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Edited by Richard Machin and Christopher Norris

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## Introduction

RICHARD MACHIN AND  
CHRISTOPHER NORRIS

*I “Post-” what, exactly?*

We begin by sorting through just a few points from the critical debate raised by this collection. This should not suggest that the essays have been completely understood and then set out in précis, with the intention of drawing the reader on into the pages that follow. But as it is customary for introductions at least to pretend omniscience, the reader is quite entitled to ask of this introduction two relatively straightforward questions: “What do the essays have to say about English poetry?”, and “What do they have to say about literary criticism?” By way of a reply, the introduction asks another question: “Why is it so hard to provide an answer?”

First of all, these authors are not united in any common theoretical pursuit. “Post-structuralist” is a non- or even anti-name, drawing attention to what the essays are *not*, rather than to any shared critical system that characterizes them. In fact many of the contributors evinced anxiety when asked to stand beneath, if not to go ahead and wave, the post-structuralist banner. Essays such as these exhibit a diversity which threatens the tradition of institutionalized criticism; in response, that tradition is ever willing to assimilate them by means of just such a collective name. The name pins the writer down, makes it possible to speak species, and offers a bootstrap by which talk about the new theory can raise itself above talk about the old. But this name also begs the immediate question of another, previous name: what is it about “structuralism” that prevents these essays from being post- anything else? We are already implicitly adding a “Speaking post-structurally . . .” qualifier to each of them which, when made explicit, seems ludicrously uninformative. In view of these objections, why use the term at all?

Structuralism offered criticism its last chance to make a science out of theorizing literature. Fortunately enough, it resulted in a cross-fertilization of disciplines that spawned this latest and spectacularly impotent offspring. Criticism after structuralism is impotent in so far as

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it is unable to produce further and greater structuralisms. There's not much science of the kind favoured by structuralism to be found nowadays. It is as though the literary structuralists represented the culmination and the grand finale of all previous attempts to produce a scientific theory of literature; in this case, no "new structuralism" was possible. Perhaps "fitz-structuralism" more usefully describes what happened next; it hints, among other things, at both the dangerously over-productive parent and the contentiously illegitimate offspring. But even this seems too closely to confine, or even to exclude its subject. In the event we have the equally graphic "post-structuralism", a term that seems not to name what we do in the present at all, but rather to re-name structuralism itself, as what we used to do in the past. It provides a post to which structuralism is then hitched, confining it by means of the shortest tether the language has to offer.

If the terminology doesn't seem to tell us much about the writers, neither can it have a lot to say about any new critical context that they provide for the poems. Perhaps that is a good thing. After all, the ambition to escape the jargon, the prejudice, and the restriction of formalized theory is not without precedent in literary studies. "Literary theory" seems as indigestible today as it must have been in Leavis's time; literature, then, was strictly non-theory. To this way of thinking, it is not literature's place to be theoretical. And it couldn't be theory if it sounded like literature: each should know its allotted place. But this view founders on the recognition that any talk about literature presupposes a theoretical ground for the discussion, while theoretical discussion inevitably strikes literary poses during the course of argument. Clearly, the distinction is blurred and cannot be rigorously maintained; the impulse suggested by the "post-" seems to be to leave these misleading categories behind. But it also reintroduces the questions with which we began: in the light of post-structuralism's indeterminacy as to what literature and theory *are*, and therefore what it (post-structuralism) might be capable of doing, what does this collection of essays have to say about English poetry? And how are we to view criticism? As theory? Or as non-theory – that is to say literature?

Fixed and mounted by the great tradition, these poems should by now be known inside out. Especially by professional readers, who must be quite familiar with the sort of literary taxidermy still to be found in the academy. But no less than their precursive colleagues, modern readers articulate a continued and persistent need to come to an understanding of these poems. Though the readings are new, strange and different, the occasion of the discussion remains the same. Many

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professional readers of literature regard the upsurge of literary theory with a fair degree of apprehension; the canon is threatened by interdisciplinary onslaughts which seem not to play the literary game (at least, not by the familiar rules). Nevertheless, the poems emerge from their ordeal intact – even revitalized. We, the onlookers, complete a triangle in which readers stand alongside poets in an endless struggle with language.

