

# *The* Literary Theory



A Compendium of  
Concepts and Methods

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

Herman  
Rapaport



“In the quarter century since Terry Eagleton’s landmark study, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), there have been dozens of books that aim at achieving a virtually encyclopedic chronicle of the various schools and methods of literary interpretation. Amidst this daunting array of thoughtful meditations on the myriad ways of characterizing the thing called “literature,” Herman Rapaport’s *Literary Theory Toolkit* presents a strikingly innovative perspective on theory and criticism that combines succinct and accessible accounts of the most significant approaches to the experience of literature with a unique and compelling orientation to both contemporary avant-garde experimental poetics and performance theory. This volume will establish itself as an indispensable resource for anyone interested in contemporary thinking about everything from Saussurean linguistics to Badiou’s relation to Derrida to Meryl Streep’s style of acting, from Milton’s politics to the crisis of thinking about community after the Holocaust. Rapaport’s *Toolkit* combines an original reflection on the theoretical act at large with a pedagogically useful and reliable synthesis of the enormous diversity of literary theories over the past century.”

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# THE LITERARY THEORY TOOLKIT

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Concepts and Methods

Herman Rapaport

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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# Preface

What we call *literary criticism* has traditionally been the study of literary texts by readers with special competencies in the study of writings by major authors. These competencies include detailed knowledge of the author's life and times, excellent competence in the language within which an author has written, and knowledge of disciplines relevant to an author's work, for example, religion, philosophy, or psychology. In addition, the literary critic has expertise in reading a wide range of authors from a number of different historical periods and therefore is familiar with literary conventions (standard practices), allusions (cultural references), and genres (literary types). Literary critics are also expert in the study of literary devices like metaphor, metonymy, irony, and paradox, which they may see as significant to the patterning or structure of literary works. Most importantly, however, literary critics are intuitive readers who perceive semantic and syntactic implications that escape notice by most others and use these implications to develop suggestive and coherent interpretations. In and of themselves such forms of literary critical expertise do not make up any kind of theory, since they just represent an ensemble of practices that literary critics have found useful in literary analysis.

When literary critics talk about *literary theory*, they are referring to a critical analytic that is aware of itself as a *methodology* and that is capable of self-reflexively calling its own assumptions into question. *Theory* has its roots in the methodological study of interpretation that goes back at least as far as Aristotle's treatise "Of Interpretation," though unquestionably this was hardly its inception. Interpretation theory asks the question of how we can know the difference between a true and a false interpretation, a reading that is good from one that is bad. How do we know we are construing meanings accurately? What are the limits of inferring meanings or developing textual implications? How do we know that a sentence is to be taken

ironically and not straightforwardly? What if our interpretation is not authorized by the writer who has maintained a very different interpretation? And what if our interpretation uses analytical tools not known to the authors or their contemporaries? Although these are very basic questions of method, the fact is that the history of criticism and theory has not decided them once and for all.

This book can be used in two ways, (i) as a *compendium* of major issues and developments in literary criticism and theory that can be consulted much as one consults an encyclopedia, and (ii) as a *companion* to major issues in literary criticism and theory that can be read linearly in terms of units or areas. Chapter 1 is a comprehensive overview of criticism basics and those areas and trends in criticism and theory that are most relevant for students of literature today. Readers are encouraged to read it straight through from beginning to end, if what they are seeking is a reliable introduction to critical practice and the state of criticism and theory right now. That said, its sections can be read in any order, should one be interested mainly in consulting individual topics.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 stress mainly “critical” tools that concern narrative, poetics, and performance, respectively. Sections in these chapters provide readers with concepts, methods, and analytics that critics have found useful for conducting analyses of each genre. Care has been taken to include some avant garde literature in order to extend our literary curriculum somewhat so that it can embrace a few works that are more rather than less difficult to interpret.

