

Introduction

The Field of Literary Theory

There is a sense in which literary theory is just one thing: the formulation of general principles concerning literary texts or the practices associated with these texts. Most of our attention in literary study is devoted to single works, sometimes to the works of a single author, sometimes to the works of a single period. When we do literary theory, we try to rethink these practices, to reunderstand what we are doing in examining single works, authors, periods, and to reunderstand the nature of works, authors, periods, in general. On the other hand, the way in which such rethinking and reunderstanding take place is highly varied. Thus, when we encounter literary theory concretely—in interpretations, theoretical polemics, and so on—we encounter it, not as a single project, but as a multiplicity of particular ideas and practices, goals and presuppositions. To make sense of this multiplicity, we need to identify some clear and readily applicable organizing principles.

Perhaps the most basic and obvious distinction is that between *descriptive* and *normative* theories. All literary theories have descriptive and normative elements. However, some theories set out to describe aspects of literature, while others set out to judge them. The former are concerned with what literature, in its various aspects, is; the latter are concerned with what literature, in its various aspects, should be. For each category, I should like to distinguish two primary subcategories: the *theory of interpretation* and the *theory of literature* for the descriptive category; *aesthetic theory* and *ethical/political theory* for the normative category.

A *theory of interpretation* does two things: (1) It defines the object of literary interpretation: literary meaning. And (2) it establishes a method of determining, in specific cases, what that meaning is. In other words, it says what meaning is in general (the verbal structure of the text, the author's intent, the response of "competent" readers), and it says what critics can do to find that meaning for specific texts (look at image patterns, read

biographies, study histories). In short, a theory of interpretation, though a general theory, aims at isolating what is unique to individual literary works. A good theory of interpretation, when applied to *Othello*, will tell us something about what is particular to that play. A *theory of literature*, in contrast, focuses not on the unique, but on the common. It concerns the principles, structures, and so on, that are repeated across literary works.

Clearly, there are connections between the theory of interpretation and the theory of literature. Indeed, most theories of literature lead to at least partial theories of interpretation. For example, a psychoanalytic theory that explains literary creation by reference to Freud's account of dreams—a theory of literature that seeks to explain what all literature has in common—leads to the interpretation of particular literary works in terms of unconscious fantasy. On the other hand, it is important to emphasize the different goals of these undertakings, for if we do not keep this difference in mind, we may fail to recognize the value of one or the other undertaking and misjudge theories of that type. For example, if a theorist sets out to discover what all plots have in common, he/she is considering an important issue with ramifications for our broad understanding of literature, our knowledge of the human mind, and so on. However, the nature of the undertaking is such that it will probably not lead to terribly valuable or interesting interpretations of individual works. In consequence, if we judge such a theory by the criteria of a theory of interpretation, we are likely to undervalue it greatly. In other words, we risk a sort of literary theory version of the ugly duckling phenomenon—denigrating the theoretical swan because we insist on thinking of it as a duck.

Descriptive theories are meant to guide literary study, but not to guide literary creation or other sorts of literary decision. Evaluative theories, in contrast, are designed to guide literary creation, as well as our (evaluative) response to literature—including our practical decisions as to whether given works should be published, taught in schools, and so on. Again, there are two major subcategories of normative theory: *aesthetic theory*, which is concerned with what makes a literary work beautiful (sublime, aesthetically effective), and *ethical or political theory*, which is concerned with what makes a literary work ethically beneficial or politically admirable.

Literary theories are differentiable not only by reference to basic goals (interpretation, ethical evaluation, etc.), but also by reference to the primary objects of theoretical concern or focus. These too fall into a limited number of categories. Specifically, theorists tend to divide into one of three

general groups, depending upon whether they conceive of literature as primarily a matter of language, mind, or society. Thus interpretive theories might focus on the text (language), authorial intent (mind), or historical context (society). Theories of literature may look for common textual structures, shared authorial propensities, patterns of social development in the genesis of literature. Ethical theories might be concerned with the author's views (for example, whether he/she was racist), the likely social effects of the work (for instance, whether it is likely to foster racism), or the linguistic implications of the work. Aesthetic theories may address an author's emotional expression or textual structure or social reception—and so on.