Throughout this struggle, the importance and the necessity of the poetry is unquestionable on two counts: first, the subject of each essay is taken “as read”; that is to say, both as having been read before, and as presenting us with a legacy of interpretative problems which still, as a matter of course, demand a solution. Second, and perhaps more importantly, each new act of criticism questions, rather than enhances, the critical tradition. In the process, it implicitly casts doubt on the relevance of previous readings. Our understanding of the text is renewed, alongside the recognition that any understanding to which we are brought can only be partial and incomplete.

The present essays seem to owe as much to the archaeological as they do to the literary-critical tradition. The dead letters of canonized texts are reorganized even as the readings preserve them; a new context is offered, and the poem appears in startling relief. This process tells us as much about the context as it does about the poems, and writing about literature begins to merge with writing about the changing circumstances in which literature is both written and read. As the poems are translated into this alien context, readers new to post-structuralist criticism might justifiably feel that, on occasions, they are faced with a different language. But as they work to interpret it the process of translation itself reveals new and revised significance for the poems; they seem to speak strangely, and about unfamiliar things.

No, they don't; surely it can't really be the poems that are speaking. Another characteristic of these (and other) post-structuralist readings is their tendency to feature the text as an active subject. Where once the author was, now shall the text be. Strictly speaking, texts cannot do anything. They don't affect anything or anyone until they are read. And yet, the process of reading seems inevitably to employ agents to work on its behalf, be they personal (the name of an author, “this reader”, or an implied ideal recipient) or more purely grammatical (an impersonal “it”). The source of meaning always used to be an author. But it might be the reader (just another author), language (the medium as the message), or ideology (a mixture of all three). We do always require a source, a centre around which we can coordinate strategies to “make sense” of a piece of writing – much as we require the subject

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for a verb. (In this sense, “It’s great”, said of a poem, is akin to “It’s raining”, said of the weather.) Within the ensuing discourse a new subjectivity emerges, which the text then claims and reproduces as its own. Since, without enlisting the help of powerful rhetoric, we can’t attribute will to an (often departed) author, and since we get the feeling that, no matter how partisan we are, significance within the text is not solely our own responsibility, on many occasions the text’s usurpation of a strictly human capacity to make meaning takes place by default. There is certainly a sort of floating subjectivity around when we talk about literature, an “it” waiting to seize its chance to become an “I”. (It just did it again.) Such texts, and the autonomy with which they speak, have become the prerequisite source of the power that we ascribe to authors, to readers, to language and to ideology. This turns out to be the transcendental proof, if any sort of proof were needed, of the permanence of the canon.

But if language seems to cover its tracks, in this case by transforming a structural effect (the grammatical third person) into subjective agency, then the same must be said for the critic. Barthes took structuralism to its limits, applying highly systematized but entirely fictitious codes in a mixture of certitude and inspired mythmaking. The present essays, too, owe much to the fact that language always tends to look the same, whether it is used in literature or theory, fact or fiction. The critic is free to borrow from a limitless number of different registers, providing a fluid context into which the poem enters at successive turns of the argument. Indeed, it is often hard to distinguish the reading as context for the poem, and the poem as context for a discourse which seems at odds with the conventions of critical argument. Why should this be?

In part, these readers implicitly reserve the right not to talk about the poem in question. Or rather, to present the poem in tandem with issues which seem alien to it, about which we might have thought it had little to say. In these cases the reading is less an exposition, or an interpretation, than a dialogue. And the poem’s part in the dialogue, the statements it makes and the meanings it introduces, can be far from conventional in the impression they create of the “personality” of the poem. Perhaps this is the most authentic way in which these poems can be said to “speak” at all in the present day. Meaning, and the sense of an underlying “intention to mean” that is produced, now arises from the poems’ structure rather than from their more overt statement. We are invited to consider how the functional aspect of poetry, its manifest task to make meaning, combines with a more apologetic justification of its success: the language itself remains, after a poem has been read,