Chapters 5 and 6 stress mainly “theoretical” tools that address texts as systems and social theory, respectively. Chapter 5 concerns questions of redefining structure or system in ways that have required a paradigm shift (a Copernican Revolution, if you will) in the humanities with respect to how we analyze not only literature, but culture, history, economics, the social, and much else. Given that texts *are* signifying systems, how we analyze them depends upon what kind of system we imagine them to be and whether, from various theoretical perspectives, these systems are viable. Chapter 6 treats fundamentals in social theory that are rarely taught explicitly in language and literature departments but that need to be mastered if one expects to be successful in writing sociological literary criticism, something that has become quite dominant in some language and literature departments. The general sociological topics under discussion are ways of theorizing (i) the public sphere, (ii) ideology, (iii) power, and (iv) the social relation. These topics cover a very wide range of issues, among them,

hegemony, alterity politics, theories of community, social contract thinking, and much else. To this material one should add the lengthy section in Chapter 1 on the theory of social constructedness (1.6), which is developed there because it is so absolutely central to literary studies at the present time. In this section the reader will also find sub-sections on race studies, ethnic studies, global studies, and other sub-fields in social theory relevant to the languages and literatures.

Care has been taken to include a wide array of well known literary examples drawn from all historical periods. What is called practical criticism, the application of critical theory to specific texts, is a major feature of this book and it therefore may serve as a useful companion within courses in which an array of texts are being surveyed. Some emphasis has been placed on literature written before 1800, and readers will notice that attention has been paid to John Milton, whose work has the function of a guiding thread that runs through various parts of the book. Milton is ideal for my purposes, if only because Milton's premise of rewriting the Adam and Eve story in the epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, is easy to grasp from the perspective of plot; because Milton is such a major practitioner of the art of literature and is therefore a cornucopia of wonderful literary examples; and because he wrote in a way that makes it easy to detach bits and pieces of his work for close examination. Also, over the past decade Milton has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity among readers, which suggests that he may be of intrinsic interest generally.

With respect to literature written after 1800, and much of that is, in fact, also covered, I have made some effort at points to emphasize work that is avant garde in nature. There are two reasons for this. One is that there has been a major renaissance in avant garde literary writing in both Great Britain and the United States, much of it in the area of poetry, but much of it in narrative and performance writing, as well, and this by now vast literature has been generally underrepresented in most university curricula. So in a text such as this one, some exposure to this new work is in order. Given that this sort of work is difficult to interpret and requires tools of analysis that are non-traditional, it is useful to observe how innovations in critical theory can be used to address works that people by and large have difficulty accessing, something that speaks to the practicality of such critical analysis.

Readers may notice that this toolkit differs from many introductions to critical theory in that it includes a section on performance that covers not only the emergent field of performance studies but aspects of traditional theatre and some of the more interdisciplinary aspects of performance,

some of it based in the visual arts. Often overlooked in language and literature and even theatre departments is the immense work in performance that has been underway since the 1960s, particularly in New York City, where directors like Richard Foreman and groups like the Wooster Group have been producing breakthrough theatre for many decades. Furthermore, there has been much innovative work in the area known as performance art, which is often very language based, and therefore deserves acknowledgment. Then, too, many courses that include drama pay little or no attention to the craft of acting, which is a deficiency that is addressed in this chapter, as well.

