

## ON WRITING A THEORY TEXTBOOK

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Hans Bertens

*Utrecht University*

It must have been in 1997 that the then humanities editor of Routledge U.K. asked me to contribute a book on literary theory to the so-called Basics series that Routledge had started commissioning in the mid-nineties. After reading *Languages: The Basics* (Trask 1995) and *Philosophy: The Basics* (Warburton 1992), which the editor had sent me to give me an idea of the series' format, I took up the offer. I liked the format and the tone that the editor apparently encouraged, or at least allowed—the book on linguistics, by R.L.Trask, an American linguist who at the time taught in the U.K., had repeatedly made me laugh out loud—but I should for the sake of honesty admit that I would have taken up the offer anyway because I felt too flattered to do anything else.

Now the offer of course was not so much an offer to write the book, to be called *Literature: The Basics*—which would ultimately become *Literary Theory: The Basics*—but an offer to send in a book proposal, which I duly did after reading all introductions to literary theory that at that point were available. I remember taking a rather strong dislike to Terry Eagleton's *Introduction* (Eagleton 1983), published by Blackwell, and a book that for years had been a bestseller, because it seemed more of a partisan tract inspired by that heavy-weight duo Marx and Lacan than the even-handed survey that literary students to my mind deserved. I also remember having a mixed reaction to Jonathan Culler's brief *Literary Theory* (Culler 1997), published in Oxford University

Press's *Very Short Introduction* series, which appeared right when I started to think about my own approach. I admired its obvious erudition and accessibility but was less impressed by its apparently unquestioning acceptance of all poststructuralist tenets, an acceptance that left students with virtually nothing but endless deconstructions and aporias. Not much to look forward to if you happened to be an aspiring student of literature. But there were also some to my mind excellent introductions, such as Keith Green and Jill LeBihan's *Critical Theory and Practice: A Coursebook*, also published by Routledge (Green and LeBihan 1996), and Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Barry 1995), published by Manchester University Press. I have reason to be grateful to Barry. In practically all the introductions I read by way of preparation for my own introduction, either poststructuralism or Marxism, or a combination of both, almost completely filled the horizon, even if the topics or approaches covered, as in Eagleton's introduction, were not necessarily poststructuralist or Marxist. Barry's book was a good more traditional, offering fair analyses of the various approaches to literature as these have taken central stage and subsequently spoken their reluctant exit lines in the course of the twentieth century. More importantly, Barry's book apparently did well on the market, which strongly suggested that even in the politicized and polarized world of literary studies an even-handed approach did not necessarily lead to disaster. I found that encouraging because in the course of my preparatory reading I had begun to see that, given my own academic perspective and my temperament, I too would in all likelihood want to write a rather traditional, non-partisan book. But there was of course no question of plagiarizing *Beginning Theory*. That potentially explosive problem, however, was defused by the organization of Barry's book, which I found somewhat puzzling. The first three chapters followed a familiar chronological pattern: 1 Theory before "theory"—liberal humanism; 2 Structuralism; 3 Post-structuralism and deconstruction. But then Barry largely leaves chronology for what it is, and we get: 4 Postmodernism; 5 Psychoanalytic criticism; 6 Feminist criticism; 7 Lesbian/gay criticism; 8 Marxist criticism; 9 New historicism and cultural materialism; 10 Postcolonial criticism, and finally, and rather surprisingly, 11 Stylistics. Barry's organization gave me the opportunity to be equally traditional in approach but to organize my own book in what seemed to me a way that did more justice to the course of history or seemed at least more logical. And so I came up with 1 Reading for meaning—practical criticism and the New Criticism; 2 Reading for form, I—formalism and early structuralism, 1914-1960; 3 Reading for form, II—French structuralism, 1950-1975; 4 Political reading: 1960s and 1970s (a chapter that covers the more traditional, pre-poststructuralist feminist criticism, the more traditional black criticism, as it was then still called, and the more traditional Marxist criticism); 5 The poststructuralist revolution: Derrida, deconstruction and postmodernism; 6 Poststructuralism continued: Foucault, Lacan, and French feminism; 7 Literature and culture: the new historicism and cultural materialism (a standard combination in theory textbooks); 8 Postcolonial criticism and theory; 9 Sexuality, literature, and culture (a chapter that

discusses the effects of poststructuralism on traditional feminism and in so doing goes on to cover lesbian and gay criticism and the rise of queer studies—the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and, more in particular, Judith Butler).