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as the mute foundation of its elegant speech. The language must be accounted for, its rudeness overcome; it must be either hidden, or quaintly featured in the overall architectural scheme. To dismantle this elegant facade is to see the difference between the raw materials, which must claim to be singularly meaningless, and the finished structure, which has a completeness, an identity which is at once appearance and essence. Keats's vocabulary and Lloyd-Wright's bricks have this much in common. The poems haven't changed in all this. They are still the same, and in an important sense they remain the same whatever we say about them. Criticism itself produces and maintains the category "literature", even when it appears to deny principles on which the institutionalized study of literature is founded. Literature is produced, and reproduced, as the site for interpretative contests among competing theories of reading; the changing contexts in which it appears produce an equal and opposite sense of permanence. One of the theorists in this collection demonstrates Yeats's permanent presence within attempts to control, explain and overcome his influential aesthetic. Even as the demonstration unfolds, we see the poetry materialize behind this present struggle to come to terms with powerfully exclusive critical theories. So as change is forced upon convention, convention itself receives an added prop. Stability and change depend on one another, just as post-structuralism reproduces such oppositions even as it appears to prove them groundless.

Nevertheless, it is often when post-structuralism attempts to shift our attention away from "primary" literary texts, and toward the "secondary" works of the critics themselves, that it meets most resistance. Resistance, in this case, often entails fear – fear that something important will be lost, or replaced by an inferior product. There's no doubt that, on the evidence of the present essays, such fears are groundless. Their effect is not to replace study of canonized poetry with study of canonized critics; rather, it is to change those habits of reading with which we approach the work of both the poets and their critics. For example, there is a convention which attaches to poetry a timeless, or more precisely an ahistorical, notion of work. This work is exclusive to "primary" literary texts, and it implicitly excludes whatever it is that critics do. Criticism can still smuggle in its own influential judgments, yet it must do so while claiming merely to provide a service function. But now, this service function is able to reflect on its own history; criticism not only serves, but uses literature as a benchmark against which it can measure its own progress. These poems exist, for us, on the far side of a whole critical history of attempts to read them, a series of attempts to theorize the interpretative problems

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that have arisen in the course of producing a coherent theory of reading. And so there is an important sense in which the present essays cannot but impose upon the poetry their own pre-history of interpretative struggle. Are we reading the poems through the criticism, as convention would have it, or are these poems offered as media for the tensions and the manoeuvrings of modern critical debate? Tension and manoeuvring is certainly in evidence in these essays. It works both to revise our understanding of the poetry, and – in part as a result – to subvert the conventions by which the poems are fitted into a history of literary interpretation.

We are asked to consider the complex and largely unspoken notion of subjectivity which structures our appraisal of “metaphysical” poetry. This notion sustains, and is in turn sustained by, the sort of subjectivity that we then repeatedly find among the metaphysical poets. The means by which we come to understand the poems, and the poems that we subsequently feel we understand, are inextricably intertwined: when we are now asked to question our view of one metaphysical writer’s expression of subjectivity, we are immediately led to relativize the position from which we speak, as interpreting subjects in the present. And just as the developmental history of the subject is defined by developmental changes in what the subject knows, so our notion of subjectivity is itself produced, and threatened, by what we know and by how we account for our knowledge. In a subject-centred universe knowledge, understanding and personal identity are held in a disconcertingly fine balance. This is perhaps why it seems so important for us to maintain a coherent picture of literary history, with a firm if diffuse basis in the past and a sharp relevance in the present. Take away that coherence, and we are in danger of falling off the top of the pyramid.

This is one respect in which it makes sense for post-structuralists to insist on the crucial importance of interpretation – sometimes over and above the assumed primacy of real, historical events. Interpretation is not the medium through which the stark immediacy of historical events is made visible; to read is to reproduce images with which we have become familiar, in contexts whose diversity merely serves to increase an accompanying sense of inevitability. In this way a narrative is produced, from which processes of interpretation can make innumerable versions of “the real”. Great historical texts make history, and great critical texts make literature. Critical readings of history-texts and historicizing readings of critical texts are, in this respect, similar. They each look for traces of production, marks of the struggle to come to terms with, or find terminology for, experience. Close readings, the