Lastly, I need to comment on why so much of the theory in this toolkit is indebted to European developments, and particularly those that have occurred in France from the 1960s onwards. For the history of the Anglo-American reception of so-called French theory, readers may eventually want to consult my book, *The Theory Mess* (2001), which talks about the rather messy state of affairs that resulted when so-called high theory from Europe began to be disseminated in Great Britain and the United States. Problematic about the influx of Continental theory was (i) that it required a sophisticated education in types of philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, and Marxism that hadn't been much taught in Anglo-American universities, (ii) that it called into question less sophisticated work that had gained respect in the UK and US, something that produced resentment and backlash, and (3) that when Continental theory arrived from abroad, it did so as a confusing and unmanageable torrent of vast corpora by major figures (Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan, Emmanuel Levinas, etc.) and movements (The Frankfurt School, Hermeneutics, Structuralism, Phenomenology, Tel Quel, Semiotics, etc.). Of course, the question was whether this vast amount of critical theory coming from abroad could or even would be assimilated and instituted. That *The Literary Theory Toolkit* is still attempting that assimilating and instituting tells us something about the success or failure of past efforts, though it also speaks to the fact that Continental developments in criticism and theory form a major watershed in the intellectual life of the West. Just because we are in a new millennium we shouldn't imagine that suddenly everything we learned about critical theory in the late twentieth century doesn't count and can be ignored. In fact, much of what was developed then has as yet to be thought through and applied. In other words, that tool bag is much bigger and far more interesting than many people suspect, provided one puts in the effort of rummaging around and finding the tools.

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Herman Rapaport.

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### I.1 Basics of Literary Study

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#### Comprehension versus Interpretation

*Comprehension* concerns the conceptual assembly of textual information in a way that is precise and literally accurate. In order to discuss a literary work, the critic needs to know how personages are described and characterized, how settings are depicted and what details they include and possibly exclude, what actions take place and in what order, and what sorts of figural details and narrative devices the author has included. A good comprehension of a literary work will also include the ability to identify points of view, major themes, and key allusions (references to historical occurrences, myths, or passages in other influential texts, for example, the Bible). Everything that falls under the term comprehension has to do with gathering and assembling of evidence that can be used for justifying interpretations. For literary critics comprehension exceeds mere competence in that it leads to noticing details that others have missed. Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* is masterful in its capacity to select minute details that have major historical significance in the development of representational styles in the West. An even closer reader of literature was Paul de Man in his seminal article "The Rhetoric of Temporality" in which he demonstrates complexities with respect to how allegory and symbol function in the late eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

In university, the teaching of literature tends to stress skills in *interpretation*. This exceeds mere literal comprehension and requires the ability to

<sup>1</sup>Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953). Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

see problems and offer hypotheses. For example, why is the order of events in a story told in a sequence that is unchronological, and why in the case of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, do we not begin with the materials of Book 6 (Satan's revolt in heaven), which is much closer to the epic's real beginning? Books 1 and 2 start us out right after the rebellious angels have fallen down into hell *after* their revolt. Or, why does William Faulkner in the novel *The Sound and the Fury* not have Caddy Compson narrate a section of her own? How does this silencing of woman function in the novel? As sexual repression, if not sexism? As the deliberate formation of a lacuna in the text that impedes our ability to totalize the narrations that *are* given? As a perspective Faulkner expects us to construct for ourselves, which then makes it much more a part of ourselves? To answer such questions requires *interpretation*. Here one is required to perceive a significant problem, conceptualize that problem, analyze textual evidence, and offer some hypotheses and solutions.

Literary interpretation occurs when critics begin asking questions about what they have observed. How critics pose questions and formulate problems tells us how original and insightful they are. In fact, what distinguishes a seminal book or essay from a run of the mill study is the originality of the way in which a problematic is conceptualized and the surprising results to which it leads. In recent decades, we have seen many studies that have recycled the same questions and problems by way of applying them to new works, and with predictable results. The study of how yet another literary heroine subverts patriarchy may contribute somewhat to the understanding of yet another literary text, but as an interpretive project it would hardly indicate much originality of mind, given the many essays and books that have executed this very same project albeit with other primary texts. The same could be said about the many studies coming out right now in which critics look for hybrid social identities in order to show how characters in literature "negotiate" race or ethnicity in a represented social context. In the past, critics who were looking for ambiguity or archetypes in literary texts were engaging in very much the same sort of prescribed literary interpretive practice: the imitation of institutionally sanctioned projects pioneered by innovative thinkers in the profession. Major examples of original critical projects in the twentieth century would include Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

## READING

Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (1953)

Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978)

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## 1.2 Common Critical Practices

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Four common types of critical practice are: close reading, contextual analysis, the application of a critical approach, and social critique.