My chapters did of course not exhaust the topics that circulated in the critical debate in the later 1990s, but those topics that also suggested themselves—cyborg studies, and in connection with cyborg studies the category of the posthuman; trauma theory; white studies; disability studies; ecocriticism—seemed not yet fully established and apart from a brief mention of ecocriticism I decided to ignore them. One or two of the four readers to whom Routledge sent out the manuscript actually mentioned the absence of this or that topic, but none of them felt unduly worried by those gaps. They did feel, however, that I gave far too much attention to practical criticism and the New Criticism. Interestingly, they did not object to the rather lengthy discussion of formalism and structuralism in which I even explain Jakobson's famous claim that the poetic function "projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination," using, by the way, lines from a Stephen Sondheim musical to illustrate the principle of equivalence: **225**

What's the muddle  
In the middle?  
That's the puddle  
Where the poodle did the piddle. (Bertens 46-49)

Which lines, as I also pointed out, clearly demonstrate that there is no causal relationship between equivalence and quality.

I found this tolerance with regard to formalism and structuralism, coupled with an intolerance with regard to practical criticism and the New Criticism, rather remarkable because the influence of formalism and structuralism on British and American criticism has been practically zero—Genette was very briefly in the picture in the later 1970s and early 1980s—while the influence of practical criticism and the New Criticism is still widespread. Possibly, traditional Anglo-American criticism—to lump the two together—was by my readers seen as not sufficiently theoretical to warrant inclusion in a theory book, while structuralism's theoretical status is undisputed. But there are of course less rational and more unfriendly explanations for the short shrift they gave to a mode of criticism that had dominated Anglo-American literary studies for some forty years. In any case, the still substantial influence of traditional criticism, in combination with my wish to be even-handed, persuaded me to stay on course and pay very serious attention to the origins and development of practical criticism and the New criticism, which, apart from everything else, have their own theoretical foundations. Let me quote my own preface:

There was a time when the interpretation of literary texts and literary theory seemed two different and almost unrelated things. Interpretation was about the actual meaning of a poem, a novel, or a play, while theory seemed alien to what the study of literature was really about because its generalizations could never do justice to individual texts.

In the last thirty years, however, interpretation and theory have moved closer and closer to each other. In fact, for many contemporary critics and theorists interpretation and theory cannot be separated at all. They would argue that when we interpret a text we always do so from a theoretical perspective, whether we are aware of it or not, and they would also argue that theory cannot do without interpretation.

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The premise of *Literary Theory: The Basics* is that literary theory and literary practice—the practice of interpretation—can indeed not very well be separated and certainly not at the more advanced level of academic literary studies. One of its aims, then, is to show how theory and practice are inevitably connected and have always been connected. The emphasis is on the 1970s and after, but important earlier views of literature get their full share of attention. This is not a merely historical exercise. A good understanding of, for instance, the New Criticism that dominated literary criticism in the U.S. from the mid-1930s until 1970 is indispensable for students of literature. Knowing about the New Criticism will make it a lot easier to understand other, later, modes of reading. More importantly, the New Criticism, like other more traditional approaches to literature, has by no means disappeared. Likewise, an understanding of what is called structuralism makes the complexities of so-called poststructuralist theory a good deal less daunting and has the added value of offering a perspective that is helpful in thinking about culture in general.

