

## Upcoming

If you would like your conference or day school listed in *CCUE NEWS* please send information regarding the event to Kate Fullbrook, Associate Dean, Faculty of Humanities, University of the West of England, St Matthias, Oldbury Court Road, Fishponds, Bristol BS16 2JP (Fax: 0117 975 0402; e-mail: Kate.Fullbrook@uwe.ac.uk).

### *Voyages Out, Voyages Home: Eleventh Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*

13-16 June 2001  
University of Wales, Bangor  
Contact: Michael Whitworth  
University of Wales, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DG  
email: woolf@bangor.ac.uk  
<http://www.bangor.ac.uk/english/woolf.html>

### *Symbiosis: Anglo-American Literary Relations: Endless Renovation*

1-12 July 2001  
College of St Mark and St John  
Contact: Gerard Barrett  
Symbiosis 2001  
College of St Mark and St John  
Derriford Road, Plymouth PL6 8BH  
email: symbiosis2001@hotmail.com

### *After the Deluge: Women's Writing 1945-1960*

7 July 2001  
De Montfort and Loughborough Universities  
Contact: Jane Dowson and Imelda Whelehan  
Department of English  
De Montfort University  
Clephan Building, The Gateway  
Leicester LE1 9BH  
Tel: 0116 2577397  
email: jdowson@dmu.ac.uk or imw@dmu.ac.uk

### *British Association for American Studies*

6-9 April 2001  
University of Keele  
Contact: Dr John Dumbrell  
Department of American Studies  
Keele University  
Keele, Staffordshire ST5 5BG  
email: asa09@ams.keele.ac.uk

### *Mars in Ascendant: The Great War and the Twentieth Century*

31 July-4 August 2001  
University College Northampton  
Contact by  
email: patrick.quinn@northampton.ac.uk

### *Just for the Thrill? Women in Contemporary Crime Fiction*

31 March 2001  
University of the West of England  
Contact: Dr Ann Hancock  
Faculty of Humanities  
University of the West of England  
St Matthias, Oldbury Court Road  
Bristol BS16 2JP  
email: ann.hancock@uwe.ac.uk

### *Victoria's Laureate: An International Tennyson Conference*

20-23 July 2001  
University of Lincolnshire and Humberside  
Contact: Marion Shaw c/o The Tennyson Society  
Lincolnshire Library Services  
Brayford House, Lucy Tower Street  
Lincoln LN1 1XN  
email: M.Shaw@lboro.ac.uk

### *British Braids: Intercultural Dynamics in the British Isles Today*

19-21 April 2001  
Brunel University  
Contact: Paula Burnett or Anshuman Mondal  
Faculty of Arts  
Brunel University  
Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH  
email: Paula.Burnett@brunel.ac.uk or  
Anshuman.Mondal@brunel.ac.uk

### *Facts and Fictions: Ireland and the Novel in the Nineteenth Century*

14-16 September 2001  
Cardiff University  
Contact: Dr Jacqueline Belanger  
School of English  
Cardiff University  
Cardiff CF10 3XB  
email: belangerj@cardiff.ac.uk

### *Unrespectable Recreations: The Victorians at Play*

17 March 2001  
Trinity and All Saints, Leeds  
Contact: Julia De Dominicis  
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Trinity and All Saints  
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# CCUE News

THE COUNCIL FOR COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY ENGLISH

# “Writing Histories”

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## Editorial

This issue of *CCUE News* focuses on literary and linguistic history. Despite the debates over the nature of the canon and over the relationship between literature and history, English Studies' view of the major blocks of literary history still reflects a broad consensus. The Eighteenth Century may now be 'The Long Eighteenth Century', and the notion of the 'pre-Romantics' may be out of favour, but many other familiar categories continue to carve up the English curriculum. Steven Matthews points out that periodisation in literary history has kept a tenacious hold on English Studies, affecting academic appointments, the curriculum and the student experience, and asks whether it is time to rethink the categories we use. Stephen Penn argues for a more historical account of theory – one that does not see it as having been born between the *Chatterley* ban and the Beatles' first LP. He points, for example, to the richness of theory in the medieval period. In an interview, Michael Alexander reflects on what seems to me the heroic enterprise of writing a single-authored history of English Literature, and on the factors affecting the writing of literary history at this moment in time. Finally, Gary Day asks how radical literary theory really is.



This issue also includes two reviews. Steve Clark reviews some recent issues of the enterprising new journal *The Reader* (and elicits a response from *The Reader*). Roger Dalrymple considers the published outcomes of *the Assessment and the Expanded Text* Project – booklets which are full of practical examples of ways of enlivening assessment in university English, and using it productively. *CCUE News* would be happy to review other journals and books of general interest to CCUE members.

*CCUE News* 15 (Summer 2001) will take as its theme **English Language**: current directions in language study; innovations in the curriculum; modes of teaching; links with other academic areas (including literature and theory). Any contributions and suggestions to the address below, please. Final date for copy: June 1st 2001.

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Chris Ringrose interviews Michael Alexander, Berry Professor of English Literature at St. Andrews University about his recently published *A History of English Literature* (Macmillan, now Palgrave 2000)



## Writing Literary History at the Millennium

CR = Chris Ringrose  
MA = Michael Alexander

**CR:** I must first of all say that I really admire the scope and consistency of your new *History*. It manages to cover a tremendous range of material whilst having something interesting to say on every page about individual works. There is also a consistent style across the 399 pages. Is this a prose style that you think is recognisably 'yours', or did you set about devising one in order to write this book – one that would be accessible to students and general readers as well as academics?

**MA:** Thank you, I am glad you liked the *History*. I have been lucky in the timing of my career, in that I have been able to teach the range of English literature, medieval and modern. That is why I was interested when invited to write a history of our literature from its beginnings to the present – even though writing to increase public understanding and to help students is precisely what the RAE encourages us not to do. I had written on Pound and Auden and as well as on Hardy and Tennyson, Shakespeare and Chaucer. I had translated the earliest English verse into modern English verse. So the *History* is a partial acknowledgement of my luck in having taught at a time when that range was available.

I wrote the *History* in a style which addresses the student as an intelligent general reader. Style, however, did not come first. In a History of this scope the immediate problem is the contents, and their proportions. The publishers wanted English literature from 680 to the 1990s, that is why they approached me. The various literatures in English will not go into one volume, so 'English literature' had to be the literature of England (and contributing neighbours, e.g., Dunbar, Scott, Wilde, Beckett). I tried for clarity, concision and liveliness of style. There was a lot of rewriting. I want the book to be read as a whole, so the reading of it has to be enjoyable.

**CR:** Do you think this is a particularly good moment at which to produce a new *History of English Literature*? I'm sure you reviewed most of 'the competition' from recent years, and even from earlier in the century. Did the structure and tone of other histories influence your own – or were you looking for an alternative?

**MA:** Publishers obviously think it's a 'good moment', and sales are promising. It's reprinting, though under the name of Palgrave, which Macmillan have adopted for their international academic books. About the time that Macmillan made contact, Andrew Sanders' *Short History* came out. As I finished, I heard of new multi-volume histories commissioned by OUP and CUP. If literature is to be studied, literary history will continue to be indispensable, though some say that it is now impossible. It isn't – it's just difficult.

After everything theoretical has been said, literature remains – and often remains largely unexplored by those studying English. There is an evident need for literary history, but what's needed is not always welcomed. I am not sure that the literary curiosity of students choosing English is encouraged enough. Teachers can teach only what they know, and members of a 'research-led' profession may teach not the subject but their research. Students, however, require a prospectus of what English literature contains, especially if their degree-structure no longer asks them to sample the historical range. A prospectus enables an informed choice. They come to us knowing a few set texts. They leave us having read more texts, and with some ideas. Yet they are often incurious about the range of English literature, its quantity and variety, its chronological sequence and distribution.

