



Beginning theory

An introduction to literary and cultural theory

Second edition Peter Barry

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Acknowledgements

You'd better not look down, If you want to keep flying

So says the great B. B. King. It is excellent advice, and trying to stick to it helped me to complete this book. I was also greatly helped by the advice and expertise of Anita Roy, Humanities Editor at Manchester University Press. Annie Eagleton was a meticulous and helpful copy-editor, and Alison Abel provided valuable help at the proof-reading stage.

Many of the chapters are based on material I used on the 'Introduction to Literature' and 'Concepts of Criticism' courses at LSU. The former is taught by a 'team-ministry' of various colleagues, whose comments and advice I have been most grateful for over the past few years. In particular, I must thank Gillian Skinner for reading sections of the manuscript and making a number of extremely useful suggestions, all of which I have acted upon. Nicola King supplied the 'What feminist critics do' checklist, and I have adopted this idea for all the chapters. Of course, all the faults which remain in the book are entirely my own responsibility.

Steve Dorney rescued me when my technical expertise proved unequal to the task of producing hard copy from my (as I thought) cunningly adapted disks. Marian and Tom enabled me to write the book by giving me frequent periods of study leave from Sainsbury's and 'Playdays'. The book is for my mother and in memory of my father, Francis Barry.

I will be most interested to hear from any users of this book who might wish to write to me (either via Manchester

University Press, or directly to English Department, UCW, Aberystwyth, Dyfed SY23 3DY, Wales, UK (ptb@aber.ac.uk). If anything in the book seems unclear, or unnecessary, or misrepresented, or wrongly omitted, or fails to acknowledge a source, I will endeavour to improve or rectify matters in any subsequent edition.

Sections of Chapter 3 have previously appeared (in a slightly different form) in *The Use of English* and *The English Review*.

Peter Barry

LSU

April 1995

Preface to the second edition

Since the first edition of this book (which was written in the earlier part of the 1990s) literary theory has continued to change and develop. To reflect these developments, I have added a new chapter on ecocriticism, making this the first book of its kind to register the increasing interest

in 'Green' approaches to literature.

Of course, my own feelings about the various kinds of theory have changed a bit too. In particular, I now find structuralism rather more interesting than poststructuralism, and to reflect this I have added a new chapter on narratology, a branch of structuralist theory which lends itself very readily to enjoyable and thought-provoking practical applications. Apart from these new chapters, the second edition is the same book as the first, but with up-dated bibliographies.

With my colleagues at Aberystwyth I teach on a range of theory courses, notably the 'RTRT' modules ('Reading Theory/Reading Text'), whose original twenty-seven mini-topics I helped reduce to four somewhat larger ones. This is more or less what the structuralists Levi-Strauss and Todorov wanted to do to the thirty-one narrative functions posited by Vladimir Propp (see Chapter 12), which shows how keen we are at Aber to apply the lessons of literary theory to our everyday teaching lives. I am very grateful to my colleagues and students for all the discussions we have had about 'RTRT', and to students on the 'Short Story' option over the past few years with whom the various theoretical approaches to narrative have been tried out.

The cartoon narrative on page 225 is supplied courtesy of Gray Dudek, Marketing Division of Pedigree Masterfoods, a division

of Mars UK 2001. I am very grateful to Matthew Frost at MUP for his tireless promotion of this book (which is now part of the 'Beginnings' series), and, for nearly everything else, to Marianne and Tom (who has graduated since the first edition from 'Play-days' to 'Gameboy Advance').

English Department, Aberystwyth

Introduction

About this book

The 1980s probably saw the high-water mark of literary theory. That decade was the 'moment' of theory, when the topic was fashionable and controversial. In the 1990s there was a steady flow of books and articles with titles like *After Theory* (Thomas Docherty, 1990) or 'Post-Theory' (Nicolas Tredell, in *The Critical Decade*, 1993). As such titles suggest, the 'moment of theory' has probably passed. So why another 'primer' of theory so late in the day?

The simple answer is that after the moment of theory there comes, inevitably, the 'hour' of theory, when it ceases to be the exclusive concern of a dedicated minority and enters the intellectual bloodstream as a taken-for-granted aspect of the curriculum. At this stage the glamour fades, the charisma is 'routinised', and it becomes the day-to-day business of quite a large number of people to learn or teach (or both) this material. There are evident dangers of over-simplifying things and so offering a false reassurance to students facing the difficulties of this topic for the first time. All the same, the main responsibility of anyone attempting a book

like this one is to meet the demand for clear explanation and demonstration. If the task were impossible, and the mountain of theory could be climbed only by experts, then the whole enterprise of establishing it on undergraduate courses would have been a mistake.

The emphasis on practice means that this is a 'work-book', not

just a 'text-book'. As you read you will find suggested activities, headed 'STOP and THINK', which are designed to give you some 'hands-on' experience of literary theory and its problems. You will not just be reading about it, reducing theory to a kind of spectator sport played only by superstars, but starting to do it for yourself. Becoming a participant in this way will help you to make *some* personal sense of theory, and will, I hope, increase your confidence, even if you suspect that your practical efforts remain fairly rudimentary. It is also hoped that the 'STOP and think' activities will provide the basis for initiating seminar discussion if this book is being used in connection with a taught course on critical theory.