This book, then, is both an introduction to literary theory and a history of theory. But it is a history in which what has become historical is simultaneously still actual: in the field of literary studies a whole range of approaches and theoretical perspectives, political and apolitical, traditional and radical, old and new, operate next to each other in relatively peaceful co-existence. In its survey of that range of positions *Literary Theory: The Basics* tried to do equal justice to a still actual tradition and to the radicalness of the new departures of the last decades. We still ask, “What does it mean?” when we read of poem or novel or see a play. But we have additional questions. We ask, “Has it always had this meaning?” Or, “What does it mean to whom?” And, “Why does it mean what it means?” Or, perhaps surprisingly, “Who wants it to have this meaning and for what reasons?” As we will see, such questions do not diminish literature. On the contrary, they make it even more important. (Bertens ix-x)

I have quoted this passage in full, because it summarizes the arguments that I put forward to defend myself against the charge of being too soft on traditional criticism and that I used to persuade a theory-minded publisher to let me go ahead with a set-up that from a theoretical perspective was definitely not the most radical option. I also argued that there were more closet-humanists than publishers specialized in poststructuralistically inflected literary theory suspected and that they might welcome a book that presented cutting edge contemporary theory—a claim I felt I could seriously make—but that also had an appreciative eye for the achievements of earlier generations of critics.

I do not know if all those closet humanists were truly there, but the book certainly did well. It was published in the summer of 2001, and reprinted in 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, when Routledge asked me to do a second, revised and updated edition. I have heard the rumor that publishers ask for a second, revised and updated edi-

tion when the trade in used copies of the first edition becomes too lively, but I can't imagine such a trade could make much of a difference. Publishing is on the whole a commercially oriented enterprise, but it seems to me that there just have to be more important reasons for commissioning a second edition—such as the fact that the immediate competition has brought out second, revised and updated editions, which was indeed the case, both Terry Eagleton and Peter Barry having published new editions of their respective introductions. A bit to my surprise I again had to send in a proposal and so I once again read my way through the competition. As I just mentioned, Eagleton and Barry had brought out new editions. Both, however, had simply tacked on a new chapter to their original text and updated their suggested reading lists. In first instance I thought that rather disappointing. But when I started to read more widely for my own second edition I began to see why they had not really exerted themselves to produce a wholly new book. I should at this point mention that in 2006, when I began to read seriously, I had been pretty much out of teaching and research for a full six years, having served as a full-time administrator since the summer of 2000. Of the critical approaches that I had considered but not seriously included in 1999, only ecocriticism had made a breakthrough and now deserved a chapter all by itself. Cyborgs were perhaps less marginal than they had been seven years earlier, but were certainly not a burning issue, and researching the posthuman did not lead me to more than a dozen serious articles that related it to literary studies. Trauma theory had apparently lost much of the appeal it had in the mid-nineties; white studies and disability studies had virtually disappeared – again, from the field of literary studies. I emphasize this because of what happened after I had sent in my new manuscript—on 1 January 2007, by the way. First of all my editor, although quite pleased with my efforts, inquired why my chapter on postcolonial studies contained so little new material and did not reflect his sense that postcolonial studies was a field brimming with dynamic enquiry. He also wondered why I hadn't included a discussion of Slavoj Žižek and a couple of other new theorists such as Friedrich Kittler (who is not new at all for those who follow the German scene, but has only fairly recently become a name in the English-speaking world). The reader reports, although complimentary enough, made similar observations.