Each of these categories may be subdivided. Perhaps the most consequential divisions are among mentalistic theories. These may be roughly organized into three groups—cognitive, affective, and experiential. Cognitive theories concern reasoning, inference, understanding, general procedures of human judgment, and so forth. Affective theories concern human feeling, impulse, everything that falls under the names “instinct” and “emotion.” Both cognitive and affective theories tend to have an “intrapyschic” focus. They tend to devote primary attention to the structure and operation of the individual mind. Experientially oriented theories, in contrast, concern the human mind in interaction with a material world and with other minds and focus on the physical and social relations into which the individual mind enters. Indeed, one could think of experiential theories as intermediate between psychological and social theories.

As this last point suggests, here as elsewhere, such approaches may or may not be mutually exclusive. Clearly, a theory of literature may be combined with an interpretive or aesthetic or ethical/political theory, even with all three. Moreover, a theory that focuses on language may or may not be at odds with a theory that focuses on cognition or society; it depends on the theories. Indeed, language-oriented theories are quite likely to be synthesized with mentalistic or social approaches. Some theorists conceive of language as autonomous, as relatively independent of individual mind or society. I shall refer to these more “pure” language theorists as “textualists” or “linguistic autonomists.” But other theorists who focus on language see language as ultimately bound up with or even a function of cognition, affective impulse, human experience, or social structure. Clearly, then, these categories are not antithetical or mutually exclusive.

Nonetheless, there is a strong tendency for any given theorist to focus on

one or another variety of object (social, mental, or linguistic). As a result, this provides a broad and useful, if to a degree loose, typology of literary theories as well.

In the following pages, I shall make repeated reference to these ways of organizing the field of literary theory. However, the volume as a whole is defined by yet a third principle, that of the disciplinary or subdisciplinary structures in which the theories in question are located. From the very beginning, most literary theories have not been simply literary. They have almost invariably involved the integration of literary concerns into the questions, and hypotheses, and methods of another discipline. For example, literary theory may be a type of anthropology, taking part in the study of foreign cultures. It may be subsumed under psychoanalysis, manifesting and extending the study of the unconscious mind. It may be understood as part of economics, or education theory, or neurophysiology. And there are literary theories of each sort. On the other hand, from Plato and Aristotle, through the Arabic and Indian theorists, to such contemporary figures as Jacques Derrida, literary theory has been developed most widely and most consistently as a part of philosophy. Indeed, it has frequently been integrated into technical philosophy and based on highly complex speculative or analytic systems, systems that are often unfamiliar and obscure to students of literature. The purpose of the present volume is to introduce the major literary theories that have their center or origin in technical or systematic philosophy, largely by explaining and clarifying that technical or systematic philosophy, both on its own and in relation to the study of literature.

Of course, it is not always an easy matter to determine what is to count as philosophical and what is not. I take it that I have included the literary theories everyone would agree are philosophical (Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, Marx, and so on), and excluded the literary theories that everyone would agree are not philosophical in the technical sense (Horace, Sidney, Corneille, Propp, Frye, and so on). However, a number of marginal cases remain (such as theories based in linguistics). Moreover, some nonphilosophical theories provide necessary background for some philosophical theories. In both types of case, I have tended toward inclusiveness. On the other hand, one has to stop somewhere. There will no doubt be theories and theorists that readers feel should have been included. I can only plead that the book is already long and simply could not include everyone. I do not intend it as a final and definitive listing of all philosophical literary theory. Rather, I intend it to be a representative treatment

that draws from all of the central *schools* of philosophical literary theory (phenomenology, deconstruction, and so on)—but not every theory or theorist from these schools—and from a reasonable selection of more marginally philosophical schools (such as structuralism).

In organizing the following chapters, I have followed the standard practice of giving an historical rather than a conceptual structure to the treatment of philosophical theories formulated prior to the twentieth century. Thus the first chapter treats classical theories of Europe, the Arab world, and South Asia, while the second chapter takes up philosophical aesthetics, Romanticism, and historical materialism. All subsequent theories are organized conceptually, by reference to the area of philosophy in which they are located. In parallel with the preceding division of object in literary theory, I take the primary categories to be the following: social and political philosophy, parallel to the social category of literary theory; philosophy of language, parallel to the linguistic category; philosophy of mind, parallel to the mentalistic category. Finally, philosophy of science may be added to this list in parallel with literary meta-theory, which is to say, the formulation of general principles concerning literary *theories* or the practices associated with these theories (as opposed to the formulation of general principles concerning literary *texts* and the practices associated with these texts).