I did not initially look at any competing history. After a detailed outline was accepted, I looked into the only recent thing, Sanders' *Short History*, and was impressed; also pleased that our approaches differ. That is the only recent one-volume history of English literature of comparable scale by a single author – who acknowledges that he was out of his depth with medieval literature, requiring 'carefully considered direction and notes'. My debts are general and older. I had over the years consulted the multi-volume period histories (Penguin, Oxford, Sphere, Longman, etc.), and read the eight volumes of the Macmillan History, one of which I contributed. I remember period histories by James Sutherland and Margaret Gent. Having once taught in a lycée, I came to admire the *Collections littéraires* of Lagarde et Michard: *haute vulgarisation* indeed! In the US, I found American teaching anthologies useful, though the current edition of the Norton has been colonised by the non-literary texts of New Historicism. I like the Longmans and Blackwells annotated anthologies. I once edited a five-volume Anthology of English Literature. All of this helped.

I wrote this book afresh from my own principles, but literary history has some conventions which are too convenient to drop: periods, for example, though periodisation leads to circular thinking. I use familiar divisions, while giving a fairer share of space to the seven centuries before Chaucer. The only other structural surprise is the publisher's format, which makes the book very accessible. If I compare my *History* with other one-volume efforts, it is very much more substantial than Blamires or the Penguin. In tone, it is less full and formally academic than Sanders, less erudite than Fowler, less personal than Conrad. I hope that the tone is refreshing. I dislike heaviness and verbosity.

**CR:** I'm sure the tone will be accessible to students. I saw one of our English undergraduates buying the *History* in the UCN Bookshop yesterday. How do you think students will be using the book?

**MA:** How will they use it? I wrote it to be read from cover to cover, but students will more often turn to it to get an idea of a period or an author. I hope that they will read on. Macmillan put a lot of work into designing a format and layout which make the book easy to use for reference. I wrote it to be easy to read.

How *should* they use it? I hope that students and other readers will enjoy it but use it critically. Nearly all of it – scope, proportions, inclusions, exclusions, valuations and opinions – is open to debate. Its emphases, and some of its information, will in due course need correction.

This is especially so with the final pages. The final pages of a 'contemporary history' never last. Think how the passage of five years would affect accounts of contemporary literature compiled in 1375, 1575, 1657, 1788, 1912 or 1952. Christopher Fry (1907- ) was mentioned in 1950 as a literary playwright with T S Eliot. Not now. The Introduction outlines my principles, and warns those who use the *History* as a textbook that it is selective. Students, however, rarely read introductions. I hope reviewers will.

**CR:** Your reference to a necessary selectivity reminds one that there has been a good deal of debate over the last ten or fifteen years about the nature of the literary canon – about its political and gender implications, and its relation to notions of literary value and the curriculum. John Guillory in *Cultural Capital*, and Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon*, for example, have produced weighty contributions. Is the idea of canon formation one that figures prominently for the literary historian? Or did you decide to take the canon as a given?

**MA:** I think the debate is older. The first time I heard 'canonical' applied to literature was in 1966. It was used ironically. After a postgraduate year in Comparative Literature at Princeton, I was in New York, on my way to teach at the University of California, where I remember the assault on 'the Canon', WASPs and DWEMs. Those American courses entitled Great Books and Humanities 101 did make

students read the classics in translation. But the reduction of literature to 'the five-foot shelf' of Great Books invites a political reaction. The English thought, and should continue to think, in terms of literary tradition. Tradition is a larger and more catholic thing than any selection from the tradition set up as 'the canon'.

Did I 'take the canon as a given'? We know that no canon is a given. But we forget that literature is a gift. Those who allege a bourgeois conspiracy should read and be grateful for Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* and Arnold's *Essays in Criticism*, even Ward's *The English Poets*. Poetic tradition was created by poets, not placement: Chaucer, who invokes as his ancestors Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Lucan and Statius; then those who explicitly called Chaucer their master, down to Dunbar and Spenser; Jonson and Milton celebrate the tradition, as do their successors. If some of these poets had government jobs, so did Burns and Wordsworth. We university teachers are also paid by the state.

I believe in literary merit. Some of the books known to the public as 'classics' deserve that title. They demand to be re-read. Others fade away. As for canon-formation, take as example Roger Lonsdale's *Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse*. Lonsdale found that that century's tradition had been fixed by poetic anthologies drawn up in a time of reaction, typing it as 'Augustan'. He found a variety of non-urbane, non-Augustan verse, some of it by women, which had been forgotten. I read it all with interest, and have forgotten most of it, though not Christopher Smart. Asked whether he had found a single new major talent, Lonsdale said he hadn't.

Scholars have lately dug up much that once was highly valued, and some of it is worth reading twice. The neglect of writing by women is being put right. I am very glad to have read for the first time *Evelina*, *Castle Rackrent* and *Wives and Daughters*, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Elizabeth Bowen. I also read Aphra Behn and Mrs Radcliffe. My appreciation of Julian of Norwich deepened into admiration. Others too have been neglected – Traherne, Blake and Hopkins. But the greatest rediscovery must be medieval literature itself, which began in the 18th century, and it is not yet complete: the whole unsuspected world of Old English verse, and the wealth of Middle English literature behind Chaucer, Gower and Langland. Dr Johnson, Bishop Percy and even Thomas Gray knew nothing of *Beowulf*, *The Dream of the Rood*, medieval drama, *Gawain*, or Julian of Norwich.

I have not read Guillory, and I avoid Bloom, put off by his partial editing in *The Oxford Anthology*. Strong poets do not all hate their predecessors. The Western Canon does not need to be rediscovered. In turning against theorists (other than Freud), Bloom follows Steiner and Kermode. They found too late that those who wanted to change the political or philosophical bathwater were not really interested in the baby, poetry.

**CR:** How far did you think it necessary to make explicit or implicit reference to literary theory in your periodizations and your readings of particular texts or writers? Was there ever a point where you thought "I wouldn't have written this section this way if it had not been for Ian Watt/Edward Said/Marilyn Butler/Sigmund Freud/Mikhail Bakhtin". Has theory changed our way of writing literary history?

**MA:** Literary theory is as old as Plato, but literature is older. Those who think otherwise on either count may have interesting things to say, but I prefer re-reading Swift, Shakespeare, Wordsworth or Edgeworth and translating *Beowulf*. If that shows me as critically unsophisticated, well and good. I am not a sophist.

Theory seems to me to have only minor effects upon the chronicling of what's most worth reading in English literature, although theory, ancient and modern, alters what is said about it. A literary history of this scope has no room for theory. Of the writers you mention, I learned from Watt, Butler and Bakhtin. When theorists quoted, they used texts by Homer, Balzac, Baudelaire and other writers from before 1968. Why are such writers read more often than others? We cannot dispense with the idea of literary merit, that rare combination of artistic skill with human interest which is so much easier to recognise than to define.

No, theory has altered rather than transformed general literary history, which is neither science nor philosophy but a serviceable art. If consensus has weakened, reasonable judges agree sufficiently about who the very best writers have been. Some professors object to Shakespeare being set at school, of course, but he will survive.

The literary history of particular periods is altered by books like *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* and *The Rise of the Novel*. These are useful books, but no more so than *Mimesis*, *Epic and Romance* and works of literary theory such as *An Apology for Poesie* and the remains of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Some criticism was written before 1968. French universities have had an extreme-ridden history, and American New Historicism overreacted to American New Criticism. Feminism will last, in non-theoretical forms. All students of English should read "A Room of One's Own".

**CR:** I liked the way the section on Dickens (for example) managed to combine a sense of his career and context with sharp brief readings of particular novels. At other times the constraints of space were more evident. Half a page on the Gothic, which has attracted so much critical attention recently?