All the critical approaches described in this book are a reaction against something which went before, and a prior knowledge of these things cannot be assumed. Hence, I start with an account of the 'liberal humanism' against which all these newer critical approaches, broadly speaking, define themselves. Likewise, the currently successful versions of Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic, and linguistic criticism all define themselves against earlier versions of each of these, and therefore I try in each case to explain the earlier versions first. I think that many of the current difficulties students have with theory arise from trying to miss out this stage. My approach amounts to throwing you in at the shallow end. Potentially this is more painful than being thrown in at the deep end - the technique used in most other student introductions to literary theory - but it does reduce the risk of drowning.

It should, perhaps, be stressed that the other general introductions to theory that are now available represent a stage on from this one. They offer an even and comprehensive coverage of the entire field, but with relatively little in the way of practical discussion of applications. I find them very useful, but they seem to me to be recapitulations of literary theory, often from a viewpoint more philosophical than literary, rather than introductions to it. The evenness of the coverage means that the pace never varies, so that there is no opportunity to stop and dwell upon an example in a reflective way. By contrast, I haven't tried to be comprehensive, and I do try to provide variation in pace by selecting questions, or examples, or key essays for closer treatment. Gen-

erally, the available introductions don't grapple with the problems of teaching or learning theory: until recently, the only two that tried to do so were Durant and Fabb's *Literary Studies in Action* and Lynn's *Texts and Contexts* (see Further reading section). Both these are interesting but eccentric books whose rather fragmented format prevents any real flow of discussion or explanation.

At undergraduate level the main problem is to decide how much theory can reasonably be handled by beginners. Time is not unlimited, and there is a need to think about a realistic syllabus rather than an ideal one. Theorists, like novelists, are dauntingly plentiful, and the

subject of theory cannot succeed in lecture rooms and seminars unless we fashion it into a student-centred syllabus. We are rightly dismissive these days of the notion of leaching a 'Great Tradition' of key novelists, as advocated by the critic F. R. Leavis. But Leavis's Great Tradition was essentially a syllabus, manageable within a year-long undergraduate course on the novel. It is possible to read and adequately discuss a novel or two by Austen, Eliot, James, Conrad, and Lawrence within that time. We need to make sure that what is presented as theory today likewise makes teaching sense.

When we are about to move into something new it is sensible to first take stock of what we already have, if only so that the distance travelled can later be measured. So in the first chapter of this book I invite you to look back critically and reflectively on your previous training in literary studies. We then go on to look at the assumptions behind traditional literary criticism, or 'liberal humanism' as theorists usually call it.

The term 'liberal humanism' became current in the 1970s, as a shorthand (and mainly hostile) way of referring to the kind of criticism which held sway before theory. The word 'liberal' in this formulation roughly means not politically radical, and hence generally evasive and non-committal on political issues. 'Humanism' implies something similar; it suggests a range of negative attributes, such as 'non-Marxist' and 'non-feminist', and 'non-theoretical'. There is also the implication that liberal humanists believe in 'human nature' as something fixed and constant which great literature expresses. Liberal humanists did not (and do not, as a rule) use this name of themselves, but, says an influential school

of thought, if you practise literary criticism and do not call yourself a Marxist critic, or a structuralist, or a stylistician, or some such, then you are probably a liberal humanist, whether or not you admit or recognise this.

In the course of explaining some of the major critical ideas now current, this book provides summaries or descriptions of a number of important theoretical essays. But I want to stress at the outset that it is important, too, that you read some of the major theorists at first hand. Yet as soon as you begin to turn the pages of Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, or Derrida you will encounter writing which looks dauntingly difficult and off-putting. How, then, to cope?

I suggest that it is much better to read *intensely* in theory than to read *widely*. By this I mean that you will gain little from reading chapter after chapter of a book that is making little sense to you. You will gain much more by using the same amount of reading time to read one crucial and frequently mentioned chapter or article several times for yourself. Having a detailed knowledge of what is actually said in the pages of a well-known argument, being aware of how the argument unfolds and how it is qualified or con-textualised, will be far more useful to you than a superficial overall impression gained from commentaries or from desperate skim-reading. However daunting the material, you have to make your reading meditative, reflective, and personal. Try to become a slow reader. Further, some intensive reading of this kind will enable you to quote lines other than the handful that are cited in all the commentaries. And most importantly, your view of things will be your own, perhaps quirky and incomplete, but at least not just the echo and residue of some published commentator's prepacked version. In a nut-

shell, intensive reading is often more useful than extensive reading. 'English studies' is founded on the notion of close reading, and while there was a period in the late 1970s and early 1980s when this idea was frequently disparaged, it is undoubtedly true that nothing of any interest can happen in this subject without close reading.