More exactly, the first chapter begins with Plato and Aristotle, the two earliest theorists of note in any tradition. Following this, I turn to the Arabic tradition and discuss the major commentators on Aristotle, particularly al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd. In conclusion, I take up the Indian tradition, discussing the two major schools of classical Indian literary theory—*dhvani* and *rasa*, or suggestion and sentiment—and the ideas of such influential philosophers as Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta. Though little known in the West, both the Arabic and Sanskrit traditions of literary theory were highly developed and highly philosophically sophisticated, arguably far more so than anything to be found in the European tradition from Aristotle until the eighteenth century.

The second chapter returns to Europe, beginning with the philosophical aesthetics of Burke, Hume, and, most importantly, Kant. It then turns to Romanticism, focusing on a few of the great Idealist and post-Idealist philosophers (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Nietzsche) and some of their literary fellow travelers (Schiller, Coleridge, Shelley, de Stael). It is no accident that the historical overview places such an emphasis on Romanticism. One of the recurring motifs in the following pages is that Romanticism marks a

distinctive break with previous literary theory and in effect maps out the major tendencies of virtually all subsequent continental philosophical theory—and even some Anglo-American theory—up to our own day. The final section of this chapter considers one of the most practically influential philosophical theories ever articulated—Marx’s historical materialism, at once an extension and a thorough repudiation of Romantic Idealism.

The third chapter brings us into the twentieth century, taking up the main philosophical developments out of Idealism—phenomenology, existentialism, and hermeneutics—as well as the similar American movement of Pragmatism. This chapter focuses on the philosophy of mind and experience, considering Husserl, the literary extensions of Husserl by Ingarden and others, Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer, Habermas, Dewey, and a few more minor figures related to phenomenology.

While philosophers of experience are most obviously indebted to Kant and the Romantics, the major social and political philosophers (or, rather, the social and political philosophers who have had the most significant impact on literary theory) have been more obviously writing in the tradition of Marx. In chapter 4, we take up these social and political philosophies. The first section returns to Marxism, considering not historical materialism, but the Marxist notions of ideology and ideological critique. These notions certainly figure in the writings of Marx and Engels. However, they have been developed thoroughly only by later theorists, and thus are more appropriately included here than in the historical chapter. Relatively little feminist theory derives from professional philosophy or is clearly associated with or derived from philosophical movements. Nonetheless, feminism is perhaps the most important and influential movement in cultural and political thought bearing on literary study today. It is also enormously diverse, and areas of feminist thought overlap ideological critique and culture study. In the second section, then, I sketch an outline of feminist positions as they occur in influential theoretical writings of the past several decades. The third section begins with Michel Foucault’s theories of institutional structure, knowledge, and power. From here, the discussion turns to two important varieties of “culture study.” The first, derived to a significant extent from Foucault’s work, is New Historicism; the second is that of Pierre Bourdieu. The final section takes up a specific area of culture study, postmodern theory, considering the ideas of Jean Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Fredric Jameson.

Chapter 5 moves from the experientially and socially oriented theories to consider the main textualist currents in the philosophy of language and linguistics—Russian formalism and Bakhtin’s response to Russian formalism, French structuralism, and Derridaean deconstruction. This chapter has an unusual amount of nonphilosophical material in the treatment of formalism and structuralism, especially in the treatment of de Saussure. This is due in part to the fact that formalism provides important background for Bakhtin, while structuralism provides necessary background for deconstruction. Moreover, it seemed appropriate to treat Jakobson and de Saussure in parallel with Chomsky, who is clearly a philosopher in the technical sense.

The last two chapters turn to Anglo-American philosophy. Chapter 6 extends the consideration of the philosophy of language (and linguistics), this time incorporating cognitive mentalism. It begins with logical positivism and logical atomism, continuing through more recent formally oriented analytic philosophers, such as Willard Quine and Donald Davidson. From here, it turns to the ordinary language philosophy of Austin, Grice, and Searle, and the related work of Wittgenstein and Elizabeth Anscombe. It also takes up extensions of this work by Mary Louise Pratt and others. The chapter continues with a consideration of recent linguistic work by Noam Chomsky and still more recent developments in cognitive science, concluding with a brief discussion of empirical poetics, an important adjunct to both Chomskyan and cognitive theories.