**MA:** Good! Dickens gave me a lot of trouble. The half-page on Gothic fiction follows five pages on the emergence of Sensibility and on Gothic verse. I concluded: "For all its curiosity value, the literary merit of 18th-century Gothic fiction is negligible compared with the use of Gothic made in the 19th-century novel." That is why I did not attend to it further. I quote Austen on Gothic on page 240, and later discuss the Gothic of 'Christabel' and the Brontës. I am now writing a book entitled *Medievalism*, so my views of the Gothic may develop. I did not have the room to do justice to other things: drama, except Shakespeare; non-fictional prose from Old English times onwards; the later Blake; Thackeray; short stories; biography. My knowledge of contemporary fiction is patchy. It's hard to keep up with contemporary drama from St. Andrews. On the other hand, I am pleased to have tried, however unsuccessfully, to write a consecutive history of the period 1066-1500. That had never been attempted in any one-volume History.

**CR:** For each of the periods (including that one), the tables and lists struck me as really useful reference points. But the one on 'Publications of the Modernist Period' (page 325) contains only one entry for a woman writer – Woolf. Isn't that just perpetuating the myths about 'male modernism' that critics like Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar and Shari Benstock have been struggling to dislodge? And what about women writers of the 1930s? or the 1750s?

**MA:** That table includes Mansfield too, and I mention Richardson in my discussion of Woolf, whom I describe as "the sole remaining Anglo-modernist [male or female] who was entirely English." Forgive me, but who are the other notable British women modernists of the period leading up to 1928?

**CR:** I was thinking, for example, of HD; but maybe she counts as 'American'?

**MA:** I like her and admire Marianne Moore. But American literature falls outside the scope of this book. 'Publications 1929-1939' mentions Compton-Burnett and Bowen, who is briefly discussed. Mention is made of Rebecca West, Jean Rhys and others. Who, besides Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, are the women writers of the 1750s whom I should know? That is an area in which I am not well informed. I should have to say, however, that I tried the female Romantic poets who have been put up against Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats, but concluded that the count of major Romantic poets remains at six. The balance is different with the novel, of course.

Michael Alexander, *A History of English Literature*. London: Macmillan [Now Palgrave], 2000. ISBN: 0-333-91397-3 (hbk £40) 0-333-67226-7 (pbk £12.99)



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# Historicising Theory: A Personal View



Much has been said over the years about the meaning of history (in its various guises), and possibly even more, just recently, about the need to 'theorise' history. The history of the discipline of English Studies itself, if I may be forgiven for repeating Robert Eaglestone's observation in the last issue of *CCUE News*, has been a popular subject of academic, often overtly theoretical, scrutiny. It is perhaps surprising, then, that 'theory' (a term now applied rather vaguely to *any* form of self-conscious critical reflection, or any coherent group of hermeneutic principles) has done so little to examine or illuminate histories of its own. By this I do not mean that few contemporary students or literary scholars are aware of the histories of Structuralism, Post-structuralism, the countless strands of psychoanalytic theory, Marxist criticism, Deconstruction, etc. This would be an absurd claim. It is clearly true, however, that little is said – among teaching staff and undergraduates, at least – about the theoretical writing and thinking of the periods which precede the twentieth century. The reasons for this are various, but probably owe as much to our own pedagogic methods as they do to the shortcomings of the many introductory textbooks which are now available (though these shortcomings, as I will argue, are far from insignificant).

It is difficult to know exactly what it is that persuades students to take theory seriously. Some, of course, do not, but it would be reasonable to suppose that those who do have been attracted in part by the popular myths and half-truths which surround it (and which we may often find ourselves perpetuating). Among the most pervasive – and misleading – of these is the view that contemporary theory is utterly different from anything which preceded it. It is this myth that a properly historicised account of theory – and a consciously historical approach to theory – should attempt to dissolve.

## The 'Birth' of Theory

The 'theory' that most of us talk about today was born at some uncertain point in the last century. Its various strands had their origins in a variety of disciplines, few of which had anything to do with literary studies, or with each other. This accounts for the rich diversity of theoretical approaches, which has only broadened in recent years. Eaglestone's point about a Lacanian possibly sharing nothing with post-colonial theorist could not have been better put.<sup>1</sup> But we do need some way of bringing as many of the diverse strands together as we can, since the term 'theory' itself, and the very fact that so many of us claim to 'do' it, suggests at least an imaginary unity. One of the perceived unifying impulses must undoubtedly be a preoccupation with language and the principles of signification. The twentieth

century remains, in the popular academic view, the point at which literary theory became a properly *linguistic* science. Russian Formalism and French Structuralism, it seems, will continue to be depicted as the key matrices of the enlightened, self-conscious and linguistically-informed critical perspective which – by implicit consensus – we have enjoyed for the last three or four decades. Formalism and Structuralism, we are often reminded, provided us with the means to see beyond the naïve linguistic realism of 'liberal humanist' approaches to literary study.

A glance into the depths of theoretical history sheds a different light on things. Many a student would undoubtedly be surprised – if not shocked – to discover that the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign is not something which owes its 'discovery' to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. It is indeed true that the notion of arbitrary *differential systems* of signifiers and signifieds is a peculiarly Saussurean one. In order to understand why this is important, however, we need to be aware of the fact that a recognition of the arbitrariness of the relationship between sign and referent (which are not the same, of course, as signifier and signified) dates back at least as far as Plato. Such a recognition is not identical with the Saussurean one, but nor is the Saussurean theory of signification such a radical departure from received ways of thinking as we are often encouraged to suppose. Both pose a challenge to any belief in 'natural' signification, or to any illusions about the transparency of language (a challenge which is almost invariably seen to originate with twentieth-century theory, and to take its main impetus from Saussurean linguistics).

This is not, of course, to deny the significance of psychoanalysis, Marxist historiography or Structuralist linguistics. What it seems that we need to avoid, however, is the assumption that the critical questions addressed by contemporary theory could not have been asked, or adequately answered, in the absence of the linguistic, political and cultural models which have been available to us since the late 1960s. Many of them *were* asked, and answered, by theorists of the past, even if these figures – grammarians, rhetoricians, exegetes, theologians, philosophers – did not enjoy the benefits of any possible appeal to the umbrella terms 'theory' and 'literature', or to the vague and rather dubious designation, 'theorist'. The problem that confronts us is how best to raise awareness of these shadowy figures of the past. Few of them seem to get mentioned outside specialist textbooks and tutorials (of which there are few, given that the history of theory lacks something of the appeal, among undergraduates, at least, of its synchronic counterpart). Recent histories of theory, such as Richard

Harland's *Literary Theory from Plato to Barthes*<sup>2</sup> have gone some way towards addressing this, but there is a long way still to go. What we need, it seems, is not just a larger number of textbooks which give a place to the history of theory (from antiquity onwards), but a greater willingness to embrace theory as a fully historical phenomenon. A first step towards achieving this, as I argued earlier, must lie in the rejection of the notion that theory, in what is taken to be the 'proper' sense of the term, was born early in the last century. The next step, and possibly a far more daunting one, is to promote an interest in what went before. Part of the difficulty here is that much of what *did* go before is so often excluded from introductory histories.