I suggest, therefore, that you try out for yourself a useful form of intensive reading, the technique known as 'SQ3R'. This breaks down the reading of a difficult chapter or article into five stages,

as designated by the letters 'SQRRR', or 'SQ3R', as is it usually given. The five stages are:

S - That is, *Survey* the whole chapter or section fairly rapidly, skimming through it to get a rough sense of the scope and nature of the argument. Remember that information is not evenly spread throughout a text. It tends to be concentrated in the opening and closing paragraphs (where you often get useful summaries of the whole), and the 'hinge points' of the argument are often indicated in the opening and closing sentences of paragraphs.

Q - Having skimmed the whole, set yourself some *Questions*, some things you hope to find out from what you are reading. This makes you an 'active' reader rather than a passive one, and gives your reading a purpose.

R1 - Now *Read* the whole piece. Use a pencil if the copy is your own to underline key points, query difficulties, circle phrases worth remembering, and so on. Don't just sit in front of the pages. If the book is not your own jot *something* down on paper as you read, however minimal.

R2 - Now, close the book and *Recall* what you have read. Jot down some summary points. Ask whether your starting questions have been answered, or at least clarified. Spell out some of the difficulties that remain. In this way, you record some concrete outcomes to your reading, so that your time doesn't simply evaporate uselessly once the book is closed.

R3 - This final stage is the *Review*. It happens after an interval has elapsed since the reading. You can experiment, but initially try doing it the following day. Without opening the book again, or referring back to your notes, review what you have gained from the reading; remind yourself of the question you set yourself, the points you jotted down at the *Recall* stage, and any important phrases from the essay. If this produces very little, then refer back to your notes. If they make little sense, then repeat the *Survey* stage, and do an accelerated *Read*, by reading the first and last paragraphs

of the essay, and skim-reading the main body assisted by your pencilled markings.

You may well have evolved a study technique something like this already. It is really just common sense. But it will help to ensure that you gain *something* from a theoretical text, no matter how initially forbidding it might be.

Finally, it will, I hope, go without saying that no comprehensiveness is possible in a format such as this. Clearly, also, this book does not contain all you need to know about theory, and it does not in itself (without the reading it refers you to) constitute a 'course' in literary theory. It leaves out a good deal, and it deals fairly briskly with many topics. It is a starter-pack, intended to give you a sense of what theory is all about, and suggest how it might affect your literary studies. Above all, it aims to *interest* you in theory.

Approaching theory

If you are coming to literary theory soon after taking courses in such subjects as media studies, communications studies, or socio-linguistics, then the general 'feel' of the new theoretical approaches to literature may well seem familiar. You will already be 'tuned in' to the emphasis on ideas which is one of their characteristics; you will be undaunted by their use of technical terminology, and unsurprised by their strong social and political interests. If, on the other hand, you took a 'straight' 'A' Level literature or 'Access' course with the major emphasis on set books, then much of what is contained in this book will probably be new to you. Initially, you will have the problem of getting on the wave-length of these different ways of looking at literature. As you would expect in studying at degree level, you will encounter problems which do not have generally agreed solutions, and it is inevitable that your understanding of the matters discussed here will remain partial, in both senses of that word, as everybody's does.

But whichever of these two categories you fall into, I want to assure you at the outset that the doubts and uncertainties you will

have about this material are probably *not* due to:

1. any supposed mental incapacity of your own, for example, to your not having 'a philosophical mind', or not possessing the kind of X-ray intellect which can penetrate jargon and see the sense beneath, or
2. the fact that your schooling did not include intensive tuition in, say, linguistics or philosophy, or
3. the innate and irreducible difficulty of the material itself (a point we will come back to).

Rather, nearly all the difficulties you will have will be the direct result of the way theory is written, and the way it is written about. For literary theory, it must be emphasised, is not innately difficult. There are very few inherently complex ideas in existence in literary theory. On the contrary, the whole body of work known collectively as 'theory' is based upon some dozen or so ideas, none of which are in themselves difficult. (Some of them are listed on pp. 34—6). What *is* difficult, however, is the language of theory. Many of the major writers on theory are French, so that much of what we read is in translation, sometimes of a rather clumsy kind. Being a Romance language, French takes most of its words directly from Latin, and it lacks the reassuring Anglo-Saxon layer of vocabulary which provides us with so many of our brief, familiar, everyday terms. Hence, a close English translation of a French academic text will contain a large number of longer Latinate words, always perceived as a source of difficulty by English-speaking readers. Writing with a high proportion of these characteristics can be off-putting and wearying, and it *is* easy to lose patience.