The final chapter turns to the issue of meta-theory and the philosophy of science, which forms the basis for most meta-theoretical discussion in literary study today. This chapter presents an overview of major trends in the philosophy of science, discussing not only Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn—the theorists most widely cited by literary critics—but also Imre Lakatos, Roy Bhaskar, Paul Feyerabend, and others.

There are many reasons why one might study literary theory, and correspondingly many ways in which one might approach its evaluation. One might study literary theory in order to achieve a certain level of professional competence—in which case, one’s concern is not with the validity of the theories in question, but with their standing or prestige. One might study theories as tools, heuristic devices for producing new interpretations of particular literary works. In that case too the validity of the theory is not a primary concern. Only the “fecundity” of the theory is significant. One might study literary theory as an incitement to reflection and as a

challenge to otherwise unquestioned presuppositions. Here, a theory has merit insofar as it highlights and criticizes standard views. These are all common reasons for studying literary theory, and common methods for evaluating literary theories.

Perhaps the least common way of approaching literary theory—but, in my view, the most important way—is as a system of explanatory hypotheses regarding interpretation, literary structure, and so forth. Even the fecundity and intellectual challenge of a theory must in part rest on this. After all, one presumably wants new interpretations that are illuminating, not merely novel; challenges to dogma that are superior to the dogma, or that lead to ideas superior to the dogma. For this, one needs a theory that, in general, has greater evidential validity and explanatory reach than the alternatives. Or perhaps one needs a set of competing theories of comparable validity and reach. In any case, issues of explanatory force, empirical adequacy, and so forth, enter crucially. It is here that the philosophy of science has obvious relevance, for the systematic meta-theoretical study of science has been extremely valuable in examining precisely what it means to understand and evaluate a theory as a system of explanatory hypotheses. At the same time, philosophy of science has broader relevance as well, contributing significantly to our (meta-theoretical) understanding of the organization or structure of theories, the ordinary practices of theorists, the pervasiveness of interpretive bias, and so on.

My general stance in explicating these theories is certainly influenced by the philosophy of science. However, it is perhaps best characterized in terms of Paul Ricoeur's distinction between critical and revelatory hermeneutics. Simplifying somewhat, we could say that a critical hermeneutics sets out to show where a philosophical theory fails, where it is contradictory, or inadequate to the facts, or misleading. A revelatory hermeneutics, in contrast, sets out to show where such a theory succeeds, how it might yield new insights, more general comprehension, deeper aesthetic pleasures. (For a more technical definition of Ricoeur's distinction, in its philosophical context, see chapter 3 below.) I have tried to combine both modes with respect to each theory or type of theory. However, in some cases, I have relied more on one hermeneutic mode than the other. In part, this is the result of my own personal sense of which theories are the most valuable, which lend themselves most readily to revelatory interpretation, and which to critical interpretation. However, the primary reason for the difference has to do with the professional study of literary theory and the standard evaluative presumptions that pervade such study. As John

Stuart Mill wrote, "if either of . . . two opinions has a better claim than the other, not merely to be tolerated, but to be encouraged and countenanced, it is the one which happens at the particular time and place to be in a minority. That is the opinion which, for the time being, represents the neglected interests, the side of human well-being which is in danger of obtaining less than its share" (297). I have tried to follow the principle this analysis implies. In other words, I have leaned toward critical hermeneutics in those cases where the value of a theory is widely accepted, and leaned toward revelatory hermeneutics in those cases where the value of a theory is widely discounted (or simply ignored). My hope is that this will foster more balanced dialogue on literary theory than has been the case in recent years, and will encourage a broader, more inclusive understanding of literary theory, both among those who specialize in the field, pursuing theoretical reflection as an end in itself, and among those who draw on literary theory for its instrumental value in their own distinct areas of specialization.

Finally, even with theories that are not primarily interpretive, I have made a point of giving concrete examples of literary applications. In order to make the applications more accessible, and to make clear both the similarities and differences among the various theories, I have, when possible, focused on a single work, Shakespeare's *Othello*. When a lyric poem is more appropriate, I have most often turned to Agha Shahid Ali's "I Dream It Is Afternoon When I Return to Delhi," which is reprinted as an appendix.