### Close Reading

Close reading concerns close attention to textual details with respect to elements such as setting, characterization, point of view, figuration, diction, rhetorical style, tone, rhythm, plot, and allusion. Often, close reading concerns the dichotomy between what the text literally says and what can be inferred. For example, we know in the case of Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* that Emma Bovary is keyed to the color blue near the outset of the novel, but what does the author mean by this? What are we supposed to infer? Is the color blue thrown in by accident or does it actually point to something that has symbolic meaning? To know the answer to such a question, one has to notice, first of all, that the color choice is so consistent that it's likely Flaubert intended it. Next, one may notice from the context of what is being related that Emma's immature girlish interest in Catholicism is being thematized, which relates to the likelihood that in this context the color blue is likely to be symbolic of the Virgin Mary to whom Flaubert may well be comparing Emma with some irony, given that Emma will hardly turn out to be anything like the Virgin. Of course, this is an *interpretation* because a sequence of observations and logical connections had to be made by the reader in order to construct it. The proof of the interpretation, insofar as interpretations can be proven, is that it has explanatory power. It not only tells us what the color blue probably refers to, but how it functions to ironize Emma, to portray her one way while expecting the reader to see through that portrayal as misleadingly literal. Because there is so much evidence in the novel that supports this ironizing

tendency, the interpretation of the color blue seems credible, since it is consistent with what is at work elsewhere in the novel and since it connects elements that otherwise would go unexplained. We generally call this most typical sort of interpretation *close reading*, because the interpreter is looking very closely at even the most minor textual details in order to develop explanations for the question of why things are presented the way they are.

## Contextual Analysis

Contextual analysis could be called the “connect the dots approach,” because essentially the technique involves the establishment of a context (or contexts) within which to situate and determine the meanings of a work by drawing direct connections between elements within the work and elements within the context. This is the approach used by literary historians who generally work up the following contexts for analyzing a literary work: (i) philological history of the language; (ii) the literary tradition that has influenced the work and to which the work “belongs”; (iii) the biography of the author; and (iv) the social, political, and cultural contexts likely to have a bearing on the work’s meanings. This type of study presumes that a work cannot mean anything in isolation. For example, the language of a literary work pre-exists it and determines what the words and sentences of, say, a novel, poem, or play would mean. Given that language changes over time, we would need to know the state of the language at any given time when a work was written in order to properly decode its meanings. Shakespeare’s plays, for example, are usually accompanied by copious footnotes that define words, many of which have fallen out of use or that meant something different at the time Shakespeare was writing.

Literary tradition is an important context too in that it donates the norms and forms that authors adopt and modify to suit their inclinations and needs. Shakespeare, Sidney, and Milton inherited the genre of the sonnet from Petrarch and his followers, and therefore it is useful to compare elements in their work to what can be found in the context of the sonnet tradition. After all, the differences may tell us something about what the authors intended and hence how to better construe the meanings. Knowing the biography of the author can help, as well, if what one is looking for is the primary intention an author had in composing a work. Henry James, for example, was quite self-conscious about leaving accounts of what experiences led him to formulate an idea or premise for writing one of his great

novels. Although the initial experiences he had differ from the final works that he completed, it is useful to see the direction in which he was headed and how the work germinated. Indeed, James' *Notebooks* offer invaluable evidence for how the work was intended to be read and how we are to construe the meanings, if what we are after is Henry James' intentions.<sup>3</sup> Another good example would be Virginia Woolf's *Diaries*.<sup>4</sup>

The social, political, and cultural contexts within which authors have written are often quite vast, and literary historians naturally have to select something quite specific from these contexts in order to relate to a literary work. For example, a theme is often chosen. One might study the figure of the mermaid in Renaissance literature, drawing connections between the literary work and cultural context of the figure of the mermaid. One might study the writings of Franz Kafka in the context of Yiddish culture in Eastern Europe – its genres, themes, etc. Given that this Yiddish culture isn't so well known to everyone, it can be illuminating to situate Kafka's work within it. Or, one could study the fiction of Jane Austen in the context of British empire building. Here again a theme contextualizes and circumscribes (and hence controls) the interrogation of meanings in the work.