But the frame of mind I would recommend at the outset is threefold. *Firstly*, we must have some *initial* patience with the difficult surface of the writing. We must avoid the too-ready conclusion that literary theory is just meaningless, pretentious jargon (that is, that the theory is at fault). *Secondly*, on the other hand, we must, for obvious reasons, resist the view that we ourselves are intellectually incapable of coping with it (that is, that we are at fault). *Thirdly*, and crucially, we must not assume that the difficulty of theoretical writing is *always* the dress of profound

ideas - only that it *might* sometimes be, which leaves the onus of discrimination on us. To sum up this attitude: we are looking, in literary theory, for something we can use, not something which will use us. We ought not to issue theory with a blank cheque to spend our time for us. (If we do, it will certainly spend more than we can afford.) Do not, then, be *endlessly* patient with theory. Require it to be clear, and expect it, in the longer term, to deliver something solid. Don't be content, as many seem to be, just to see it as 'challenging' conventional practice or 'putting it in question' in some never quite specified way. Challenges are fine, but they have to amount to something in the end.

STOP and THINK: reviewing your study of literature to date

Before we go on, into what may well be a new stage in your involvement with literature, it would be sensible to 'take stock' and reflect a little on the nature of our literary education to date. The purpose of doing this is to begin the process of making visible, and hence open to scrutiny, the methods and procedures which have become so familiar to you (probably going back to the time when you began secondary school) that they are no longer visible at all as a distinct intellectual practice. But stock-taking is not part of our normal intellectual routine, unfortunately, and it is a difficult and demanding thing to do. Yet please do not skip this section, since theory will never make any sense to you until you feel the need for it yourself. What I would like you to do is to try to become conscious of the nature of your own previous work in English, by recalling:

1. what first made you decide to study English, what you hoped to gain from doing so, and whether that hope was realised;
2. which books and authors were chosen for study and what they had in common;
3. which books and authors now seem conspicuously absent;
4. what, in general terms, your previous study taught you

(about 'life', say, or conduct, or about literature itself).

Doing this will help you to begin to obtain a perspective on your experience of literature to date. Spend an hour or so doing it. I carried out a similar exercise myself as part of the process of working on this book, and some of the result is given below. It is intended more as a prompt than a model, and I have not responded in any systematic way to the four questions above. Reproducing it will perhaps help to 'personalise' the voice behind this book, but I leave you to decide whether you want to look at this before or after doing your own.

My own 'stock-taking'

Since literary theory is the topic of this book I will concentrate on detailing the course of my acquaintanceship with it. In fact, I heard nothing at all about literary theory as an undergraduate at London University in the late 1960s. I took a straightforward 'Wulf-to-Woolf' English course (*Beowulf to Virginia Woolf*) with compulsory Old and Middle English papers. Essentially, I now realise, the English course I followed in the late 1960s retained the shape and the outlook of the pioneer English degree courses established at London University more than a century before.

The one innovation in English teaching at London was to recognise the existence of something called American literature and to appoint a lecturer* to teach it. As a result of taking this American course I became an enthusiast for a range of American poets who were part of the 'alternative culture' of the time. At the same time, and for several years afterwards, I was also trying to write poetry of more or less this kind. It quickly became apparent that conventional criticism could make very little of poetry like this. So by the early 1970s I was beginning to look at newer critical approaches than those I had encountered at university. But I wasn't at that time an advocate of literary theory, since 'theory' as such was then a non-existent category in literary studies.

* The lecturer was Eric Mottram, who died in January 1995.

The change of emphasis seems to have happened in my own case around 1973, when the words 'structuralism' and 'semiotics' begin to feature in notes about what I was reading and in the titles of the books and articles I was interested in. Structuralism, we were then learning, was a new kind of literary theory which had recently become prominent in France, and semiotics ('the science of signs') was one of its sub-branches. I was loosely connected with the London Graduate Seminar started by Frank Kermode after he became Professor of English at University College, London. The group debated the work of the structuralist Roland Barthes and caught Kermode's enthusiasm for it. I bought and read everything by Barthes then in print in England, no great undertaking since all that was available was *Writing Degree Zero* and *Elements of Semiology*, probably his least interesting and least accessible books. His much more engaging collection *Mythologies* appeared in English in 1973 in the Paladin imprint. 1973 was also the year when *The Times Literary Supplement* devoted the major part of two issues (5 and 12 October) to a 'Survey of Semiotics', with articles by Umberto Eco, Tzvetan Todorov, and Julia Kristeva, major names in these new kinds of critical theory and encountered then (in my case) for the first time. This interest in theory was consolidated in 1981 when I was asked to devise a course on literary theory as part of the BA programme at my previous college, and, in turn, a decade or so of teaching that course has led to this book.

1

Theory before 'theory' -liberal humanism

The history of English studies

It is difficult to understand liberal humanism (that is, the traditional approach to English studies, see the Introduction, pp. 3-4) without knowing something about how English developed as an

academic subject. So this is the topic of the next few pages.

STOP and THINK

The multiple choice questions below indicate the scope of what is touched upon in this section. Underline what you think are the right answers before reading further, and then correct your answers, if necessary, as you read on:

1. When do you think English was first taught as a degree subject in England?: was it 1428, 1528, 1628, 1728, 1828, or 1928?
2. At which institution was English first taught as a degree subject in England?: was it Oxford University, Cambridge University, London University, Southampton University, or none of these?
3. Until the nineteenth century you had to be a member of the Anglican (Episcopalian) Church and male to take a degree in England. True or false?
4. Until the nineteenth century lectures degree courses in England had to be unmarried Church of England clergy. True or false?
5. Until the nineteenth century women were not allowed to take degrees in England. True or false?
6. In the early twentieth century women could take degree courses in England, but were not allowed to receive degrees. True or false?