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sort that do justice to the effort of writing, seek to trace this struggle; it follows that they should best look for it in the *terminology*, rather than in the experience that the terminology seeks to produce. They lead us to examine intricate rhetorical crossings and reversals by which language demonstrates, in order to confess, its ability to get something for nothing, to produce meaning and understanding where formerly there was none. These are points at which the narrative structure of the text, that which provides the support for conventional interpretations, breaks down. It betrays a need to account for its success; moments when language seems to offer an apology for its triumph over the real can be teased out from the text, rather as an analyst unravels the neuroses that are the key to the real within a dream. What emerges is not the meaning of the texts, which would be merely one more misleading version of the real, but the complex mix of ways in which meaning is produced – historical, psychological, and rhetorical. Hence the strangeness of many modern readings in the light of conventional critical response. They seem wilfully offbeat; they leave the rails, disrespecting the norms of literary debate and seeming somehow to miss the point in an unsettling way, often by pushing the poems into issues from which poetry has in the past been excluded. And since the productively unfamiliar tone of this discourse is not easily reduced to conventional terms, convention is often forced to use its last-ditch charge – irrationality – by which it is able to normalize any discourse by excluding it.

However, these essays are clearly far from irrational. Indeed, the very rigour with which they are conducted, collectively and individually, is perhaps their most unsettling characteristic. Each reading develops an insistent coherence of its own that drives toward conclusive and irrefutable assertions. But it does this while holding open the possibility of a multiplicity of competing meanings, each of which denies the primacy of the others. This can be viewed as a self-defeating undecidability at the very foundation of the entire post-structuralist enterprise. But it is also, and more usefully, the practical demonstration of a fundamental insight that the readings bring to light.

Interpretation begins with two kinds of intention: the intention of the interpreter when constructing text, and the intention that is produced from within the structure of language, once its grammatical system gets under way. Just as we can never write exactly what we intend, so we can never write and intend nothing at all. Language has its own inbuilt intention to mean, which we can at best only attempt to harness in a way that seems to suit our present needs. In the past, personal intention when discussing literature has been suppressed –



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often in favour of claims to neutrality of motive and universality of judgment. This leads to a corresponding necessity to claim access to the “real” meaning of words on the page, by treating them as transparent carriers of author-to-reader communication. Upon this base is constructed a whole superstructure of literary taste, discrimination and classification, and the skill of the author becomes a function of the degree to which the reading cares to demonstrate his or her control of the wayward tendencies of language. Such demonstration is more a case of carefully restricting the text, rather than respecting it.

Present-day readers are fortunate enough to have this history of repression against which to work. These essays are deliberately, and explicitly, partisan. They arrive on the scene of literary debate with the clear aim of revising the way in which we read the poems – not in order to bring us closer to the author’s intention, but to exploit the potential of the text to support arguments that are radically at odds with, and sometimes alien to conventional interpretations. This has two effects. It alerts us to the readers’ interests – political, literary, philosophical or whatever. But these essays also collectively draw attention to the failure of previous criticism to make explicit its own interest, on the basis of which the literary canon has been established. They stress the relativity of meaning; that is to say, they deny that any text is able to contain a meaning or set of meanings effectively enough to gain an established identity from them. Meanings overstep boundaries, change and merge, do not obey the orderly rules of time that structure canonical literary history. For this reason, these readers favour a sort of interpretative opportunism: the importance of the text lies primarily in the way that it is made to enter current theoretical debate. Each reader makes quite clear the issues which she or he wishes to address. A new reading in philosophy, for example, might produce interpretative questions which, when turned on a Romantic poem (and its associated interpretative convention), provide a new and revised relevance. Issues raised by contemporary feminist theory are illustrated, and developed, even as they enlighten our view of Wordsworth’s programmatic autobiographical poem.