Such studies are the most typical of what professors of literature produce and they are most typical of the research on literature that one is likely to find in a university library. This approach has various limitations, and four can be mentioned here. (i) A contextual approach presupposes the meaning of a work lies outside the work per se, which suggests a certain extrinsic determinism at work, (ii) it presupposes that the meanings are fixed or frozen in a period of historical time, which suggests our experience of how a work speaks to us is subordinated to or cancelled out by its artefactual significance, (iii) it is based on the construction of contexts that may be highly selective and conveniently managed to yield the results for which the researcher is looking, and (iv) contextual analysis reduces works of literature to ordinary norms that were widely held in society; therefore, *Hamlet* isn't seen as a unique work of art, but as merely a generic "revenger's tragedy" whose innovations are idiosyncratic. Finally,

<sup>3</sup>Henry James, *Notebooks*, ed. F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

<sup>4</sup>See *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 4 vols., ed. Anne Oliver Bell (New York: Harcourt, 1982).

traditional historicism never gets beyond the circumstantiality of evidence. One would think that Milton's *On Christian Doctrine* ought to explain *Paradise Lost*. Or that Edmund Spenser's famous letter to Sir Walter Raleigh about Spenser's composition of the *Faerie Queene* ought to explain this epic poem satisfactorily. But in fact such empirical evidence, even from the pens of the authors themselves, are merely circumstantial and turn out to be controversial given that there are so many ways in which to read them in relation to the texts that really interest us. In short, there are no smoking guns in historical analysis, which has the consequence of calling the whole approach to this sort of analysis in question (also see 5.2).

### Application of a Critical Approach

Application of a *critical approach* is a more systematic example of interpretation in which a coherent body of thought (i.e. a theory) is mapped onto the literary work in order to explain its meaning. In its crudest form, this approach is blatantly allegorical. But if it has an advantage, it is that the researcher is working with a coherent body of analytical thought and not just making ad hoc determinations; plus the theory has been tested by others and has much more validity than an individual's ad hoc guesses and rationalizations.

Because methods and approaches quickly devolve into routines and habits of thinking, it is not surprising that researchers will want to avoid anything that seems hackneyed and trite. No one in the late 1960s wanted to hear yet another paper on ambiguity in poetry, because by then the topic had become entirely depleted. Today, few academics want to hear yet another gendered analysis of "the gaze," because they're all too familiar with Laura Mulvey's argument in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, which has passed into the domain of public knowledge. The same can be said for J.L. Austin's notion of performative speech acts. By now educated people know that the minister's act of saying "I pronounce you man and wife" before the couple he is marrying isn't a description, but an enactment of a legal and binding contract.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989). J.L. Austin *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1975).

As to how theories are applied, it's useful to take a more or less simple example. Some will recall that Sigmund Freud famously applied his theory of the Oedipus Complex to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, something that was developed by one of Freud's followers, Ernest Jones.<sup>6</sup> Freud (and Jones) speculated that Hamlet cannot easily kill Claudius, the man who killed Hamlet's father, because Hamlet as an Oedipal child had originally wanted to kill his father in order to keep his mother to himself. The famous bedroom scene in which Hamlet speaks to his mother about having married the very man who killed his father is filled with jealousy that masquerades as moral uprightness. In fact, Hamlet is thought to identify with Claudius, because Claudius did what Hamlet himself wanted to do as Oedipal son. In this scene, Hamlet wants Gertrude to withdraw from Claudius, which is a repetition of the original Oedipal wish. The fact that Hamlet will eventually kill Claudius and that the play will end in a horrible bloodbath speaks to the Oedipal aggression that motivates the play's psychology.