To explain the rise of English studies we need to indicate briefly what higher education was like in England until the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The short answer is that it was a Church of England monopoly. There were only two universities, Oxford and Cambridge. These were divided into small individual colleges which were run like monastic institutions. Only men could attend them, of course, and students had to be Anglican communicants and attend the college chapel. The teachers were ordained ministers, who had to be unmarried, so that they could live in the college. The subjects available were the classics (ancient Greek and Latin literature), divinity (which was taken by those seeking ordination) and mathematics. Anyone who was Catholic, Jewish, or Methodist, or atheist was barred from entry, and hence, in effect, barred from the professions and the Civil Service. As far as higher education was concerned, then, you could say that right up to the 1820s, the organisation of higher education had not changed since the Middle Ages.

Many attempts were made to reform the situation, expand higher education, and introduce practical subjects into the curriculum, but they all came up against entrenched conservative forces. The breakthrough came in 1826 when a University College was founded in London with a charter to award degrees to men and women of all religions or none. From 1828 English was offered as a subject for study, and they appointed the first English Professor of English in 1829. However, it was not really English as we know it. It was mainly the study of English language, merely using literature as a source of linguistic examples. English literature as such was first

taught at King's College, London

(another college of what later became London University) beginning in 1831.

In 1840 F. D. Maurice was appointed Professor at King's. He introduced the study of set books, and his inaugural lecture lays down some of the principles of liberal humanism; the study of English literature would serve 'to emancipate us ... from the notions and habits which are peculiar to our own age', connecting us instead with 'what is fixed and enduring'. Maurice regarded literature as the peculiar property of the middle class and the expression of their values. For him the middle class represents the essence of Englishness (the aristocracy are part of an international elite, and the poor need to give all their attention to ensuring mere survival) so middle-class education should be peculiarly English, and therefore should centre on English literature. Maurice was well aware of the political dimension of all this. People so educated would feel that they belonged to England, that they had a country. 'Political agitators' may ask what this can mean 'when his neighbour rides in a carriage and he walks on loot', but 'he will feel his nationality to be a reality, in spite of what they say'. In short, learning English will give people a stake in maintaining the political *status quo* without any redistribution of wealth.

You can see from this that the study of English literature is being seen as a kind of substitute for religion. It was well known that attendance at church below middle-class level was very patchy. The worry was that the lower classes would feel that they had no stake in the country and, having no religion to teach them morality and restraint, they would rebel and something like the French Revolution would take place. The Chartist agitation of the 1830s was thought to be the start of this, and the first English courses are put in place at exactly the same time.

The conventional reading of the origins of the subject of English is that this kind of thinking begins with Matthew Arnold in the 1850s and reaches its height with the publication of the Newbolt Report on the Teaching of English in England in 1921. It is evident from material like Maurice's inaugural lecture that this was happening much earlier. However, I do not accept the simplistic view that the founders of English were motivated merely

by a desire for ideological control. This was undoubtedly one of their motives, but the reality was much more complicated. There was, behind the teaching of early English, a distinctly Victorian mixture of class guilt about social inequalities, a genuine desire to improve things for everybody, a kind of missionary zeal to spread culture and enlightenment, and a self-interested desire to maintain social stability.

London University degrees were taught by external licence at university colleges in major industrial cities - Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, and so on, all these places eventually becoming major universities in their own right. Hence the spread of the subject at degree level throughout the country. However, Oxford and Cambridge were suspicious of the new subject of English and held out against it, Oxford until 1894 and Cambridge until 1911.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century there was vigorous discussion and campaigning to establish a Chair in English at Oxford. In 1887 the first attempt was defeated largely because of a speech in the Convocation by the Professor of History, Edward Freeman. Freeman's speech is another key document: it touches upon several problems in English which are still unresolved. He said:

We are told that the study of literature 'cultivates the taste, educates the sympathies and enlarges the mind'. These are all excellent things, only we cannot examine tastes and sympathies. Examiners must have technical and positive information to examine.

This is a problem which has never been entirely solved in English. What, exactly, is its knowledge component? As a way of attaching specific and technical information to the study of English, early supporters had advocated the systematic study of language, but early advocates of English wanted to separate literature and language study, so that the one could be done without the other. Freeman's famous response was: 'what is meant by distinguishing literature from language if by literature is meant the study of great books, and not mere chatter about Shelley?' Freeman won the argument. Literature had to be studied along

with language, otherwise it would not be an academic subject at all. So when the English course was finally set up at Oxford in 1894 it contained a very heavy element of historical language study - Anglo-Saxon, Gothic, Letto-Slavonic, Middle English, etc., from which it has still not managed to free itself.