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My first thought was that I had been out of things too long and had, moreover, been rather sloppy in my research. And so I went back to the library. What, for instance, of the dynamic energy that according to my editor was generated in and by postcolonial studies? I did, indeed, find a good deal of energy, but it was an energy that was not immediately relevant for a book on literary theory. Whereas postcolonial studies in its earlier stages had been a predominantly literary affair, developed and brought to a first fruition within Departments of English, it now ranged far and wide across the academic landscape, recognizing few, if any, borders. Fairly close to its original provenance we find it in cultural studies—for instance in dance and in sports studies—and in media studies. We find it in religious studies and in ecological studies—following up on Alfred W. Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* (Crosby

1986). We find it in studies of the body as a site of oppression (and of resistance). But postcolonial studies has also pushed back its interest beyond 1492 to the medieval period (the Crusades and other early encounters with the Muslim world) and even to antiquity (where West first started meeting East). It has discovered and opened a fruitful dialogue with Latin American studies. In short, postcolonial studies has brought virtually everything imaginable within its sphere of interest. This should of course not surprise us. After all, three quarters of the globe has at one time or another been colonized and colonization usually does not simply scratch the surface of a colonized culture but permeates it.

228 Although within the literary domain postcolonial studies is still heavily influenced by the theorists of the 1980s and 1990s, and although especially Said and Bhabha are important names in those offshoots of postcolonial studies that are closest to literary studies—religious studies, for instance—much of contemporary postcolonial studies had moved away considerably from its poststructuralist inspiration (even if it is still sensitive to poststructuralist concerns). This is illustrated by recent criticisms of postcolonial studies' earlier, primarily literary bias. So we find the cultural critic Simon Featherstone pointing out that one of the standard readers in the field—Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's *Postcolonial Studies Reader* (Ashcroft *et al.* 1995) does not present Ghandi, Mao, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, Amilcar Cabral, Ho Chi Minh, "or any other of the first generation of postcolonial leaders and theorists" (Featherstone 19) In *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, edited by Ania Loomba *et al.* and published in 2005, we find a similar—although very politely phrased—critique: "A keynote" of the volume, the editors tell us, "is the reassertion of a certain historical urgency that may have been leached from postcolonial studies during its period of theoretical refinement and institutional consolidation" (Loomba *et al.* 5). For many of the contributors to *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* some of the central assumptions of postcolonial studies will have to be rethought. Its "refinement" and "consolidation" have seriously harmed its political relevance and its focus on texts and subjectivities—and most certainly its poststructuralist focus on texts and subjectivities—will not enable postcolonial critics to arrive at an analysis and understanding of the processes of globalization that have followed in the wake of decolonization and that arguably constitute the most important development of the last twenty or even thirty years.

In order to be relevant for the twenty-first century, postcolonial studies must for these critics distance itself from the more radical form of poststructuralism. It must offer historical accounts that it does not immediately proceed to deconstruct; it must be wary of Bhabha's privileging of hybridity, which is not necessarily an inevitable, let alone fortuitous, state of being; it must reconsider the role of the nation-state (which is not as moribund or, for that matter, as undesirable as the champions of hybridity have argued); it even needs to reassess its dismissal of metanarratives and must seek to preserve and utilize what is "most salvageable from older metanarratives of social change" (Loomba *et al.*, 19). While Loomba and her co-editors are intent upon (at least

partly) rehabilitating metanarratives of social change, others would like to see other metanarratives provisionally accepted—environmental metanarratives that privilege the wilderness, or the ecological metanarrative of global warming—or would like to see metanarratives at least respected: metanarratives of the sacred (the sacred places of indigenous peoples) and religious metanarratives in general.

The broadly historical-materialist perspective that we find in a number of recent postcolonial studies has also made its mark on postcolonial literary studies, pushing earlier poststructuralist themes to the background. Especially Benita Parry and Robert Young (the latter in Young 2001 and other books) have asked attention for “a politics grounded in the material, social and existential” as Parry put it in a 2002 article and have worked to bring powerful social and political agency back into the postcolonial discussion (Parry 77). However, while Young’s revisionist attitude towards religion, nationalism, pan-Africanism and other undeniably important themes that postcolonial studies in its poststructuralist mode was and is deeply uneasy with, may have come as a fresh breeze on a sultry afternoon, it does of course not signal a new theoretical departure. What we find more in general in current postcolonial studies is restoration and not new and daring theoretical perspectives. There is massive activity, and much of it in new domains. That activity is very welcome, but theoretically not very exciting and certainly from the perspective of literary theory not “worth a detour” as the Michelin travel guides would phrase it. **229**