## Missing Links: The Middle Ages

It is here that I would like to mention the Middle Ages, since this is the period most frequently overlooked or under-represented. (It is here, too, that I should perhaps confess that medieval literary theory is my own primary research interest.) Harland's volume, published in 1999, devotes only a single chapter of nine pages to the Middle Ages. This would hardly seem to be an adequate representation of a period in literary history which occupies the best part of a millennium. In his popular introductory textbook on literary theory, *Beginning Theory*, Peter Barry fails even to mention the Middle Ages, leaping without apology from Aristotle, who wrote 'the earliest work of theory' (here identified as the *Poetics*), to Sir Philip Sidney, 'the first prestigious name in English writing about literature'.<sup>3</sup> Even if we were to forgive such an omission (on the grounds, perhaps, that it has countless precedents), we might still wish to question Barry's claim that the *Poetics* is the earliest work of theory. Such a claim can only be justified if we subscribe to the controversial belief that the literary text is the only kind of text about which we should theorise. Barry implicitly steers us away from this assumption by describing the *Poetics* as a work of 'theory', rather than 'literary theory'. If his concern is with theory *broadly* construed, however, we might ask why he fails to mention one of the most important and influential of Aristotle's works (known virtually by heart to medieval theorists), the *De Interpretatione*. John Phillips's *Contested Knowledge: A Guide to Critical Theory* is a little more comprehensive, and usefully highlights, in a chapter of a little over fifty pages, historical antecedents (albeit not medieval ones) to the philosophical questions raised by contemporary theory.<sup>4</sup> The volume has much else to recommend it, and it is particularly refreshing to see that Phillips presents it as a guide which seeks to engage students *critically* with contemporary theoretical concepts.

What of *literary* histories? These have traditionally paid scant attention to early theoretical activity, and there are few signs that this will change significantly. Michael Alexander's recent book (*A History of English Literature* – discussed elsewhere in this issue of *CCUE News*) includes a valuable, if brief, excursus on medieval theories of authority and allegory, but there is no attempt to present theory as a necessary counterpart to literary activity.<sup>5</sup> Histories of specific periods inevitably fare better in this respect, just as multi-volume literary histories give greater recognition to classical and medieval theorising.

*The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, a number of volumes of which are still in preparation, devotes a volume to each of the key literary periods.

What we have, then, are at least some introductory textbooks which gesture in the right direction. It is unfortunate that we have many more which do not. If we are to encourage students to think about literary production and reception as activities which always presuppose a theory or theories (even where no explicit or coherent theory is available to us as a text), we surely need to *illustrate* that theoretical concepts have a history beyond the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This is not to suggest, of course, that we should seek to plunge undergraduates into the depths of medieval, renaissance, Romantic and Victorian theories of literature from the outset. What we might aim to do instead, however, is to highlight the fact that theoretical problems are not unique to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. An obvious point, perhaps, but one which, it seems to me, is all too often forgotten.

Pedagogic changes do not happen overnight, and I am not arguing that we should seek to 'market' theory in a radically different way. A reluctance to historicise, however, will inevitably serve to perpetuate many of the rather problematic and uncritical perceptions of twentieth-century theory which exist among our undergraduates. If nothing else, a properly historicised approach supplies us with one of the necessary means of reading theory *critically*, rather than dismissively, and of discouraging the dangerous assumption that theory, and theorists, are simply too formidable to be brought into doubt.

A recognition of the diachronic aspect of 'theory' is, of course, already implicit in many of the concepts and terms which are used by students and university teachers. What appears to be the problem is that this recognition is confined largely to a set of familiar binarisms: Structuralism: Poststructuralism, modernism: postmodernism, etc. Interest in the earlier history of theory is effectively stifled by the broader opposition between a benighted 'liberal humanism' and an age of theoretical enlightenment. This reductive historical schema underpins a large majority of contemporary introductory accounts of literary theory, lending a dangerous, if reassuring, sense of 'otherness' to any theoretical activities which preceded those of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Since contemporary critical and cultural theory so proudly seeks to bring 'margins' and 'others' to the surface of academic enquiry, there must surely be good cause to bring the histories of earlier forms of theory to the forefront?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'Undoing English', *CCUE News*, 13 (6–8), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Literary Theory from Plato to Barthes: An Introductory History* (London: Macmillan, 1999)

<sup>3</sup> *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 21–22.

<sup>4</sup> *Contested Knowledge: A Guide to Critical Theory* (London: Zed Books, 2000), pp. 42–94.

<sup>5</sup> *A History of English Literature* (London: Macmillan, 2000).



Steven Matthews

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# The Breakdown of Periodization?

What are we involving ourselves in when, as teachers, scholars, and writers, we read literary history through a process of periodization? Is there a tension between the definitions which we are professionally forced to assume for ourselves and to represent – be we Renaissanceists, Romanticists, Victorianists – and the *actual* nature of our approach to the subject of English? Especially when, as is often the case, those definitions are practically restrictive in terms of the kind of teaching and writing we are able to undertake? It would be difficult in most departments, for example, for an expert in eighteenth-century literature to launch an M.A. in modernist studies, however far she or he is a dedicated amateur of the latter period. Similarly, it would be difficult for such a person to persuade academic publishers that they were the ideal author for a monograph on, say, late twentieth-century African-American literature.

We tend to be constrained by the ‘period’ choices we make, and we often make those choices early, at PhD level. Yet, even given those constraints, obvious further tensions have emerged in the subject area between various critical and theoretical approaches to research, and a period-based version of literary history. Many historically-founded undergraduate and taught M.A. courses, in other words, seem to have come somewhat adrift from the implications of the theoretically-driven scholarly monographs which have appeared in the 80s and 90s. Or, at least, there seems a significant and unresolved tension in the subject between various versions of theory which challenge the traditional period-founded view of literary history, and those which offer their re-readings whilst not seeking to disturb fundamentally established professional categories.

Paul de Man, for example, argues in his essay on ‘The Epistemology of Metaphor’ that “Rhetoric... is not in itself a historical but an epistemological discipline. This may well account for the fact that patterns of historical periodization are at the same time so productive as heuristic devices yet so demonstrably aberrant”. Post-structuralism’s dependency upon an examination of the patterns of discourse in the text allow it to both exchange gifts with the muse of history, and also proclaim a trans-historical universality in its theory of knowledge-grounding. De Man’s Preface to his 1984 collection *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* acknowledged that his own style displayed a “repeated frustration in a persistent attempt to write as if a dialectical summation were possible beyond the breaks and interruptions that the readings disclose”. He felt that he had to attempt “to recuperate on



the level of style what is lost on the level of history” in the Romantic period. His writing is therefore both determinedly post-Romantic, and contradictorily untrue to the period in its own self-frustration, its inevitable troping of given tropes, and historically-bound stylistic repetitions.

The practice of this kind of criticism, with its necessary self-involvement, obviously disturbs the categories which the academy has chosen to adopt. But, for that very reason some theoretical modes of criticism and approaches in Cultural Studies are not easily translatable into other, more established, modes of studying or (not least) teaching the subject. Acknowledgement that we are all trapped in a Romantic/post-Romantic struggle against inevitable stylistic fragmentation clearly does not lend to the kinds of structural and structured thinking which reading and teaching – particularly for those at undergraduate level – has to involve.

Perhaps paradoxically another reading practice, and one which might be taken to review periodization from a more grounded perspective, New Historicism, has largely proved less radical than promulgators like De Man of rhetorically-based approaches to literature. Stephen Greenblatt’s attempt from the early 1980s, for example, to practice a more cultural, or what he called “anthropological”, criticism did not offer a similar challenge, as the title of the book in which he sought to lay out his ‘new’ method – *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* – proves. Greenblatt saw his sample texts as providing “a focal point for the converging lines of force in sixteenth-century culture”, whilst continuing to take the particularity of that culture as a given.

Even the kinds of canon re-formation which have ensued from this and other cultural approaches, including Marxism, Women’s and Gender Studies, have not that significantly disturbed the established period parameters. If anything, despite the inclusion of a wider range of perspectives and voices within degree courses, these parameters have recently been strengthened. The greater amount of teaching now undertaken from anthologies has both instilled periodicity in students’ thinking about literature from an early stage, and heightened their anxieties about it – have they a workable definition of ‘modernism’ which they can apply to any text, seen or unseen, in the exam on the period? This leads all involved, both teachers and students, into a difficult form of rhetorical and epistemological double-think.

