust in the student's -that's to say your-willingness to go away and address literary texts from theoretical perspectives. With so much to study, this doesn't always happen. Theory, that which is associated, in the words of Tom Cohen, 'with a philosophically inflected amalgam of programs interfacing linguistic concerns with the redefinition of "history" (or, for that matter, human agency, meaning, impositions of power, and so on), (Cohen. 1998, 5), merely ends up an adjunct of literary studies, an optional course (or those: who wish to take it. What could be better for those who fear 'theory' than this version of events? Theory in this guise is not going to represent a threat to anyone: or anything if it's put in its place. (This is assuming of course that what is a named theory is a threat; it may or may not be radical or political, but it is only a threat if you fear being asked to think differently from the usual tired complacent habits of thought and belief which can come to constitute an identity for you, without your awareness.)

On the other hand, the other form of 'theory's' institutionalization is its absorption into the mainstream. Take the following statement: 'These days most academics are, to some extent, theorized.' These are the words of an ex colleague. or as close to what he said as I can remember (though I believe it's fairly accurate). I'm not going to suggest that there is any overt agenda behind the utterance of this statement; in fact I believe it was uttered, as far as was possible for him, In absolute good faith. Yet, it can be read in a number of ways which suggests something of the institutional fortunes of 'theory'. While 'theory' may be contained through being given its own place in the curriculum as yet one more course, it can also be consumed, rendered relatively ineffectual and reduced to a series of formalist tools. To simplify greatly: the study of the function of metaphors and rhetorical figures has been replaced, as a result of, for example, the influence of Foucault and the Anglicization of his radical foreign identity, with the study of images-of the body, or of incarceration; aces-of policing, and .so forth feminism, to take another example, is merely, me examination of the depiction of women, of female characters and women writers. One can read the formalist, 'common-sense' domestication of 'theory' everywhere (not least in the name, the very idea, of 'theory') in literary studies, where 'domestication' means simply the replacement of old figures of analysis with newer ones, while maintaining the same principles behind the act of reading. If we are all, to greater or lesser extents, theorized, I hen the debates and battles,

spoken of by Newton, Payne and Eagleton, are won. Aren't they? Theory, in this formula, has done well and no longer needs to keep going on about political issues or to insist on being political. One can't keep waging a war with the foreign, so one has to find ways of accommodating it, always supposing of course that [his accommodation occurs according to one's own identity and values. If we are all more or less theorized, then 'theory' no longer has to be an issue? its erasure begun as surely as that of radical thought gestured towards by Eagleton.

Border Crossing

As if to anticipate the institutionalization and domestication of 'Literary Theory', critical theories have, repeatedly, energetically and ceaselessly, formed and reformed themselves, forging allegiances with, and involving themselves in, critical debate with other theoretical discourses, models, paradigms. There is no single literary theory, if there ever was, even though the anti-theorists make the mistake of assuming a single identity for theory. The application of [he title 'Literary Theory' is merely one form of domestication. The title operates to silence and erase differences, to hide contention, to ignore the complications, the heterogeneity, the protean energies, not only of disparate theories, but also within any supposedly single theory, such as, for example 'feminism'. As Ruth Robbins' title, '"Will the Real Feminist Theory Please Stand Up?' suggests, it is impossible to tell which the 'real' theory, if only is because, as she goes on to argue, there is no single true feminist theory. And this perhaps is feminism's, or any theory's, 'threat', that being hybrid, heterogeneous and protean, 'it' is not an 'it'; the theoretical discourse, by virtue of its own nature, resists all efforts at identification. This can be seen in any number of the essays in this collection. Martin McQuillan stares that there is no such thing as reader-response theory, precisely because what is called reader-response theory draws upon so many other theoretical discourses, and all theoretical discourses are, in a sense, responses of the reader. Postmodernism cannot be represented because the discourses called Postmodernism are themselves, so diverse and differentiated, while at the carne time, the discourse no Postmodernism is post-modernist discourse inasmuch as it seeks to stress or represent me un-represenrable. K. M. Newton's article on Roland Barthes and Structuralism similarly stresses that Barthes was a critic who never stood still, and could not therefore be pinned down as a structuralism critic (even supposing some simple identity called 'structuralism' existed" which. as Newton shows in differentiating Barthes from other structuralism critics, it did not).

