

# **TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERARY THEORY**

**AN INTRODUCTORY ANTHOLOGY**

Vassilis Lambropoulos and David Neal Miller, Editors

INTERSECTIONS: PHILOSOPHY AND CRITICAL THEORY

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and Mark C. Taylor

# Twentieth Century Literary Theory

*An*

*Introductory*

*Anthology*

*edited by*

*Vassilis Lambropoulos*  
*David Neal Miller*

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## Introduction

When we started putting together this anthology, we realized with much satisfaction that recent developments in the humanities and the social sciences have called into question attempts to define theory (or any other concept) on the basis of attributes rather than of use: as long as people these days are arguing about "theory," graduating in "theory," and publishing on "theory," we at least can live with or without those quotation marks and leave static definitions to the lexicographers. For our own purposes in this volume, we take theory to mean what gets taught, published, reviewed, and read as theory—and the currently acceptable public uses of the term. In this sense, *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: An Introductory Anthology* is itself a contribution to the process and project of definition.

Because we want to avoid endorsing the false distinction between theory and practice, we must add here one qualification; that we also take theory to signify the self-reflexivity of the specialist: the questions he or she raises about the enterprise—its assumptions, methods, and procedures. In this case, the specialist is the professional reader of literature, scholar or critic, as well as its educated practitioner—the informed author. This shared reflexivity is directed to their respective practices, the reading and writing of literature. This anthology, then, is meant to introduce the student and every other interested person to the problematics of twentieth-century literary criticism—the self-reflexive (and often self-inflicted) anguish of the literary scholar or writer over the nature of his or her subject, the scope of his or her investigation, and the validity of his or her methods.

The urgent need for a book of this kind became apparent to us while we were preparing together a course with the same title: we discovered, much to our surprise, that the last similar effort remains David Lodge's excellent (and unduly neglected in the United States) *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism: A Reader* (London: Longman, 1972). That anthology served its purposes very well at the time of its publication, but today its age shows at least in three respects: first, because it stops at the threshold of structuralism, since its last selection dates back to 1966; second, be-

cause it concentrated more on criticism than on theory; and third, because the compilation does not include figures and texts which have only recently acquired a significant prominence. What we felt we needed was a new reader that would respond to contemporary course and class requirements; one that would focus exclusively on theoretical questions and include writers representing more national languages and literatures; and one that would present older as well as very recent pieces which reflect the state and the orientation of this art in the 1980s—the age when theory not only invaded academia but became part of pop culture too.

Although the spectacular spread of interest in theory made it easier for us to shun a clear-cut definition of the popular term, a series of difficult choices had to be made at every stage of the compilation process. This introduction intends to give all the necessary explanations about our decisions and allow, perhaps even help, the reader to make his own whenever he finds himself in disagreement. Of course, the main difficulty was found in exercising our judgement with a self-reflexive awareness worthy of our subject and its commentators: since we were to collect some of the most interesting instances of the self-criticisms of literary criticism, our practice would have to draw guidance from those very questions which had inspired the texts selected. The best help in this impossible task came from our own educational experience, the course that we had the opportunity to co-teach and build in our University.

Out of our teaching practice and the consistently fascinating exchange of ideas with our undergraduates and graduates grew the plan of this book and all its strategic choices: it was constructed for and out of the results of an experiment in meta-theoretical communication that worked. Obviously, this local success does not guarantee that our collection will be of ideal or uniform use to all instructors and students; but we happen to believe that its wealth is open and adaptable enough to serve a variety of propaedeutic needs and satisfy a wide spectrum of tastes and inclinations. With this due acknowledgment to the institutional origins of the book made, we can proceed now to account for our editorial decisions.

First, let it be simply stated that the anthology covers only the twentieth century because there was no literary theory before (if by literary theory one means a considered body of knowledge rather than isolated texts of theoretical import). In fact, we feel that our choice was directly dictated by the historical constitution of our subject. An anthology of criticism, of course, could extend back and include far more names and trends (although it might have to stop at the twilight of Neo-Classicism and the decline of interest in rhetoric which allowed what was first conceived as criticism by the Romantics to emerge). But theoretical questions about the very possibility of the critical enterprise had generally

been avoided, and this is the fundamental epistemological difference that we chose to respect and implicitly emphasize. The first self-reflexive moment which heralded the appearance of literary theory coincided with the first truly self-reflexive moment of literature itself, the rebellions of Modernism, and developments in the former followed in close correspondence the evolution of the latter. Clearly, it is only in this century that literary theory emerged as a legitimate subject of knowledge in itself, influenced literary studies in general, and participated in many productive dialogues with other disciplines inside and outside the humanities; and it is only in the cultural and intellectual context of the modern era that its emergence can be properly understood. As it has been often publicly admitted, ours is the Age of Theory—of a theory which is perhaps about the nineteenth century, the Age of Criticism.