However, versions of the cultural approach to reading can, in other instances, sometimes call into question such period categories. The political impetus of some Postcolonial criticism, for example, has partly been to overturn dominant discourses by discovering resistance to it even where imperialism had most seemed to prevail. The claim that an identifiable modernity emerged in colonised countries before it did within the consciousness of the coloniser would seem again to have challenged the prevailing literary categorisations. But this is in its turn a complex matter, since different colonised countries began their resistance at different historical moments and to different ends. In both Ireland and Australia, where I have focused some of my own research and teaching, modernity arrived as a cultural condition arguably, for local reasons, *later* than it did in the colonising power, Britain. A clash of different temporalities and rhythms exists in those emergent nation spaces at the same time, a clash that cannot be easily mapped back on to established periods of English Studies. What we find therefore is a curious eclecticism of literary categorisation, where for instance questions of literary influence become a constrained and complex matter drawing upon no direct or linear reading of history in literature in English.

Which is perhaps merely to dramatise the kinds of seepage across period boundaries, and between various anxieties of influence, which has always existed from the writer’s own perspective. Recent work by Stephen Gill on the influence and example of Wordsworth for the Victorians would form a good example of the former; any consideration of the adjustments which T.S. Eliot made towards his reading and writing would convey a sense of the latter. A Bloomian reading of influence would seek to erode the potential problematics of periods by viewing everything as post-Spenserian or (in the American context) post-Emersonian. But once again this cabalistic interpretation might erode significant distinctions between texts from different periods. What gets eroded also is that ‘history of ideas’ element in periodization which provides to say the least a handy teaching tool, at the same time as it reveals some very real dynamics of textual practice.

Yet the postcolonial example of reading, one which establishes temporal, cultural and historical – as well as literary – particularities remains an instructive one. It does not allow for single view of the text, and resists mapping that particularity back upon period assumptions. It certainly mounts a resistance to the kinds of teaching material which, as mentioned above, we are increasingly being driven to use through practical expediency. Anthologies (even those founded upon New Historical principles) and other guides to literary history have tended to challenge the particularity of the text in all kinds of

ways in order to pull out ‘characteristic’ features. The text is presumed to operate according to the (unspoken) rules of period contexts, rather than being allowed to establish its own contexts. This problem becomes particularly acute in thinking through twentieth-century literature, where the boundaries between specified historical periods are potentially more fluid and fraught perhaps than elsewhere. The establishment of a ‘postmodernist’ undergraduate module, whilst appealing in many ways in terms of the cultural climate and likely student interest, ironically runs the risk of canonising the very texts which are proclaimed to be most questioning of issues around history. And yet the concomitant reduction of all of history to pastiche, which emerges from much postmodern discourse, offers a further blindness to the fact that similar practices have occurred earlier in the very ‘modernist’ texts that are being ironised.

Similarly, earlier in the century, the discrete specialization which had seemed to concentrate upon the 1930s – largely a variant on ‘the Auden generation’ ideal – has been consistently under challenge from more recent studies, not least within reconsiderations of some of the major ‘modernist’ figures including Virginia Woolf, who are now accepted as having themselves revised their presumptions during the decade. The modernist, stream-of-consciousness, Woolf, familiar to all undergraduates is becoming a very different figure from the Woolf studies perspective. On the other side, a more generally Cultural Studies approach to the period is refocusing attention on its other aspects, including the progress of ‘social democracy’. Once again, there is a tension between literary, and literary-historical, scholarship, and the reasonable delivery of that scholarship in taught courses.

Perhaps one way forward is the continued recourse to the old way of delivering research in teaching, whereby broad historical ‘cores’ are set alongside primarily author-based options, creating a positive epistemological or rhetorical tension between them. Yet within this there must be expanded place for those versions of literary history from the postcolonial spaces which challenge any progressivist and linear presumptions inherent in the periodization model. Only by understanding those temporalities of resistance which challenge the very nature of the academic institution of English can we come to understand better the epistemological and the historical bases of the subject. Foucault’s argument in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that, with the breakdown of periodization, we must refocus on the ‘particular structure of a given *oeuvre*’ at the moment of its creation and reception, continues to resonate today.

## The Reader, Issues 5 (Autumn/Winter 1999/2000) and 6 (Spring/Summer 2000)

Reviewed by Steve Clark

St Mary's College, Strawberry Hill

# 'The Intelligent General Reader'

*The Reader* encourages a non-professional approach to serious reading, an ambition "rising out of English in Continuing Education, and directed at 'the intelligent general reader'". The quotation marks protecting the latter phrase perhaps indicate a mythical beast akin to the snark, but there is much to admire in this stimulating new journal. One cannot but respect the time and effort involved in raising funding, physical production of issues, and the ambition of 'building a solid subscription base'.

Even over a couple of issues some practical compromises are evident, though recycling a 1976 interview with A.S. Byatt is not intrinsically invalid – nor is the reprinting of a Graham Swift piece from 1993. Some reviewing circles are apparent: poems by Elizabeth Jennings and Michael Symmons Roberts (No.6), both positively reviewed (No.5); Stanley Middleton, contributor of two poems (No.5), lauding Philip Davis's 'excellent anthology' (No.6) which in turn had received a full-page advert on the back cover of the preceding issue.

The same trackings can be made with the *TLS* or *LRB*, but are simply more immediate visible in a small magazine with a smaller pool of contributors. It should not detract from *The Reader's* broader ambition: to overcome the endemic stratification of educational institutions, and display an obstinate and admirable fidelity to an older rationale. One can also interpret the project within broadly Habermasian perspectives of the emergence or reconstruction of a democratic sphere (the importance of print culture to which has preoccupied many of those much-reviled 'professional' academic studies). However, the challenging aspects of *The Reader* which I wish to touch upon are: the attempted unification of critical with creative writing and the difficulties of escaping a potential élitism; the gendered aspect of reading; and the question of spirituality.

*The Reader* proclaims itself 'a magazine about writing worth reading'; establishing an unnecessarily schematic polarity with professional criticism: creative writing after all is also an academic discipline. The lack of quality narrative prose is lamented (prompting pleas for any 'good things to report in fiction post-1945' no less) but novels are self-evidently difficult to deal within a journal format; brief reviews all too often dwindle to little more than plot summaries. The poems are difficult to judge in isolation, though one might single

out the excellence of Elizabeth Jennings's lyrics and the cheerful parody of a Duffy monologue, plus Alan Gould's 'Electrician', whose twist is that there is no twist.

The journal's understandable hostility to academic pedantry may be seen as preventing utilisation of the freedoms that those newer methodologies have permitted. Ralph Pite's expert and lucid account of Dante has occasional lapses into speaking *de haut en bas*: the *Inferno* as 'carefully devised and thrilling horrors – a medieval Stephen King' or the switch to the vernacular as in: 'imagine too a Royal charter rewritten in the language of *EastEnders*'. Whether such a debased version of Hollywood cockney is in any way equivalent to the 'real language of men' is extremely dubious; more generally, popular forms cannot simply be treated as givens but require a properly formulated model of genre and some grasp of narrative semiotics. It is theory that has made them available to us through breaking down previous value-exclusions.

The impact of new technology is broached: 'Digital encoding may mean that no book need be out of print again', so 'it's possible that we're going to have to read more than ever. If so, our direction is going to need constant sharpening'. The traditional Leavisite imperative is confronted with the 'sheer physical quantity of reading matter, through which we need signposts and personal recommendations' (but when does 'personal' displace institutional endorsement through syllabuses, republishings, and so on?).

Robert Bly's *Iron John*, in lamenting the lack of contemporary rituals for initiation into manhood, suggested that genuine heroism is restricted to completing one's Ph.D notes (along with passing the driving test). *The Reader* may or may not feel Bly should go back to his drums, but interesting gender issues are nevertheless raised in the journal in pieces by Tim Kershaw: 'What Will Teenage Boys Read?', in Bel Mooney's essay on *Beowulf*; and in Janet Modina's short-story, 'Genesis'.