Thus there are border crossings from one analytical practice to another, and within so-called theoretical positions. Indeed the mobility of - in and among, across - analytical configurations points to an active resistance to, erasure of, anything so simply, so reductively defined as literary theory or, even, particular theories' (supposing they can be defined as such) as discrete discursive. Epistemological phenomena or self-identical intellectual structures not already driven by internal fractures. Contradictions, paradoxes, aporia, silences and omissions, or otherwise hermeneutically closed off. To return to the image of countries and stares, theories exist in a state of productive tension, rather than in some utopian location of pluralist consensus, as is imagined by those, such as my previously mentioned acquaintance, for whom theory represents a club, determined to exclude those who don't know the language. it is not the case that there is the land of non-theory, and that of theory, w here, like the Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians, wars are waged over which end one's egg should be opened {a case might be made for the comparison to be made in terms of Yahoos and Houyhnhnms, although this is not the place to do so) even though anti-theorists such as Gary Day in England or, in the US, Alan Sokal and David Lehman - who typifies Anglo-American parochial distrust in remarking that the 'American lit-crit profession is slowly but steadily shedding its tweedy image in favor of foppish French fashion' (Lehman, J99J, 48) - might wish it were that simple (as their anti-theoretical narratives seem to suggest they do). Rather, theories cross each others' borders constantly; there arc borders, limits, the demarcation or lines, to be certain. But these get redrawn constantly, as you will see from the essays in this collection. For example, the effects and legacies of various structuralisms mark theoretical readings of textual forms in a number of places. Theories not only cross the borders of an assumed identity in order co demonstrate the unspoken assumptions which serve to articulate that identity in the first place, they also, to reiterate the point, cross and re-cross each other's borders, remapping their own boundaries as they go. It is perhaps this very sense of excess, and of the constant outgrowing of a self which so troubles those who need the definition 'Literary Theory', If only so as to keep 'it' in 'its' place, in their minds at least. 'Literary Theory' is itself a form of border erected so as to keep 'theory' contained. It names an act also of border patrol, of polishing, keeping the foreign, the other, the potentially dangerous under surveillance. The border patrol operates in a number of ways, for it seeks to erect a boundary within its own territory, rather than ultimately expelling the theoretical. To take the example of 'deconstruction', a very singular example unquestionably, and vet an example which serves to exemplify the treatment accorded all such singular examples, whether we name these feminism, Marxism, postcolonial or gay theories, the institutionalized response is summed up

by Peggy Kamuf Concerning the institution that is the university put in question by the PC debate, the term "deconstruction" is most often presumed to refer to a theory, a method, a school, perhaps even a doctrine, in-any case, some identifiable or localizable 'thing' that can be positioned-posed and opposed. Within that institution, but also that can be excluded from this defined enclosure' (1997).

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE TEXTUAL KIND

As Peggy Kamuf continues, what is more interesting than the reasons (or establishing boundaries - the reasons present themselves more or less obviously or immediately, as me reasons for identification and location - is the revelation of a certain unfigurable space ... the space for different kinds of effects' (1997, 141). I. is precisely the opening of a space, uufigurable by any border, - which does not have installed already within it as a condition of its structure the possibility of its own erasure - which gives rise of such animosity in the face of the perceived threat of theory or theories. Indeed, the use of the plural theories is intended to signal that the opening of the space is already underway. if the work of Jacques Derrida in a certain way, in a translated form, is remarked in queer theory or postcolonial studies for example, this is less a comment on the signal importance of Derrida's work to a number of areas and disciplines, discourses and practices in the twentieth century, than it is an exemplary sign of the opening of channels of virtual communication which pass easily across all imagined borders and boundaries. The virtualization of theoretical movements re-inscribes the space of the theoretical with a certain haunted quality, an uncanny effect as one of the possible effects described by Kamuf, in the unfigurable space of theories. Another effect, if it can he described this way, is to counter the formalization of critical thinking in the institution of literary criticism. For what has emerged have been new forms of political thinking, which, in adapting radical discourse and crossing the borders of literary study, have reinvented textual encounters, as the examples of postcolonial theory, queer theory and gay and lesbian studies, and cultural studies show. Critical practices such as these address not only questions of what we read, but also how we reread what we've already been told how to read. This is not to say that other theoretical discourses have not been political, have not messed the necessity for rereading in ways which seek to emancipate the differences of the text. Rather, it is to suggest that literary theories have responded to the immediate danger of institutional enclosure through redrawing the political lines of analysis, of textual encounter. The textual encounter has become one, once more, of proximity, the close encounter of the tide above. If theoretical discourse is markedly political, it has also, by virtue of its production of different

effects, come close to the text, to read with energy and urgency textual structures. With this in mind, each of the essays here speak to the question of the

interactions between philosophically inflected discourse, language and a rethinking of the historical or historial, along with matters of agency and power, the constitution of the subject and so on, in order to work with, and thereby move beyond, institutional definitions of the theoretical and its identified subsets, moving also towards the idea of reading in excess of the notions of 'a-f€l1lillism', 'a Marxism' and s forth. In doing this Introducing Literary theories endeavors to make available to its readers the possibility of coming to terms with the openness and energy made possible by the difference of the critical act, and to begin a process of crossing various epistemological, political and critical borders themselves.

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