This is an important characteristic of these readings: they offer us new ways of discussing familiar texts, or, more usefully, they offer means of entering the discussion in ways which are relevant in the present day. If theory seems to have been stressed in the last few pages, then it is theory in a particularly utilitarian sense. Perhaps the overriding aspect of these readings is their practical, rather than their theoretical effect. Reading is, and has always been, primarily a practical activity, oriented toward varying well-defined goals. Moreover,



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when this activity seems most transparent, natural and free of effort, it is correspondingly suspect. So in the work that follows, the going is often pretty tough. “Theory” and “criticism” do not, in themselves, hold much interest for any of these essays; what is important is the *practice* of reading and writing, the ways in which the fruits of that practice are consumed, and their more broadly social and historical effects.

When we see the problematics of contemporary theory read into a text from which it seems quite far removed, we are already drawn into a struggle to continue to “know” well-read texts in the light of new knowledge, often derived from a completely different discipline of study. This new knowledge doesn’t make reading in itself difficult, but rather it complicates reading in proportion to our familiarity with the text in question. What gets increasingly difficult is the task of maintaining our received impressions of what the text is “about”; it is hard to accept a new, strange and uncanny version of a text which we once thought we recognized. These new essays seek out canonized poems as their most fruitful subjects, the most productive point of greatest resistance to their revisionary practice.

But if practice is the keynote, theory is always about to return, to unsettle and to complicate practice time and time again. Literary criticism has as its goal the production of critical readings, but for as long as it is locked in the complexities of theoretical debate it cannot turn attention to the “primary” texts of literature. Theory upsets the otherwise smooth and uncomplicated process of reading, and so to read must be temporarily to forget the unavoidable incursion of theory (which would otherwise prevent the reading ever from getting started). The only way to do this is to merge theory and practice, letting theory structure, rather than deconstruct, the critical discourse. In this way the practice of reading becomes a demonstration, and therefore an at least partial defeat, of its own limitations. Harold Bloom’s readings provide a spectacular example of the way in which theory can be placed in the service of a practice which it would otherwise overwhelm: his complex scheme of correspondence and continuity is above all else a powerful critical practice. Indeed, so powerful is his practice (and his alternative tradition of influential texts) that it seems to rise above the combined potential of its constituent turns of theory.

The upsetting of any firm distinction between theory and practice is characteristic of the collection as a whole. Any call to theory which the essays make transforms that theory into prior practice, and we are left to ponder its significance over and above its truth, or even its coherence. Discussion of modern criticism often uses the sort of termin-

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ology, and makes the sorts of assumption, from which the criticism is attempting to escape. This collection demands judgment of a different kind, starting out from radically different premisses. We should ask what its effect is on the English poetic canon, on institutionalized literary study and, above all, on our own practices of reading. What does it mean – outside of strictly “literary” interpretation – to suggest that our view of seventeenth-century poetry has been dictated by opinions which have become so deeply entrenched that they are now practically instinctive? What is the effect of linking contemporary semiology, its problematizing of the relation between signifiers and signifieds, and the failure of sixteenth-century poets to trap their Gods within language? And what are the consequences of writing a criticism whose rhetoric renders it indistinguishable from “literature”? Where does reading end, and writing begin? This anthology produces far more questions than ever it could answer – each one related to the questions with which we began. After all, solutions are best provided by engineers, not readers. We are offered what one of the contributors ironically lampoons as “insane adulterations” of texts with meaning. The phrase admirably characterizes the view that sees post-structuralists as mad, and their work as somehow immoral. It includes the sense that there is an almost sacrilegious disrespect for binding professional vows, and that the readings break the norms of commonsense literary talk. It even allows one (and only one) excuse; temporary loss of sanity is the only explanation for this unsanctioned, albeit pleasurable, action. “Post-structuralist”, “fitz-structuralist” – so what about “Insane adulterer”? Though equally imprecise, it is certainly more colourful.

Each of the essays that follow is an individual example of modern critical theory “in action”. And the effect of the collection as a whole is to demonstrate the impact of theory on texts which can already be considered familiar to students of English literature. It should thus help to close the gap which in recent years has divided practical criticism and critical theory. These readings also hint at the vast amount of work that we have yet to do before we begin to understand the processes at work behind the formation of the canon and the construction of literary history.

*II The uses of theory: some historical bearings*

The resistance to theory goes deep and far back in the history of English criticism. It has typically taken its sharpest, most aggressive form at times of ideological stress when the values of a native “com-