Interestingly, in postcolonial fiction we find a similar move away from some of the central concerns of postcolonial literary theory. Under the influence of important theorists like Bhabha, the postcolonial often was “associated,” as Elleke Boehmer put it, “with metropolitan, diasporic, migrant and minority spaces for which the nation as a horizon of expectation had retreated” (Boehmer 247). But the most recent generation of postcolonial writers has moved beyond such a privileging of hybridity. They “work,” to quote Boehmer again, “to build local ‘structures of feeling’ positioned at several removes from the dominant North, drawn from their life worlds,” to the point that contemporary African novelists “turn increasingly towards local audiences and narrative traditions, and away from the implied European reader” (Boehmer 250-51). In what seems a post-postcolonial development, Europe no longer dominates the cultural horizon.

The current state affairs in postcolonial studies tells us first of all that postcolonial studies has to a large extent become post-literary—in the sense that it has moved away from literature and even texts as its primary concern. Some leading postcolonial critics would even argue that cultural manifestations and artifacts—postcolonial studies’ other focus—are of relatively minor importance and that postcolonial studies should focus on economic developments, patterns of migration, armed ethnic conflict, and other issues that directly affect the lives of millions of people, rather than on the “theoretical refinement” that had its origin in postcolonial literary studies. In other words next to a cautious rehabilitation of metanarratives we also find what can only be described as an empirical focus in postcolonial studies’ most recent incarna-

tion, and with that empirical focus an unmistakable reorientation in the direction of history, sociology, and economic studies. This is not necessarily a deplorable development—quite welcome, in fact, after the rarefied atmosphere of much post-colonial literary theory—but it has not done much for postcolonial literary studies. The renewed presence of the empirical world—in which that world exists in its own right and is more than a linguistic and inevitably temporary construct—has had a much larger impact on for instance ecological criticism, a relatively recent approach to texts in which empirical scientific evidence concerning the dangers that threaten our ecosystems—if not the globe as such—is taken very seriously, while simultaneously what theory has taught us with regard to texts and the power structures they operate in is brought into play.

Another development concerns the new direction that Elleke Boehmer signals in the work of those contemporary African novelists who would appear to have moved beyond the central issues of postcolonial literary theory. Looking back we may say that the last thirty-five years of Anglo-American literary theorizing—an edifice erected, of course, on Continental European foundations—have been characterized by one overarching theme: a frontal attack on common sense and all the things that common sense told us were true. Everything that was taken for granted with respect to language, identity, gender, race relations, sexuality, religion, power, our relationship with the world of nature, and a good many other things, came under severe scrutiny, and was as often as not rejected. A central target was the unquestioning assumption that Euro-American value systems and epistemologies were universal and timeless. But to assume that a Euro-American attack on common sense is of equal relevance outside the Western world implies exactly the sort of universalism that had become deeply suspect. In other words, theory's own logic, which de-universalizes and historicizes everything, is bound to promote the building of "local 'structures of feeling'" that Boehmer describes, even if those local "structures" are rather at odds with what one might call theory's hidden agenda: its focus on, and elevation of, "otherness," of alterity, of the marginal and the indeterminate—often presented in universal guise, but clearly a revival of a recurring interest in Western culture that can be traced back to Romantic theory and poetry. It is, in any case, no longer obvious that theory should have the last word, even in discussions that directly regard the most recent manifestations of postcolonial writing.