Kershaw's piece is located in the tangible context of a 'school parents' evening'. In many ways its perspective is traditional: 'readers will not easily make the jump from accessible to challenging literature unless they are guided'; immersion in popular genres should be encouraged (pulp gothic's fixation on "adolescent dissatisfaction,

disintegrating families and bullying' is noted) despite the 'worry that this type of reading does not lead anywhere'. 'In the final analysis, parents and teachers need to avoid being too judgemental when it comes to boys and reading. Tim Kershaw deals with important matters, but perhaps this is an opportunity missed – to open up the issues of persistent under-achievement, and broader contexts of socialisation and construction of masculinity (inferior verbalisation skills, lack of peer-group support, failures of communicative interaction). In this context, inability to read is a concrete exclusion.

*The Reader* does confront the issue of professionalism, not only at academic but also at school level: the National Curriculum, for example, is slighted as a way of punishing teachers 'for years of perceived laxity'. Yet should not a magazine dedicated to reading be able to give some discussion of the effectiveness or otherwise of the National Literacy Strategy, and of the technicality and rigour of current initiatives at primary and secondary level?

Bel Mooney's disarming article on *Beowulf* confesses to her impatience as an undergraduate with Anglo-Saxon literature, an attitude fuelled by 'egocentricity, laziness and lack of literary judgement [and] historical error'. She now acknowledges that '*Beowulf* contributes to his own destruction, the epic hero attaining the far more interesting status of tragic hero'. The poem's 'perceptions are universal' not the mere 'barbarous relic of an alien age'; one such perception is of 'man's ability to make joy within the seethe of chaos'. Bel Mooney here makes a curiously unqualified use of the inclusive masculine (Sarah Coley's review-essay on Heaney's translation also speaks of the 'jostle and struggle of real men', and 'moments of encounter with the world beyond man's making'). These female commentaries on archaic masculinity edit out its constitutive violence, alienation and misogyny: *Beowulf* may be many things but 'the mildest and gentlest of men'? Tell that to Grendel's mother.

Medina's story 'Genesis' also shows a proclivity for intuitive maleness: Victor chopping timber ('He watched the axe with satisfaction as it cleaved deep into the blood-red heart wood') and slaughtering a hen ('She felt plump and soft as he held her steady while the warm blood trickled into the bowl. He held her firmly as she trembled and quivered, surrendering her life to him, slowly, quietly, in the gathering gloom'). Does this not earn all the strictures heaped on, for example, the close of Lawrence's 'The Woman Who Rode Away'? The violence arguably prefigures that of the final scene of childbirth, where the man stubbornly refuses to allow his new-born daughter to die. Here what is perplexing is the (wholly implausible) incompetence of the midwife (who 'just stood rigid aghast at the sight of it').

These numbers of *The Reader* often touch on 'the problems of belief in a post-modern, post-Darwinian world'. Hardy is a recurrent touchstone; A.N. Wilson's move 'from conventional doctrine to personal doubt' in *God's Funeral* is respectfully reviewed; Jennings's verse is praised for its 'religious vision', and Roberts's for its gnostic parables; in Pamela Bond's 'Esprit de Corps', 'in/queues of prayers/ they say they had no idea/they prayed'. The final section (No. 5) explicitly addresses the question 'why should I read religious literature when I hold no religious beliefs'; answering that discomfort is only part of a more general 'intrusive awkwardness we feel in most past writing' and that 'knowledge in our lives is usually a form of longing'. In contrast, Simon Starkey's essay on Milton is notably more comfortable with the paradoxes of post-critical faith. With *Paradise Lost*, 'once release the poem from a dogmatic understanding and its stories can be restored to a paradigmatic drama'.

Philip Davis sounds a note of exasperation: 'If the academic study of literature was ever a subject at the very forefront of exciting and deep thinking, it is not so now. Now, for the most part, professional literary criticism is jargon-ridden and dull, as well as expensive. Better for the serious general reader to go direct to the novels, plays and poems themselves and for help and stimulation, to real-life discussion groups'. But are such 'discussion groups' likely to be found outside the ambit of educational institutions, and why are *they* not also a legitimate form of 'real-life'? Cannot the preservation of the endangered species of the 'serious general reader' draw from alternative traditions: of definitions of the public sphere, and of the communal accountability of post-critical theology? *The Reader* provides a stimulating forum for the discussion of such issues, springing from consideration of the nature of reading itself.

***The Reader* is published twice yearly in Spring and Autumn.**

**An annual subscription is £4.50 post free (cheques payable to 'The University of Liverpool'), and back issues 3, 4, & 5 are available at £1 each.**

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# The Reader

## Replies to Steve Clark

Any reply to a somewhat unfavourable review is bound to seem an expression of wounded pride and it isn't the specific criticisms of Dr Clark that call for a response so much as the assumptions about the study of literature from which they proceed. The relation between academic and interested reader indicated in this review points in a single direction by which the special skills of the profession are to be offered to those outside by a process of patient explanation and lucid exposition. Unfortunately, the reviewer's account of the 'freedoms that those newer methodologies have permitted' looks suspiciously like restriction, so that no passing reference to contemporary popular culture is permissible, apparently, outside a 'grasp' (significant word) 'of narrative semiotics' and *Beowulf* can only be considered in terms of the 'construction of masculinity'. We end up not with democratic 'freedoms', the generous diversity of the reading experience, but two or three working methods of commentary which, and we recognise the dangers of polemical parody, repeat a few unsurprising historical facts (no; Old English poetry does not offer many female voices), confirm a cosy circle of judgements about what collectively shocks us

(the end of 'The Woman Who Rode Away') or agree to dislike any dogma but one's own ('post-critical faith').

The issue is whether as a subject of study English is concerned with enquiry and the testing of responses and ideas or whether it is a technical subject in which different texts are subjected to the analysis indicated in a series of instruction manuals. Since *The Reader* manifestly holds to the former model it is our belief that the 'general', that is the non-professional, reader has something to tell us, as well as our hope that the experience of those who teach the subject might interest a wider public. The vitality of English as a study lies in the capacity of the books themselves to stimulate, astonish and move the reader – and to depart from the purposes for which they came into being is to lose what draws people to read in the first place. We transform the subject into a dowdy and not very expert poor relation of sociology at our peril. *The Reader* does believe in 'legitimate forms of real life in universities': it simply has a different view of what constitutes real life from that offered by the reviewer. A wide pool of contributors is welcomed and sought – please write to us.

### The English Subject Centre: from Philip Martin, Director

The English Subject Centre has been long in its arrival, but is now established. The role of CCUE in establishing the Centre should not be underestimated, for its constitution, based on a partnership between CCUE, King's, and Royal Holloway, owes its strength to the strong reporting line between the Centre and the Council. The Subject Centre belongs to, and is responsible to, the Subject Community. Of the 24 subject centres nationwide, only this one has its representative function so clearly built in to its foundation.

The Centre has four full-time staff. Carol Eckersley, the administrator, worked in Royal Holloway English Department as secretary and PA to the Head of English before joining the centre in November. Carol is therefore familiar with the subject and its terminology, and her organisational experience will be a great asset for us. Dr Michael Hanrahan also took up his post in November. Michael is a medievalist with a wide experience in the States and the UK in the application of IT in the classroom. Joining us from Ripon and St John, his role in the Centre is that of Project officer for IT and Communications. Dr Siobhan Holland (project officer for academic liaison) started in October, joining the Centre from Staffordshire University, where she was involved with FDTL projects. Siobhan's specialisms are in twentieth century and contemporary writing, and Irish Studies.

