Book Review


Beginning Theory is a concise and lucid introduction to literary theory, containing a commented bibliography. This book is ideal to assist undergraduate and graduate students alike in the difficult transition to advanced literary study. At first, students tend to assume that a text has an authoritative authorial meaning, and that they must discover that meaning through analysis. With further study, they come to understand that texts have multiple and unstable meanings. Each reader brings a new reading to a text, and a text is ultimately a sum of all readings that ever were and could be. Students learn to reconcile the instability of a text with the understanding that a work of art conforms to the workings of its own mysteries, surpassing the intent of its author, as does the unconscious go beyond the conscious.

In the introduction, Peter Barry anticipates the difficulties that students encounter with theory. He stresses that what makes literary theory difficult is its language rather than its ideas, which tend not to be as complex as commonly believed (7). Chapter 1 provides a historical overview of the birth and evolution of literary studies in the early twentieth century, along with historical background on liberal humanism and the subsequent transition to theory. Barry points out that Aristotle was “the first critic to develop a ‘reader-centred’ approach to literature, since his consideration of drama tried to describe how it affected his audience” (21). Barry also discusses Sir Philip Sidney’s insight in Apology for Poetry that the function of literature is to give pleasure. As Sidney put it, a poem is “a speaking picture, with this end, to teach and delight” (23). Barry extends his historical overview to the Romantics and concludes his discussion with the towering figure of T. S. Eliot whose contributions to literary criticism include such notions as the objective correlative and poetic impersonality.

Chapter 1 concludes with a discussion of practical criticism, the traditional mode of literary analysis during the early twentieth century, which consisted of close and ostensibly disinterested readings of texts, divorced from historical and social contexts. At the time, the study of English literature was thought to further a sense of national identity, thereby diminishing class tensions (13). The prevailing ideology then was liberal humanism which fostered belief in unchanging human nature and a transcendent individual subject (17).

Chapters 2-3 discuss structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction. The advent of literary theory in the mid-twentieth century reinforced the understanding that identity is a social, historical, and linguistic construct and that language makes possible the conceptual categories that we take for granted. Structuralism, which emerged in France during the 1950s thanks in great part to Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, analyzes the
hidden structures that govern language and literature. It seeks a scientific and detached approach to textual analysis, focusing on the narrative models, codes, and motifs that connect texts to cultural structures. Barry shows how structuralism owes much to the work of linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, who focused on patterns in language and how meanings are established.

Structuralism owes to linguistics the understanding that the meaning of words is relational, that is, words only have meaning in context and in relation to other words (41). This might seem obvious but educational testing makes it difficult for students to grasp even this simple concept. Take the Graduate Record Exam, which is generally required for admission to graduate programs in the United States. An entire industry has sprung up to prep students for this exam, a feature of which includes “verbal analogies” consisting of pairs of words that must be matched correctly. Words have no meaning in isolation; and to teach students otherwise is to inculcate in them a disjunctive view of language. No wonder, then, that today few students in the United States can enjoy poetry let alone write a poem.

Barry notes that structuralists generally believe that “language doesn’t just reflect or record the world: rather, it shapes it, so that how we see is what see” (61). Barry shows the implications of this insight by demonstrating the arbitrariness of our conceptual categories. He points out that there is no reason why there should be four seasons. The seasons, Barry argues, “are a way of seeing the year, not an objective fact of nature” (44). According to Barry, structuralism is inherently paradoxical since it uses the scientific method even as it “questions our way of categorizing reality” and seeks to redefine concepts and categories that we generally take for granted (65).

Barry shows how post-structuralism is a more skeptical approach to textual analysis, one in which the instability of meaning leads to free play with the text. Barry clarifies the differences between structuralism and post-structuralism: whereas structuralists seek parallels, symmetry, and patterns in order to show textual unity and coherence, poststructuralists extend the sense of disjuncture between language and referents, evincing thereby a profound awareness of the limitations of knowledge (72-73). Barry quotes Nietzsche to summarize the post-structuralist view that “There are no facts, only interpretations” (63).

Barry defines deconstruction as “applied post-structuralism” and states that its goal is to reveal “internal consistencies in the text, aiming to show the disunity which underlies its apparent unity” (72). He shows how deconstruction tries to uncover the unconscious dimension of a text (71), stating that its overall effect of its analyses is “angst-ridden, fissured enactments of linguistic and other forms of indeterminacy” (76).

Chapters 5-8 provide a concise and informative overview of postmodernism, psychoanalytical criticism, feminist criticism, queer theory, and Marxist criticism. Before defining postmodernism, Barry provides the reader with an overview of modernism, with its privileging of subjectivity, merging of
genres, and preference for fragmentation and discontinuity (82). Barry notes that while modernism views fragmentation in a spirit that pines for lost faith and an integrated world, postmodernism sees fragmentation as a liberating “escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed systems of belief (83-84). Postmodernism blurs the distinction between the real and non-real, between high and low culture, exposing the falsehood of representation.