A greater sense of direction was given to English in the Cambridge English school in the 1920s. Because Cambridge English was the most recently founded, dating only from 1911, it had the least weight of tradition to fight against, so change was relatively easy. The engineers of this change were a group of people who began teaching at Cambridge in the 1920s. They were: I. A. Richards, William Empson, and F. R. Leavis.

I. A. Richards was the founder of a method of studying English which is still the norm today. Firstly, it made a decisive break between language and literature. Richards pioneered the technique called Practical Criticism (the title of his book in 1929). This made a close study of literature possible by isolating the text from history and context. Instead of having to study, say, the Renaissance period as a distinct historical moment, with its characteristic outlook, social formations, and so on, students could learn the techniques of practical criticism and simply analyse 'the words on the page'. The gain from this was that it was no longer possible to offer a vague, flowery, metaphorical effusion and call it criticism. Richards argued that there should be much more close attention to the precise details of the text.

A second Cambridge pioneer was a pupil of Richards, William Empson, who presented his tutor with the manuscript of the book which was published in 1930 with the title *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. This book took the Richards method of close verbal analysis to what many felt to be an extreme. Empson identified seven different types of verbal difficulty in poetry (which is what he meant by ambiguity) and gave examples of them, with worked analyses. Another Cambridge critic, F. R. Leavis, said in a review that it is a highly disturbing book because it uses intelligence on poetry as seriously as if it were mathematics. Not everybody liked this ultra-close form of reading. T. S. Eliot called it the lemon-squeezer school of criticism, and his own critical writing is always on a much more generalised level.

The last of these Cambridge pioneers was F. R. Leavis, probably the most influential figure in twentieth-century British criticism. In 1929 he met and married Q. D. Roth, subsequently

known as Q. D. Leavis. He had written his doctoral thesis on the relationship between journalism and literature. She had written hers on popular fiction. These were revolutionary topics, and a certain excitement and glamour attached to this couple in the 1930s. In 1932 they founded an important journal called *Scrutiny* and produced it together for twenty-one years. As the title implies, it extended the 'close-reading' method beyond poetry to novels and other material.

Leavis's faults as a critic are that his close readings often turn out to contain lengthy quotations on which there is surprisingly little comment. The assumption is that the competent reader will see there what Leavis sees. As has been said of him, he often gives the impression that he is analysing the text when he is really just paraphrasing it. Secondly, his approach to literature is overwhelmingly moral; its purpose is to teach us about life, to transmit humane values. His critical terms are never properly defined. He famously refused the invitation offered by the critic Rene Wellek in the 1930s that he should 'spell out the principles on which he operated in a more explicit way than hitherto'. The result was one more degree of isolation for literary studies. In the period of its growth just surveyed, it claimed independence from language studies, from historical considerations, and from philosophical questions. The consensus which held the subject together from the 1930s to the 1960s rested upon the acceptance of these demarcations. The 'project' of 'theory' from the 1960s onwards is in essence to re-establish connections between literary study and these three academic fields from which it had so resolutely separated itself.

Ten tenets of liberal humanism

The personal account on pp. 9-10 mainly responds to the second and third of the four questions given earlier. I'm now going to

expand on the implications of the fourth question, which asked what it is, exactly, that we learn when we 'do' English in the traditional way. Of course, we learn things about specific books and authors, but I mean here the more general values and attitudes which we absorb from English, and which remain as a kind of distilled essence of the subject when all these specific details have been forgotten. These are not usually formulated and stated, but they are, in a sense, all the more real for that, being simultaneously both pervasive and invisible. They can only be brought to the surface by a conscious effort of will, of the kind we are now trying to make. So what follows is a list of some of the elements which seem to constitute this 'distilled essence' of the subject, that is, the corpus of attitudes, assumptions, and ideas which we pick up, probably unawares, as we do it. These seem to have been what we were learning when we studied English - these are the values and beliefs which formed the subject's half-hidden curriculum:

1. The first thing, naturally, is an attitude to literature itself; good literature is of timeless significance; it somehow transcends the limitations and peculiarities of the age it was written in, and thereby speaks to what is constant in human nature. Such writing is 'not for an age, but for all time' (as Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare): it is 'news which stays news' (Ezra Pound's definition of literature).

2. The second point is the logical consequence of the first. The literary text contains its own meaning within itself. It doesn't require any elaborate process of placing it within a context, whether this be:

- (a) *Socio-political* - the context of a particular social 'background' or political situation, or

(b) *Literary-historical* - whereby the work could be seen as the product of the literary influences of other writers, or as shaped by the conventions of particular genres, or

(c) *Autobiographical* - that is, as determined by the personal details of the author's life and thought.

Of course, as scholars, most academics would assert the value

of studying these contexts, but as critics their adherence to the approach which insists upon the primacy and self-sufficiency of the 'words on the page' commits them to the process which has been called 'on-sight close reading'. Essentially, this removes the text from all these contexts and presents it 'unseen' for unaided explication by the trained mind.