An application requires us to find considerable symmetry between the literary work and the theory. In the case of a Freudian reading of *Hamlet* the advantage is that the theory pulls the play together in a way that explains elements that otherwise would seem arbitrary or disconnected. In recent years, we have seen this put to good effect by Slavoj Žižek in his many books, which have often discussed popular cinema. Instead of using Freud, Žižek has turned to the theories of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in order to reveal psychological dynamics at work in popular culture no one has noticed or bothered to look for, given that for most people popular culture isn't imagined to be intellectually respectable. Speaking of David Lynch's film *Dune*, Žižek writes: "*Dune* is not 'totalitarian' in so far as it publicly displays the underlying obscene phantasmic support of 'totalitarianism' in all its inconsistency."<sup>7</sup> This obscene support is shown in terms of the monstrously large phallic sand worms with which a new totalitarian order has become allied.

The point, of course, is that there never was a purely symbolic Power without an obscene supplement: the structure of a power edifice is always minimally inconsistent, so that it needs a minimum of sexualization, of

<sup>6</sup>Ernest Jones, *A Psycho-analytic Study of Hamlet* (London: International Psycho-analytical Press, 1922).

<sup>7</sup>Slavoj Žižek, *A Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 72.



the stain of obscenity, to reproduce itself. Another aspect of this failure is that a power relation becomes sexualized when an intrinsic ambiguity creeps in, so that it is no longer clear who is actually the master and who is the servant.<sup>8</sup>

Žižek's attempt is to advance a theory of totalitarianism and its subversion that employs insights taken from Lacanian psychoanalysis that admittedly is complex and concerns a terminology that is quite specialized. In this case, Žižek is addressing the obscene supplement (the added element) that reveals itself as an inconsistency in the structure of power.

Those who are critical of applied theories, whether they be psychoanalytical, anthropological, sociological, or whatever else, will complain that to read cultural works or events in this way is to reduce them to neat models that are reductive (simplistic). Indeed, application of critical theory will be disappointing if connecting a theory to a work is merely "plug and play." In this case, the transposition requires little of the one who performs it and often tells us just what we already know. This leads to the objection, once more, of predictability. Not only are the approaches made to seem conceptually predictable in terms of their itineraries, but the insights they yield can be figured out in the absence of reading someone's painstaking analysis. When the Modern Language Association's *Bibliography* began labeling articles with "feminist approach," "dialogical approach," or "Freudian approach," they were more or less saying: "Don't bother looking it up: you can figure the argument out for yourself." But in the case of someone like Žižek – and this is what makes him a best seller – the applications are mostly *unpredictable*. Moreover, the examples work in such a way that they help explain and develop a theory (Lacanian psychoanalysis) that to many people makes no sense without a key. This last point is important: an application ought to work two ways. The theory should illuminate a work, and a work should illuminate a theory.

## READING

Ernest Jones, *A Psycho-analytic Study of Hamlet* (1922)

Slavoj Žižek, *A Plague of Fantasies* (1997)

<sup>8</sup>Žižek (1997), p. 71.

## Social Criticism

Interpretations of literature (of any period) are often politically motivated by critics who are reading literature for the sake of responding to current affairs in the world or for the sake of modeling a sociological theory. When a critic argues that John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is about imperialism, that Adam and Eve are like native peoples in America, and that Satan is like an imperialist conqueror, then we can be sure that the critic is more influenced by contemporary issues having to do with how we are dealing with the colonial past than by what Milton probably intended. Recent interest among Renaissance scholars in empire, self-fashioning, and "Otherness" is much more a direct reflection of contemporary interests in these issues than a reflection of concerns intrinsically significant to the period, which is to say, that as a rule interests of the present drive interests in the past.