Psychoanalytical criticism explores the role of the unconscious in the motivations of characters. Literature can be interpreted much like a dream in the symbolic expression of hidden desire. Psychoanalytical criticism shows how sexual impulses are sublimated or spiritualized. This criticism also explores how we create defense mechanisms to cope with stress or existential threats, and how we project our own attributes on to others. As has often been said (and there are many variants of this saying), we see others not as they are but as we are. Lacan used psychoanalysis to show the linguistic structure of the unconscious. He rejected traditional literary characterization in which individuals were endowed with set attributes, since identity is dynamic rather than static. As the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano points out in *The Book of Embraces*, “identity is no museum piece sitting stock-still in a display case, but rather the endlessly astonishing synthesis of the contradictions of everyday life” (125).

Feminist criticism explores the gendered vantage point from which we view literary characters as well as the social implications of language. Feminism seeks to erase or transgress social strictures and gender conditioning, representing femininity as a construction rather than as an essence. Queer theory is a recent critical approach to literature that challenges conceptual categories such as ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ to show how sexual identity is unstable and how certain traits remain latent and are only occasionally manifest.

Marxist criticism examines the persistence of class in society and how economics informs our understanding of literature. It posits a material basis for the social forces that govern our lives. The understanding of the conditions of work that govern our lives has given rise to such concepts as alienation, which describes the estrangement and dehumanization that comes from repetitive, meaningless work. Barry discusses the work of a group of Marxist critics known as the Russian Formalists whose scholarship took place during the first three decades of the twentieth century. One influential idea was Victor Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarization, which is to represent the familiar afresh or, as Barry puts it, “as if we were seeing it for the first time” (161). Barry devotes part of his chapter on Marxist criticism to an overview of the work of Louis Althusser, including his notion of interpellation, namely, the illusion that we are free subjects when in fact capitalism dictates the choices that we make (165).

Chapters 9-10 cover new historicism, cultural materialism, and postcolonial theory. New historicism relates literary texts to other texts of its historical era. It examines the discourses of power and the multiple discourses that respond to power. For example, panegyric texts meant to exalt rulers can also be subversive since excessive praise is the safest way to damn monarchs. We often see this play of opposites in Shakespearean dramas such as *Henry VIII*. 
New historicists attempt to liberate literary texts from canonical perspectives, relying on texts that refashion a past that would otherwise be irretrievably lost.

Cultural materialism recognizes the economic and social imperatives that shape literary texts and the hidden injustices and the power relations that determine language. Textual circumlocutions, the silences, the ironies, the discontinuities are examined in cultural materialist approaches. As Barry points out, the new historicist situates a literary text in its own time whereas the cultural materialist is more likely to analyze it in a contemporary context.

Postcolonial criticism exposes the biased representation of cultures and shows the interested and exploitative ends of such representation. Postcolonial theory emerged in the 1990s thanks in great part to the work of Edward Said and Michel Foucault. These writers show how the Other becomes estranged or monstrous in discourses of power which draw lines of demarcation between “we” and “they,” between “normal” and “abnormal,” between “Westerner” and “Oriental.” Like the legal or educational expert on sex, the Orientalist portrays the Other as alien and remote, to be elucidated for the uninitiated. Foucault maintains that power is present not so much in institutional structures as in force relations and social hegemonies (86).

Postcolonial theory exposes the boundaries that we draw between ourselves and others to be as illusory as those that divide the indivisible Earth. It casts a critical eye on public discourse in the United States, where the media routinely uses expressions that contain thinly-veiled assumptions and prejudices. For instance, the expression “the Muslim world,” which falsely represents Islam as monolithic religious experience, is far more current than its analogue, “the Christian world.” The term “Islamic terrorists” is commonly used to describe violent extremists, but one rarely hears the term “Christian terrorists,” even though some individuals have blown up abortion clinics or murdered doctors out of religious conviction. Although the enduring popularity of the hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers” shows how deeply ingrained is the association of religion with war in the minds of many Christians, the expression “Christian terrorist” is regarded as a contradiction in terms, while “Muslim terrorist” is believed to be a term that is transcendentally self-evident.

The final chapter of this riveting book is devoted to a discussion of stylistics, which Barry describes as a kind of updated version of the discipline known as rhetoric (204). Stylistics uses linguistic terms with a view to scientific objectivity, a view that, Barry notes, lends itself to the demystification of literature (208). In sum, Beginning Theory is an engaging, informative, and even indispensable guide to the study of culture and literature.
Works Cited


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