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Preview Press the Escape key to close Modern Literary Theory and Ancient Texts. An Introduction

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Abstract
This short volume is designed to introduce classicists (mainly students of classical literature) to a range of twentieth-century theoretical approaches to the study of texts. Its best feature is S.'s unapologetic and palpable commitment both to theory, as the engine for producing new ways to frame and to explore crucial questions about literature, and to literary texts themselves. His conclusion, arguing that literary theory helps us perceive the 'strangeness' of classical texts and their provocations to 'see the world from a strange perspective' (p. 208), is passionate and convincing; the sections where he focusses on the application of modern theories to ancient texts are also strong, if rather few in number.

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close, modern, literary, texts, ancient, preview, press, escape, theory, key, introduction

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There are twelve chapters on various schools of theory. These are presented in a part-chronological, part-thematic order which works well; before coming to, say, ‘Deconstruction’ (Chapter 8) or ‘Feminist Approaches/Gender Studies’ (Chapter 11), the reader has already been introduced to ‘Russian Formalism’ (Chapter 1), ‘Structuralism’ (Chapter 2), ‘Intertextuality’ (Chapter 5) and ‘Reader-Response Criticism’ (Chapter 6), and is ready to follow the arguments developed in the later chapters.

As this partial list may indicate, the book’s coverage is eclectic: it treats many, but not all, of the ‘canonical’ approaches (in addition to those already mentioned, there are chapters on psychoanalysis, new historicism, and Foucauldian discourse analysis: postcolonialism and ideology/ Marxian criticism are absent, but mentioned in a postscript). Chapters on ‘orality-literacy’ and ‘narratology’ seem to have been included less because of their centrality to a theoretical canon than in recognition of their transformative importance to classical literary scholarship; in general, the book’s structure reflects S.’s own interests and convictions. This is a deliberate strategy on the author’s part: he argues that ‘after due consideration, my conviction was strong that the advantages of having a book like this, written by one person and thus having a uniform and consistent conception, outweigh the disadvantages’ (p. 12).

Accordingly, in the Introduction’s opening image, S. promises us an ‘Ariadne’s thread through the maze of confusing and contradictory theoretical approaches’ to literary texts (p. 1). The metaphor suggests that the book is designed not so much to give readers a map of theory’s labyrinth, allowing us to follow our own path through it, as to guide us along one possible route through its complicated passages and intersections. The book as it stands, however, is not a monograph following a single line of argument concerning the relative importance and usefulness of the theoretical schools included. Rather, it is positioned as an introduction to ‘the most important ideas and concepts of the main theoretical approaches’ (p. 1); S. insists ‘I want to encourage readers to pursue their own way, not to browbeat them’ (p. 2).

The book thus attempts to be both a situated piece of writing, filtered through S.’s own likes and dislikes, and a (relatively) neutral and open introduction to literary theory. This doubleness is its weak spot; in the end, it fails to be satisfactory in either aspect.
S.’s laudable intention to ‘be honest about my likes and dislikes and give reasons for them so readers can judge themselves whether they find these reasons convincing’ (p. 13) is not followed through in the main body of the book. His chapter on deconstruction, for example, opens with an accomplished presentation of some of Derrida’s key ideas and arguments through a clear and succinct account of Derrida’s reading of Saussure (pp. 114–20). However, as the chapter goes on, S.’s disillusionment with deconstruction shades into the text, and he ceases to draw a clear distinction between his presentation of the theory and his evaluation of it: he writes as if the three statements were equally uncontroversial, that Derrida argues that ‘writing functions in the absence of its context’ (p. 117); that deconstruction is ‘incapable of escaping the pitfalls of ethical and political irresponsibility’ (p. 130); and that some of Derrida’s writings ‘are simply outrageous and arrogant in their narcissistic incomprehensibility’ (p. 131).

The book thus persistently blurs the boundary between S.’s own line of argument and his presentation of other scholars’ thought. At times he falls prey to the affective fallacy to such an extent that any genuine attempt at understanding theory is lost; he invites us to ‘judge for [ourselves]’, not what Irigaray and Cixous’s *écriture feminine* is attempting to do or whether it succeeds on its own terms, but whether or not we find it ‘irritating’ (p. 181).

This blurriness seriously undermines the usefulness of the ‘further reading’ and bibliographical sections, where S.’s own preferences are consistently stated as fact. For example, in the further reading section of the Foucault chapter, we read that Foucault’s books ‘are not as difficult and forbidding to read as the texts of the deconstructionists. Without a doubt, Foucault’s own writings provide the best introduction to his work’ (p. 158): accordingly, S. provides no recommendations for readers who do find Foucault’s writing difficult. (Conversely, in the further reading section in the deconstruction chapter, he does not recommend any starting points in the works of, say, Derrida and de Man themselves, for students who might be more inspired by Derrida’s own writing than by an introductory work.) These sections also contain some striking omissions; the chapter on ‘Reader-Response Criticism’ and the Constance School contains no mention of C. Martindale’s influential *Redeeming the Text. Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (1993).

S.’s failure to distinguish between the presentation and the evaluation of theory creates a problem with the style of the book: technical terminology is not introduced clearly and used consistently (a crucial task for an introductory volume). For example, ‘discourse’ is glossed in passing as ‘the use of language’ (p. 142) in the chapter on Foucault; earlier in the volume, in the context of Bakhtin’s theory of ‘discourse’, S. has defined ‘discourses’ as ‘perspectives on the world’ (p. 77). At times, this lack of terminological clarity produces passages where the connection of thought is not coherently explicated, and which rely on knowledge which a reader of an introduction is not likely to have. The problem is exacerbated by lapses in the translation (‘Jakobson … distinguishes between several sets [Einstellung] towards the linguistic message’, p. 21) and a noticeable number of typographical errors.

This book may be useful for academics and teachers who already have some knowledge of the theoretical approaches it addresses and who will be able to extract the useful from the unclear or misleading. I would not recommend it as an introductory volume for students.

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