After demarcating the time limits of the anthology, the next and most important question we dealt with was that of the arrangement of the material—what was called earlier the plan of the book and its strategic choices. Those choices had to be strategic for many reasons: because we did not want, as editors, to take a pretentious stance of innocence or disinterested distance, as if our involvement and mediation in the field were unbiased; because we intended to propose a particular plan for discussion and research; because we conceived our collection as a reflection of and response to current epistemic attitudes and epistemological concerns; finally, because we were trying to crystallize in a textbook form an arrangement that had worked effectively in class.

Different possibilities were considered. The random (say, alphabetical) arrangement was rejected from the beginning for reasons mentioned above: to avoid the temptation of a scholarly aloofness that prizes disinterested objectivity as a valid approach. Being part of the present (academic) community of theorists, we felt that the risk of displeasing everybody involved in proposing a particular guide to the subject was preferable to the dangers inherent in the philological fallacy of editing-as-presenting. Here, we present by pre-setting. The view may be panoramic but the sensitive reader should remember that there is only one particular cultural point which validates it—that of the early 1980s; as such, the view is just another point of view, another version of the world of theory, whose best chance is to make sense here and now.

The second possibility examined was that of chronological ordering. But the first list we made showed us that this kind of arrangement presupposes a greater degree of sequential discourse than historical cultural experience confirms; it also adheres to the traditional model of linear history, according to which events follow each other in an evolutionary order that can be reasonably accounted for in terms of cause and effect. We thought that a plan of this kind would neutralize silences, inconsisten-

ways their "best" or most famous, but rather the ones that fitted our plan best in terms of relevance, strength, and concisiveness. On the other hand, the absence of certain well-known names (like those of V. Shklovski, F. R. Leavis, and . . .) from our list is in most cases due to the fact that, despite their impact, those critics did not work directly on theory but included their influential theoretical statements in pieces of criticism where they could not be legitimately isolated for our own purposes. The exclusion of criticism from our collection (to the degree that it was possible) serves not only the concentration of a very significant twentieth-century intellectual phenomenon—literary theory itself—but also the tactical distraction of interest from a literary canon which has dominated the field for at least one hundred years now.

This anthology thus attempts to resist two kinds of canonization which have overtaken literary studies in general—that of "great" critics and schools of criticism, and that of "major" national literatures. For reasons of theoretical soundness, we did not want to include arguments that depend heavily on their applications; and for reasons of political vigilance we did not want to privilege applications which deal with the "masterpieces" of western tradition and the Great Masters of the English-centered and -modeled canon. Moreover, we chose to respect the radical insularity of the margins of contemporary theoretical discourse—feminist criticism, for example.

We would like this selection of texts to be available to students of all national languages and literatures and all scholars, irrespective of what their writers studied or propagated. Only inquiries beyond the boundaries of British Romanticism, French Symbolism, and American Modernism will enable us to ascertain the validity of any theoretical statements by transgressing the decorum of scholarship imposed by the discourses of critical nationalism. In this respect, it is not an accident (or an unpromising sign) that recent discussions of cultural imperialism, feminism, and popular culture have drawn valuable attention to the wider politics of interpretation and the violent power of institutional knowledge. They have also shown convincingly that western social, political, moral, literary, or any other theory depends by its very constitution on the premises of a certain dominant tradition (which has been called phallogocentric, logocentric, metaphysical, capitalist, Protestant, etc.) and that, therefore, any theory deals necessarily with questions pertaining to the operations of its sustaining tradition only. It was in realization of these cultural (and hence epistemological) limitations that we decided to go against the grain of the established notions of what literature and criticism are and include texts that seem to bear no apparent relation to literary theory (like those by Derrida, Wittgenstein and others). Thus, we felt, we respond to challenges from other fields that literary theory itself has already eagerly taken up.

We also invite our readers to examine assumptions about language, writing, art, and reality informing the very concept of literature, and ask themselves how recent developments in other disciplines can help us improve or revise our approaches to texts. The deliberate inclusion of ideas from the theories of history, philosophy, and the human sciences is an expression of our belief that literary studies (or the texts they cherish) cannot survive in self-satisfied isolation any longer but need to participate in the open debates that these days center around the question of scientific theory and its philosophies.