Typical of the sociological approach is the work of Christopher Caudwell who in the 1930s read English literature in order to prove Karl Marx's theories about class, base and superstructure (systems of industrial production versus bureaucratic social systems of control), and the rise of commodity culture. Caudwell was most interested in showing how a literary work both proves a theory and demonstrates that theory's historical accuracy in predicting what sorts of art will appear in what sorts of social circumstance. In "English Poets: The Period of Primitive Accumulation" of 1937, Caudwell was making the argument that in Shakespeare there is a very direct and simple correspondence between work and world. Social class interests, the rise of the bourgeoisie, are thought to easily explain what are otherwise very complex literary works and characters. Caudwell was dismissed in his day as a philistine by critics who found the sociological allegorization of literature to be crudely simplistic and aesthetically insensitive, because Caudwell was mainly interested in socially stereotyping what he read and in discrediting much literature as "bourgeois" and therefore morally suspect and hence unacceptable. Noticeable in Caudwell and most sociological criticism of the Anglo-American sort is an emphasis upon morality in the context of social justice. Caudwell remarks,

Intemperate will, "bloody, bold and resolute," without norm or measure, is the spirit of this era of primitive accumulation. The absolute-individual

will overriding all other wills is therefore the principle of life for the Elizabethan age.<sup>9</sup>

This is morally problematic from the perspective of achieving social justice across all social echelons, which presumably Communism had committed itself to as a more enlightened form of social organization. Sociological critique, under either Marxist or other countercultural pretexts, has generally emphasized questions of inequality, relations of social power, and victimhood. In short, sociological critique is often about “haves and have nots,” “perpetrators and victims,” or, as it is often put, “masters and slaves.”

Of course, there is much literature that has been written in order to protest social injustice, for example, Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, Émile Zola’s *Germinial*, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, and Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, just to name a few. This should remind us that one of the chief motivations for writing literature has been political protest and advocacy, the writing of stories about contemporary life whose purpose is to make the reader identify with the plight of victims and against the rapaciousness of victimizers so that consciousness about our social surroundings will be morally raised. Literary critics are not only interested in developing the consciousness raising element of the literature, but also tend to point out that a literary work observes social relations rather better than sociological theory, given that the theory is largely abstract and conceptual, whereas the literature is concrete and particular.

Among the objections to sociological critique is that it tends to reduce a text to *content analysis*, which is to say, discussion of the storyline (the ostensible content). Like the journalist, the sociological critic is mainly interested in who, what, when, where, and why. This puts the text on an equal footing with social content of everyday life, hence erasing the difference between real life and a depiction of that life. So called literary language (the “formalist” complexities of figuration or style, say) tends to be overlooked for the sake of talking about the “issues,” which for the past several decades have focused on relations of power between social groups and how those result in prejudice, stratification, and injustice.

<sup>9</sup>Christopher Caudwell, “English Poets: The Period of Primitive Accumulation,” in *Marxist Literary Theory*, ed. Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 92.

Whereas in the 1930s, sociological critique in Anglo-American circles was largely slanted from a Marxist perspective that focused on the concerns raised by Caudwell, in the 1970s a shift occurred whereby sociological critique was taken up by feminists who reversed a decades old practice of privileging aesthetics (formalist concerns) over moral concerns having to do with social justice. The New Critical interest in writers like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, Ernest Hemingway, and many others had strategically overlooked aspects of their works that were socially prejudicial (Lawrence's and Hemingway's sexism) or that were politically objectionable (Pound's fascism). In the 1970s that began to change with the influence of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1968), a book that, while initially dismissed by the mainstream, had opened the alternative of judging literature from a predominantly moral standpoint.<sup>10</sup> This challenged and eventually overturned the critical practice of allowing avant garde innovation to trump what has come to be known as "political correctness."