The subject centre now embarks on a busy programme of activities that are concerned with its establishment and its function. There will be a series of visits to departments which will allow us to understand the varied character of English programmes in more detail, and, most importantly, to identify the needs of individual departments and the extent to which they share common grounds. We plan to visit around sixty departments this year, and by the end of the second year we expect to have visited every English department in HE. We have

arranged a programme of individual study days and workshops; a series of three large scale day conferences to address preparations for QAA academic review; a short series of IT training days; and we are planning to produce a series of reports for the subject on germane topics such as application rates to English degrees, the curriculum and Curriculum 2000, and the measurements of degree programmes in study hours.

The Subject Centre will produce a substantial Newsletter containing useful information and more discursive articles, with a circulation of around 2,500. The first newsletter contains around twenty articles, and will be circulated early in 2001. While the Newsletter is likely to be the most visible product of the Subject Centre in its early stages, it is likely to be superseded, in time, by our Web Site, which as well as including all copies of materials produced by the Centre, will also offer gateways to a wide range of other sites and services.

In summary, the Subject Centre will be both pro-active and reactive to the needs of the subject community, and I invite all English Departments to participate in our activities and let us know about their pressing needs. Thus far issues such as seminars, student literacy, creative writing, IT, and preparation for academic review seem to be high priorities.

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## Rethinking Assessment

**Review of *Towards a Productive Assessment Practice*: Rebecca Johnson and Philip O'Neil, *Diversifying Assessment*; Ian Baker and Phil Bannister, *Self-Assessment*; Aidan Arrowsmith and Siobhan Holland, *Practising Theory On Line*; Julia Bell and Julian Jackson, *Undergraduate Publishing: How to Cook a Book* (University of Northumbria, 2000). Project website: <http://www.assessingenglish.unn.ac.uk>**

How might traditional assessment practices in English Studies be diversified? How might feedback systems more fully convey to students the criteria by which their work is judged? The four case studies in the *Towards a Productive Assessment Series* offer answers to precisely these questions. The case studies are the result of *The Assessment and the Expanded Text* Project, a HEFCE-funded project directed by the English Division at the University of Northumbria in collaboration with Sheffield Hallam University, Staffordshire University and the University of East Anglia. *Diversifying Assessment* expounds the value of assessing students on review writing, seminar presentations and the compilation of 'reading dossiers' of lecture and seminar notes; *Self-Assessment* describes and provides exemplars of self-assessment forms designed to generate a productive feedback cycle between student and tutor; *Practising Theory On Line* describes how key skills required in critical thinking and essay writing may be acquired through interaction with specially-designed computer software while *How to Cook a Book* details how a course focused on the production of a text from composition to publication may foster student self-assessment and the acquisition of transferable skills. As the range of titles suggests, the project was designed to offer examples of productive assessment practices in both traditional and newer areas of the curriculum: the case study on self-assessment comfortably maps onto the traditional essay-based assignment whilst other innovations constitute substantive assessment practices.

The case studies proceed from a 'student-centred' orientation to pedagogy whereby the learning process is predominantly conceived as one of knowledge transformation rather than knowledge transmission, encouraging 'active involvement on the part of the Learners'.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, certain themes underlie the four case studies. In each, there is recognition of the value of supplementing the traditional essay-based assignment with the occasional 'low stakes' exercise where students are called upon to complete tasks dissociated from immediate assessment in order to encourage the experimentation and innovation intrinsic to progress. This assignment might take the form of writing a review of a text rather than a discursive essay; of collating lecture and seminar notes as a 'reading dossier'; of participating in a group presentation. Each of these models for assessment is conceived to some extent as constituting a 'buffer zone' or practice space within which students may experiment, relate new ideas to existing knowledge, forge connections and make moves to gain ownership of critical concepts, strategies and ideas. Perhaps the most striking innovation along these lines is the *Creation of On Line Study Environment (COSE)* program pioneered at Staffordshire University. Taking program-users through a series of tasks related to critical thinking and the formulation of dialectical argument, the software



offers students 'structured and helpful opportunities to practise using theoretical approaches for themselves'.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the case study on self-assessment makes clear how student conceptions of the traditional essay-writing task may be reoriented to help them recognise more clearly its formative aspect. The case study details the practice at Sheffield Hallam University of requiring the completion of a self-assessment form (embodying positive and negative feedback) prior to the submission of each essay. Students thus anticipate tutor feedback and are thereby encouraged to view the essay itself as provisional and formative, a practice space.

The project literature demonstrates persuasively how the introduction of different models of assessment can prove invaluable in clarifying assessment criteria to students. The *COSE* project achieves this by breaking down the processes of critical thinking and essay-writing into discrete, defined stages; the UEA course in the production and publication of texts helps students to uncover for themselves the need for accuracy, rigour and editorial policy in the production of their own work; the group work suggested in *Diversifying Assessment* and the self-monitoring proposed by *Self-Assessment* enable explicit peer and student-tutor discussion of how the criteria for academic tasks in English are both formulated and interpreted.

The reader of these case studies might find occasion to ponder the practical limitations of diversifying assessment in English studies. IT resources and skills are the prerequisites of projects such as *COSE*; the value of student self-assessment forms is dependent upon their full, detailed and repeated completion by the students – something one might not always wish to ask of undergraduates working to tight deadlines. Implementation of the innovations proposed would likewise need to take account of the possibility that certain models of assessment might favour particular learning styles: the student favouring a holistic approach to study might derive limited benefit from the serialistic tasks of the *COSE* software whilst assessment on group work and seminar presentation will not ideally match the more reticent or reflective student.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless the range and diversity of assessment innovations included in the *Towards a Productive Assessment Series* persuasively realises the stated aims of the project and provides a valuable contribution to the subject-specific literature on formative and summative assessment in English studies. Clear, concise, and incorporating illustrative examples of the innovations they propose, the four case studies provide rich demonstration of the value of assessment practices which encourage students to focus on learning from mistakes rather than fearing judgment by them.

<sup>1</sup> *Diversifying Assessment*, p.6. The 'student-centred' or 'conceptual change' orientation to teaching is outlined by K. Trigwell and M. Prosser, "Changing Approaches to Teaching: A Relational Perspective", in *Studies in Higher Education* 21 (1996), 275-84.

<sup>2</sup> *Practising Theory on Line*, p.8

<sup>3</sup> Serialist and holist approaches to learning are described by G. Pask, "Style and Strategies of Learning", *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 46 (1976), 128-48.

# The Trouble with Theory



About thirty years ago English departments were dominated by Leavisites whose contempt for popular culture, myopic pre-occupation with the words on the page and dogmatic judgements of literature in terms of whether or not it 'made for life' were stifling literary studies. Then came French theory. First there was structuralism, with its proclamation that literary works were not imaginative creations but combinations of codes and conventions, whose form was more important than their content. Then there were the various manifestations of post-structuralism, feminism, post-colonialism, deconstruction and so on, all preaching the plurality of meaning and claiming that since 'reality' was an effect of language it could be changed by being described differently. Finally there came postmodernism, the current orthodoxy, with its distrust of 'grand narratives' and its demolition of the Berlin Wall between 'high' and 'popular' culture. The effect of these various changes was to bring the canon crashing down and to change the role of the critic from someone who contemplated texts to someone who used them to contest representations of 'reality'.

Despite the success of theory in changing the culture of English studies, questions remain about its precise relation with traditional criticism, particularly as represented by F. R. Leavis. Theorists maintain that the work of, among others, Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva and Lacan represent a complete break with the kind of criticism practised by Leavis, but I am not so sure. In very general terms, Leavis would have agreed with the underlying proposition of structuralism and post-structuralism that language does not mirror the world but moulds it. Indeed, he devoted his entire career to explaining the importance of that principle in relation to the development of 'culture' while simultaneously defending it against those who exploited it for commercial purposes. Moreover, Leavis was just as sceptical as Barthes about the author as the guarantee of meaning, and even displayed Derridean tendencies when he took M. R. Ridley, the editor of the Arden *Antony and Cleopatra*, to task for saying that a particular phrase had either one meaning or the other. Why, asked the exasperated Leavis, could it not have both? And why, we may ask, have theorists only read Leavis in one way when they claim that any text can be read in many ways? Are they blind to their own insight that the other is always, in part, yourself?