In another way, too, theory has become less central, at least from the perspective of literary studies. Literary theorizing has branched out in all possible directions and has become hard to distinguish from some forms of contemporary philosophy. In fact, theory might be called the assimilation of one particular brand of philosophy into literary studies. Arguably, that brand always had a literary sensibility and one might even, mischievously, claim that its interpretive moves and general *modus operandi* are not that far removed from those of Anglo-American traditional criticism, even if its range is incomparably larger (a combination that would certainly explain its attractiveness for English and American critics). One consequence of that assimi-

lation is that literature as we used to define it no longer has a central place in literary theory, strange as it may seem. Judith Butler, one of the icons of queer studies, hardly ever deals with literature and neither does Slavoj Žižek—which is why I chose not to discuss him. (Butler’s work is much quoted in literary studies and does therefore have a legitimate place in a book on literary theory.) The second consequence is that literary theory—that is, its assimilation of that particular brand of philosophy—has very successfully penetrated fields of inquiry that used to stand by themselves—film studies, philosophy, anthropology, theology, art history, cultural studies, in fact, all humanities disciplines—and even legal studies. But there is little reason to keep calling it “literary” if it deals with admittedly important but not specifically literary issues such as the nature of sexuality, the possibility of agency, the role of language, and so on and so forth.

Since the first edition of *Literary Studies: The Basics* was published, an increased interest in politics (and in political effectiveness), in socio-economic reality, in the long-term viability of our eco-systems, in the effects of globalization—in short, in the empirical world, has begun to make its mark on literary studies. The radical notion that reality as we know it—or think we know it—is a discursive construct, made up of a great number of (often competing) discourses, has lost a good deal of its power and persuasiveness. It is tempting to think that our current crises have something to do with the more modest, more empirically inclined line that literary studies would seem to be taking. Nobody can afford to ignore the effects of global warming, including the natural disasters that have already occurred, the threat of terrorism—9/11 and Madrid shocked all of us out of our complacency—the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Mass-scale death and bloodshed, although always already mediated and put in constructing frames when they come to us, in our offices, halls and class rooms, fix our minds on what is real. There is of course no way we can go back to the common sense assumptions regarding “reality” that for so long dominated Western culture. In that sense theory—in its more philosophical guise—has lost nothing of its relevance. But there is also no reason why theory would have nothing to say about a world that is not wholly made up of discourses. It would have to reorient itself, but there are signs that it is busy doing that.

I expect literary studies to become more global in its interests and to pay closer attention to non-Western cultures and literatures—and without the immediate goal of deconstructing them. I also expect an increased interest in religion and in the sacred because religion and the sacred play such a central role in the lives of billions of people and are, moreover, clearly an important factor in the wars the West—or at least part of the West—is fighting. It is, with hindsight, amazing that theory, which has interrogated so many fundamental issues in western culture, has largely avoided a confrontation with religious subjectivities, recently expressed, for instance, in Marilyn Robinson’s novel *Gilead* (2004) which is, by the way, a bit of a cop-out because it is safely situated in the fifties. Perhaps religion was considered too obvious a target, perhaps it was thought to be too risky. In any case, theorists will, more

generally, follow the call formulated by the materialist branch of postcolonial studies for a closer scrutiny, and not in terms of generalities, of the actual workings of a postcolonial, globalizing world.

But that is not as easy as it possibly may seem. Theory's perspective must of course be different from that of the political scientists, economists, sociologists, cultural anthropologists, and others who deal those developments. In order to qualify as literary theory it must have a literary dimension. That dimension, however, is increasingly lacking in some of theory's latest explorations, as it is lacking in some developments that are not directly inspired by the high theory of the last twenty-five years, such as the rise to prominence of cultural memory studies in Western Europe. It becomes harder and harder to find literature at the cutting edge of theory. No matter how we look at it, the absence of literature in much contemporary literary theory should make us stop and think. Once we had, in I.A. Richards's experiment, just the words on the page. Now we know everything about the page—its manufacturer, conditions  
**232** of production, surplus value stolen by capitalist entrepreneurs, ecological footprint, various social functions, and the end of its life cycle as a waste problem. But the words have largely disappeared.

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