For each one of the ten sections in this book, we have selected three texts as required reading and we have suggested five others as recommended. We would like to have published all eighty texts here, but that would have resulted in a bulky and uneconomical volume. Thus we give only bibliographical references for the supplementary material, and our encouragement that these texts be consulted. In our own course, taught under a quarterly system, we discuss (rather than lecture on) the main texts but we urge students to read on their own the rest too, and on this condition we feel free to make occasional references to them in class. Despite its demands, the method has worked very well: the course has proven to be an intensive one but the range of questions posed in the thirty texts, as well as their intellectual breadth, is such that continuous attention, exploration, and participation are almost automatically required and, in our experience, have not been refused.

Since the anthology focuses on issues rather than schools, works, or critics, the number of texts in each section is one that allows for enough familiarity and diversity; this allows a sufficient number of alternative treatments of the same topic to be presented. In the third chapter, for example, we have chosen texts which in turn suggest that the examination of the artist's literary biography is a valid subject for literary studies, ostracize intentionality from the proper concerns of close reading as irrelevant, and reject as a cultural construct all notions of the creator. The aim of such a selection is obviously to alert the reader to the multiple dimensions of the problem by exposing him to different, opposing, or even incommensurable positions. As has been affirmed, it is not answers or solutions that we intended to provide but rather questions and issues that we hoped to raise. We felt, however, that in this respect information about the schools of thought represented by these interpretations or their exponents, although potentially helpful, was not of primary importance and could also distract attention from problems of immediate relevance; those interested may choose to research those matters elsewhere. Although certain schools were given their fair say under certain topics (like structuralism in the section on Narrative or phenomenology in that on Reception), no special emphasis was added to that share.

The recommended texts supplement the required readings in various ways: they expand viewpoints, they examine alternative aspects, or they even counter positions advanced in the main list (as, for example, in the cases of Valéry and Lukács). But again we refrained from pointing out all these internal correspondences, preferring to let the reader himself engage the texts in possible correlations, if he wishes to explore the dialectics of our selection. In fact, the additional texts give ample ground for home work, including a return to the required ones for different kinds of cross-reading. Eventually, the interpretive freedom the reader will feel competent to exercise can be one of the better measures of the volume's success.

The last major editorial decision we were faced with was the order of texts, which, like the order of things, reflects the state of a discourse and its respective domain of knowledge. Our final arrangement is neither chronological nor hierarchical but the one we thought was (and found out in practice to be) the most educational—the one that introduces (and intrigues) the reader into the problematics of the topic. Usually, the first text in each chapter is the most conservative of the three (without this meaning that we consider it to be a truly conservative one): it maps a territory with some clarity, certainty, and safety along rather conventional lines that normally are not expected to surprise the student. The other two progressively blur those demarcations, with the last one often arguing that they are altogether impossible to draw, at least not without questioning some fundamental assumptions about the character of the topic itself. Ideally, at the end of every chapter one should go back and review it as a unit in order to grasp the range of questions asked or not asked by those writers.

With a single exception, texts are printed in full. In most cases we chose to print them as they originally appeared and in all cases we found uniformity an insufficient reason for any editorial intervention. This principle was followed even in matters of transliteration and orthography. Whether a text is an essay, an article, a paper, or part of a book is indicated by the bibliographical reference provided at its end. Different available translations were compared for imaginative adherence to the original or, in the case of the Slavic languages, meaningful lucidity. All the titles belong to the authors. Since we did not want to create a historical anthology nor, on the other hand, encourage an ahistorical (or what some might consider "purely philosophical") approach to our selection, we added as an Appendix a list of all eighty texts included or mentioned in strict chronological order to show the linear path of time that modern theoretical debates have followed—from the 1920s, when a literary work was generally expected to be and not mean anything in particular, to the present day and the return of axiology to prominence.

In closing, we would like to repeat that this anthology is not meant for posterity but for specific and productive contemporary uses. It is by these uses that its value should be judged. We present a guide to the problematics of twentieth-century literary theory fully aware of the fact that even this seemingly impersonal work entails taking sides. We tried to leave much room for the reader's and the instructor's initiative and to suggest an approach which integrates a coherent series of working ideas. As an implicit evaluation, this selection directs interest and inquiry to issues and arguments, rather than artworks or personalities. Compiling this volume has been a thoroughly fascinating experience which owes more than we want to express to more than we can mention at this closing point. We are grateful to our colleagues for their support, to our students for their understanding, to our educators for their guidance, and to our friends for their devotion—in reverse order. We are also grateful to each other for sharing the same office and what still strikes the other party as in incomprehensibly affectionate tolerance.

February 1984