After a plethora of books began appearing on the woman question, sociologically oriented critics began investigating questions of race, gay and lesbian identity, ethnicity, and Western-non-Western social relations (post-coloniality, diaspora, etc.). In the 1990s an interest in what came to be called global studies emerged within which questions of human rights have come to the fore. Also studies in popular culture, which gained respectability under the moniker of Cultural Studies, began toeing the leftist ideological line of sociological criticism by emphasizing the "constructedness" of social identity in terms of how various groups engage in certain cultural practices.

Emphasis upon social constructivism has become more or less a dogma within social criticism and leads to an interesting inversion with respect to literature. The real social world is treated very much as if it's a fiction, whereas the fictional world of literature is treated as if it's tantamount to the real. This chiasmus is made possible, given that the real world and fiction are both viewed as "constructions" ("signifying practices"). People who are critical of this view note that it is compatible with "postmodernism," which is seen by some as a relativist cultural ideology that assumes

<sup>10</sup>Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (Boston: New English Free Press, 1968). Notice that the press that published Millet's book was not an academic press. Feminist literary readings were not considered legitimate within the academy at that time.

everything is a fiction. Although sociological critics tend to stay away from avant garde art (and the postmodern in particular), it is the case that in both literature and the visual arts many artists have been fascinated with radicalizing practices of simulation that insist upon the constructedness (or fictionality) of culture and society.

A well known philosophical source for both the avant garde and sociological theory is Friedrich Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense."

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding: truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn away by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigor, coins which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer as coins.<sup>11</sup>

This suggests that human reality is a rhetorical construction, an illusion of which we have forgotten that it is an illusion.

This view underwrites a concept of postmodernity as inherently simulative, but is also of major importance to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), a founding sociological text for recent theories of social construction. Of no less significance have been the writings of Michel Foucault, which are even more directly indebted to Nietzsche's thinking in the passage above, but that have interposed a history of bureaucratic development which mediates and modifies Nietzsche by arguing that individual human failing isn't the problem so much as the successful instrumentalization (or practical utilization) of knowledge via institutions that strategically adopt and manipulate rhetoric in order to project power.

<sup>11</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non Moral Sense," in *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent Leitch et al., trans. Ronald Speirs (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 878. The essay was not published in Nietzsche's lifetime; it was composed in 1873.

## READING

Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972)

Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900)

Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (1968)

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### 1.3 Literary Language

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Is there such a thing as literary language? In the earlier part of the twentieth century the Russian Formalists, Victor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, and Juri Tynianov were arguing that literary language deviates significantly from ordinary discourse. Shklovsky made the famous statement that literature is to be defined as the sum of its stylistic features.<sup>12</sup> These features could be seen as deviations from practical uses of discourse. Ordinary, day to day uses of language are utilitarian in terms of making one's intentions, requests, demands, and/or explanations clear to another person in the most down-to-earth ways. Literary language, by contrast, isn't merely utilitarian. A sentence in Marcel Proust's novels can be as long as a thousand words and will contain numerous embedded clauses in which one easily gets lost, something that from the perspective of an ordinary use of language isn't pragmatic if what one wants is to make one's meaning clear to another person. In the case of a police report of an accident, it is most utilitarian for there to be one logical, coherent, down to earth account of what happened in the most unambiguous terms. But in a novel by an author such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, one would be likely to get variants of the same account, each one puzzlingly different (5.10). As a whole these accounts would be so delicately incommensurate that one will start to wonder what if anything took place.

Victor Shklovsky famously spoke of literature in terms of "defamiliarization" (*ostranenie*) whereby normative representations are distorted in ways that make them unfamiliar and strange for the sake of destabilizing our automated cognitive responses to how we imagine things to be. Woolf's interacting streams of consciousness in *The Waves* have a very odd effect

<sup>12</sup>Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism*, ed. L.T. Lemon and M.J. Reis (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).