3. To understand the text well it must be detached from these contexts and studied in isolation. What is needed is the close verbal analysis of the text without prior ideological assumptions, or political pre-conditions, or, indeed, specific expectations of any kind, since all these are likely to interfere fatally with what the nineteenth-century critic Matthew Arnold said was the true business of criticism, 'to see the object as in itself it really is'.

4. Human nature is essentially unchanging. The same passions, emotions, and even situations are seen again and again throughout human history. It follows that continuity in literature is more important and significant than innovation. Thus, a well-known eighteenth-century definition of poetry maintains that it is 'what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed'. Likewise, Samuel Johnson famously denigrated Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy* on the grounds of its novelty, that is, its originality.

5. Individuality is something securely possessed within each of us as our unique 'essence'. This transcends our environmental influences, and though individuality can change and develop (as do characters in novels), it can't be transformed -hence our uneasiness with those scenes (quite common, for instance, in Dickens) which involve a 'change of heart' in a character, so that the whole personality is shifted into a new dimension by force of circumstance - the miser is transformed and changes his ways, or the good man or woman becomes corrupted by wealth. Such scenes imply a malleability in the essence of character which is at odds with this underlying assumption of English studies. The discipline as a whole believed in what is now called the 'transcendent subject', which is the belief that the individual ('the subject') is antecedent to, or transcends, the forces of society, experience,

and language.

6. The purpose of literature is essentially the enhancement of life and the propagation of humane values; but not in a programmatic way: if literature, and criticism, become overtly and directly political they necessarily tend towards propaganda. And as Keats said, 'we distrust literature which has a palpable design upon us', that is, literature which too obviously wants to convert us or influence our views.

7. Form and content in literature must be fused in an organic way, so that the one grows inevitably from the other. Literary form should not be like a decoration which is applied externally to a completed structure. Imagery, for instance, or any other poetic form which is detachable from the substance of the work in this way, rather than being integrated with it, is merely 'fanciful' and not truly 'imaginative' (the distinction made by Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria*).

8. This point about organic form applies above all to 'sincerity'. Sincerity (comprising truth-to-experience, honesty towards the self, and the capacity for human empathy and compassion) is a quality which resides *within* the language of literature. It isn't a fact or an intention *behind* the work, which could be gleaned by comparing, say, a poet's view of an event with other more 'factual' versions, or from discovering independent, external information about an author's history or conduct. Rather, sincerity is to be discovered within the text in such matters as the avoidance of cliché, or of over-inflated forms of expression; it shows in the use of first hand, individualistic description, in the understated expression of feeling, whereby (preferably) the emotion is allowed to emerge implicitly from the presentation of an event. Moreover, when the language achieves these qualities, then the truly sincere poet can transcend the sense of distance between language and material, and can make the language seem to 'enact' what it depicts, thus apparently abolishing the necessary distance between words and things.

9. Again, the next idea follows from the previous one. What is valued in literature is the 'silent' showing and demonstrating of something, rather than the explaining, or saying, of it.

Hence, ideas as such are worthless in literature until given the concrete embodiment of 'enactment'. Thus, several of the explicit comments and formulations often cited in literary history contain specific denigrations of ideas as such and have a distinct anti-intellectual flavour to them. Here we see the elevation of the characteristic 'Eng Lit' idea of *tactile enactment*, of sensuous immediacy, of the concrete representation of thought, and so on. According to this idea (which is, of course, itself an idea, in spite of the fact that the idea in question is a professed distrust of ideas) words should mime, or demonstrate, or act out, or sound out what they signify, rather than just representing it in an abstract way. This idea is stated with special fervency in the work of F. R. Leavis. (For a critique of the 'enactment' idea see 'The Enactment Fallacy', by the present author, in *Essays in Criticism*, July 1980. For a general discussion see James Gribble's *Literary Education: a Re-evaluation*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, chapter 2). 10. The job of criticism is to interpret the text, to mediate between it and the reader. A theoretical account of the nature of reading, or of literature in general, isn't useful in criticism, and will simply, if attempted, encumber critics with 'preconceived ideas' which will get between them and the text. Perhaps in this phrase 'preconceived ideas' we get another glimpse into the nature of this pervasive distrust of ideas within liberal humanism, for there seems to be the notion that somehow *all* ideas are 'preconceived', in the sense that they will come between the reader and text if given half a chance. There is, in fact, the clear mark here of what is called 'English empiricism', which can be defined as a determination to trust only what is made evident to the senses or experienced directly. Ultimately this attitude goes back at least to the philosophy of John Locke (1632-1704), which gives a philosophical expression to it. His book *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) puts forward the view that ideas are formed when direct sense impressions from the world are imprinted on the mind. The mind then

assembles these, so giving rise to the process of thinking. Locke rejected introspective speculation as a source of valid knowledge and

insisted on the need for direct experience and evidence of things. Traditional English studies, we might say, has always been Lockean in this sense.

The above list contains a series of propositions which I think many traditional critics would, on the whole, subscribe to, if they were in the habit of making their assumptions explicit. Together, ideas like these, and the literary practice which went with them, are now often referred to as 'liberal humanism'.