Of course there are differences between Leavis and the theorists, but they are less to do with conceptions of language than with a relation to economics. The driving force of Leavis's work was how to sustain human values in a world increasingly dominated by economic considerations. He was not opposed to economic development, but he was acutely aware that what he called 'technologico-Benthamite'

civilization could not answer 'the profound human need for significance' because it took no ends into account other than those 'which are looked after by quantitative criteria'. Leavis believed that literature, the creative use of language, was one means of catering for the rich diversity and creative capacity of individuals in a society whose prime goal was, as he saw it, the standardization of goods and opinion.

This position has been laughed to scorn by theorists who regard Leavis's conception of the 'human' as at best naïve and at worst complicit with a racist and patriarchal order. There may be some truth in the former but the latter is an exaggeration though understandable given the need, when establishing a new paradigm, to dramatize its difference from the old. The problem for the theorists is that while they dismiss the notion of the 'human', they cannot dispense with it. Why bother to protest at the portrayal of women in Victorian fiction unless you believe in equal rights? On what grounds can you oppose racism unless you invoke some idea of common humanity? Theorists are just as impatient with the notion of the economic as they are with the 'human'. A concept of economy implies a regulatory whole, but both post-structuralists and post-modernists regard any idea of unity as repressive and therefore reject it on principle, a move that explains why 'class' has been largely absent from their work.

For all that, the metaphor of economy is central to theory. It derives from the adoption of the Saussurean model of language which marked the moment of transition from what Catherine Belsey calls practical criticism to critical practice. Saussure used the example of money to explain how language worked. In the same way that the value of a unit of currency lies in its capacity to be exchanged for something different, such as a loaf of bread, or in its being compared with a similar value of the same system, for example another coin, so too is the value of a word determined by being 'exchanged for something dissimilar, an idea'; or by being 'compared with something of the same nature, another word'. At the heart of the theory is the enabling and unexamined metaphor of monetary exchange. This gives rise to a controlling diction and imagery that is either directly or indirectly related to notions of economy. Derrida says that the question of language is always 'one of economy and strategy', Belsey describes the critic's task in terms of the 'production' of meaning, while Lyotard's claim that truth has given way to performance underwrites the constant setting of targets which has penetrated all aspects of society. How different to Leavis who right from the beginning of his career understood that 'meaning' had to be 'wrest [ed] from the economist' if society was to be anything more than an efficiently performing 'production plant' delivering ever higher standards of living.

Theory's failure to reflect on its pervasive economism severely compromises its radical status. By abandoning the grand narrative of Marxism it lost a powerful tool in the analysis of capitalist exploitation, making its much vaunted resistance to 'power' more rhetorical than real. Theory may have a lot to say about the play of signification but it is silent over what George Monbiot calls the 'corporate takeover of Britain', the usurpation of the public need in universities, schools, hospitals and prisons by business interests. The capacity of corporations to force elected governments to yield to their demands makes a mockery of Foucault's claim that power is widely dispersed throughout society. As Monbiot gloomily concludes from his study, the 'decisions [of the multi-nationals] are, in practice, impossible for citizens or voluntary organizations to challenge'. Theorists loftily denounce such pessimism, but while they have been 'opening up' the text, Parliament has been 'closing down' dissent. Witness the Public Order Act (1986), The Trade Union Act (1992), The Criminal Justice Bill (1994) and The Security Service Act (1996).

The rise of Mrs. Thatcher coincides with the rise of theory; the free play of market forces found its counterpart in the free play of meaning. It was under Mrs. Thatcher that universities had to become more business orientated. Their funding was cut leaving them little choice but to turn to industry for help. This policy was continued by John Major and persists under the present Labour government which has created a 'reach-out' fund to encourage universities to work more effectively with industry and also redefined the role of the higher education funding councils to ensure that universities are more responsive to commercial needs. In their attempt to serve the knowledge economy, universities are adopting business practices such as mission statements, quality assurance procedures, auditing, form filling, league tables and appraisal. There are even moves afoot to introduce performance related pay. These changes, together with the adoption of the Saussurian paradigm, have altered the vocabulary of criticism, changing it from a humanistic idiom to an economic and managerial one which in turn has facilitated the bureaucratization of the academy. In particular, the highly abstract language of some aspects of theory complements the increasingly administrative culture of higher education.

Management writers have found theory very congenial. Fiona Czerniawska, a leading management consultant, writes that language is 'a coherent system of signs that determines the perception of reality' and it can therefore be used as a 'truly competitive weapon in practical business'. Another management writer, Paul Bate agrees. Language, he says 'structures thought' and, continuing in true post-structuralist fashion, declares that the 'struggle for words is the struggle for meaning' adding that managers are 'the manipulators of meaning', their aim being to change the 'organization culture' in order to 'increase productivity'. When Terence Hawkes asserted that we use Shakespeare's plays to generate meaning, I doubt if he had in mind those appropriations made by Norman Augustine and Kenneth Adelman in *Shakespeare in Charge: The Bard's Guide to Leading and Succeeding on the Business Stage* (1999) or by John Whitney and Tina Packer in *Power Plays: Shakespeare's Lessons in Leadership and*

*Management* (2000). By claiming that there is nothing to Shakespeare except what we mean by him, Hawkes renders all uses of his work equivalent when clearly they are not: it is better to use Shakespeare to promote racial harmony rather than racial hatred. To accept that some uses of Shakespeare are preferable to others is a reminder that for all its sophistication theory, in whatever form, cannot do without some notion of humanism.

There is also the wider question of who has the power to get their version of Shakespeare accepted, the theorist or the management consultant? Hawkes has little to say about this but it is a crucial matter if you believe that the study of literature, or culture generally, is about the struggle for meaning. In many ways theory serves the interests of corporate capitalism. Theorists claim to be engaged in undermining hierarchy, but a more priestly caste is hard to imagine. Besides they live, move and have their multiple identities in universities and they are therefore compelled to reproduce the very hierarchies they claim to challenge. Don't we all select which students are to be accepted on our courses and don't we all grade them at the end of their three years? And by expecting students to be punctual and attend lectures, by teaching them to extract essential information, to synthesize different points of view and to write clearly, aren't we all preparing them for the market place? Even when we teach them apparently radical methods of reading, aren't we training them to function in the commercial environment? As Mark Edmundson observes in *Literature Against Philosophy: Plato to Derrida* (1995), a book that should be required reading for all theorists, Derrida's dissolution of binary oppositions and his endless linking of terms accords well with an information economy based on networking rather than hierarchies, on numerous linkages rather than line management. Of course we cannot help but collude with the system, but the fact that we do so ought to make us more diffident about our claim to oppose it.

In the end, theory serves the existing order more than it subverts it because its tone and idiom are too close to the prevailing market and managerial philosophies to be critical of either of them. This stands in direct contrast to Leavis who had a clear sense of the difference between human and economic values. Of course this is in some sense a false distinction, but what Leavis was driving at was the way in which a concern with purely economic matters distorted other human capacities. His hostility to Marxism not only prevented him from analyzing this problem fully, it also meant he expected too much from literature. Now, perhaps, we expect too little. After the experience of theory we are embarrassed to speak of the unsettling effects of literature, its challenges and consolations, its revelations and resonances. Theory seeks to master a text, to recruit it to a cause, to make it an illustration of the known rather than an illumination of the new. It is adept at making the text other than what it is but in the process it loses what Leavis, for all his faults, tried to convey, the energy of a unique encounter.