Literary theorising from Aristotle to Leavis -some key moments

So far I have perhaps given the impression that theoretical positions about literature were never explicitly formulated by liberal humanists, at least in Britain, and that everything remained implicit. Yet a widely current body of theoretical work existed from the start within English studies, and references were often made to it in books and essays. The average student or teacher of 'Eng Lit' up to the 1970s would probably have had a fairly limited direct contact with this body of work, since the whole thrust of the subject was away from this kind of generalised position-taking.

What, then, constituted the body of theory about literature that has existed for many centuries as an available under-pinning for the study of literature, even if literary students seldom had any extensive first hand acquaintance with it? Well, the material goes back to Greek and Latin originals. Critical theory, in fact, long pre-dates the literary criticism of individual works. The earliest work of theory was Aristotle's *Poetics*, which, in spite of its title, is about the nature of literature itself: Aristotle offers famous definitions of tragedy, insists that literature is about character, and that character is revealed through action, and he tries to identify the required stages in the progress of a plot. Aristotle was also the first critic to develop a 'reader-centred' approach to literature, since his consideration of drama tried to describe how it affected the audience. Tragedy, he said, should stimulate the emotions of pity and fear, these being, roughly, sympathy for and empathy

with the plight of the protagonist. By the combination of these emotions came about the effect Aristotle called 'catharsis', whereby these emotions are exercised, rather than exorcised, as the audience identifies with the plight of the central character.

The first prestigious name in English writing about literature is that of Sir Philip Sidney, who wrote his 'Apology for Poetry' in about 1580. Sidney was intent on expanding the implications of the ancient definition of literature first formulated by the Latin poet Ovid, who had said that its mission is '*docere delictendo*'- to teach by delighting (meaning, approximately, by entertaining). Sidney also quotes Horace, to the effect that a poem is 'a speaking picture, with this end, to teach and delight'. Thus, the giving of pleasure is here allowed a central position in the reading of literature, unlike, say, philosophy, which is implicitly stigmatised as worthy and uplifting, but not much fun. The notion of literature giving pleasure will now seem an unremarkable sentiment, but Sidney's aim was the revolutionary one of distinguishing literature from other forms of writing, on the grounds that, uniquely, literature has as its primary aim the giving of pleasure to the reader, and any moral or didactic element is necessarily either subordinate to that, or at least, unlikely to succeed without it. In a religious age, deeply suspicious of all forms of fiction, poetry, and representation, and always likely to denounce

them as the work of the devil, this was a very great step to take. In English too, then, critical theory came before practical criticism, as Sidney is writing about literature in general, not about individual works or writers.

Literary theory after Sidney was significantly advanced by Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* and *Prefaces to Shakespeare* can be seen both as another major step forward in critical theory, and as the start of the English tradition of practical criticism, since he is the first to offer detailed commentary on the work of a single author. Prior to Johnson, the only text which had ever been subjected to this intensive scrutiny was the Bible, and the equivalent sacred books of other religions. The extension of this practice to works other than those thought to be the direct product of divine inspiration marks a significant moment of progress in the development of

secular humanism.

After Johnson came a major burgeoning of critical theory in the work of the Romantic poets: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley. One of the main texts is Wordsworth's *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. What Wordsworth wrote in this preface was the product of collaborative discussions between himself and Coleridge. The introduction was added to the second edition of the ballads, published in 1800, after the first, of 1798, had been met with puzzlement. The book blends high literature and popular literature, since it contains literary ballads constructed on the model of the popular oral ballads of ordinary country people. The original readers of *Lyrical Ballads* also disliked the abandonment of the conventions of verbal decorum. These conventions had imposed a high degree of artificiality on poetic language, making it as different as possible from the language of ordinary everyday speech. Thus, a specialised poetic vocabulary had tended to enjoin the avoidance of simple everyday terms for things, and an elaborate system of rhyme and a highly compressed form of grammar had produced a verbal texture of much greater density than that of ordinary language. Suddenly, two ambitious young poets were trying to make their poetic language as much like prose as possible, avoiding the conventions of diction and verbal structure which had held sway for so long. Thus, this book is one of a number of significant critical works in literary theory whose immediate aim is to provide a rationale for the critic's own poetic work, and to educate the audience for it. It also anticipates issues of great interest to contemporary critical theory, such as the relationship between poetic language and 'ordinary' language, and that between 'literature' and other kinds of writing.

A second significant work from the Romantic era was Coleridge's misleadingly titled *Biographia Literaria*. The title might lead us to expect a work like Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, but in fact much of it directly addresses the ideas contained in Wordsworth's *Preface*, showing by a close consideration of aspects of his work that Wordsworth writes his best poetry when he is furthest away from adherence to his own theories of what poetry should be. Indeed, in the years during which he and Coleridge had drifted apart as friends, they had also taken radically differ-

ent views about the nature of poetry. Coleridge came to disagree completely with the view that the language of poetry must strive to become more like the language of prose. He saw this as an

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