FOREWORD

What is literary theory? How has it developed? What does it do? Why is it necessary, and/or what is it good for? What are the arguments for it and why the resistance to it? All of these questions sound as if they belong in an exam, none of them are easy to answer, certainly not in so short a space as a foreword. But I want to begin by outlining very broadly a few responses.

Literary theory is the name given to a range of disparate critical practices and approaches which are used by members of the humanities in the exploration of literary texts, films and aspects of contemporary and past cultures. Literary theory is also the name given to the teaching of such practices and approaches in the university, particularly in English departments. Literary theory is an umbrella term which gathers together conveniently and for the purpose of identification or definition various texts concerned with the study of literature and culture by, amongst others, feminists, Marxists, and those who teach literature but are interested in certain branches of linguistics, psychoanalysis or philosophy.

Literary theory, as a convenience term or label, defines work influenced by the practices, discourses (language and its power relations within specific disciplines) and texts of feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, linguistics, semiotics (the study of signs) and continental philosophy of the last 40 years, including all the various disciplines, fields and, again, discourses, ideas and approaches gathered together under the label 'structuralism' or 'poststructuralism'. Literary Theory is, then, the name given to a number of different, differing, occasionallly overlapping or related ways of reading and interpreting, and is defined thus for economical purposes, first within the university, and subsequently beyond the university, in publishers' catalogues, in reviews, journals and news media.

Before moving on to the next question, 'How has it developed?', I would like to point to what is, for me, a problem with the term 'literary theory'. As everything in the previous paragraph should suggest, the nature of literary theory is complex and multiple. There is more than one aspect or identity for/to literary theory. Hence the plural used in the title of this reader: Literary Theories. 'Literary Theory' is problematic for me because it names a singular object or point of focus. However implicitly, 'literary theory' names a single focal point, rather than something composed, constructed or comprised of many aspects or multiple, often quite different identities. If we name several identities or objects as one, not only do we not respect the separateness or singularity of each of those

subjects or identities, we also move in some measure towards erasing our comprehension of the difference between those objects and identities, making them in the process invisible.

Indeed some would say that the act of providing a single name or single identity is done precisely to make things simple for ourselves, or for whoever does the naming. If we can reduce, say, feminist literary criticism, Marxist literary criticism, psychoanalytic approaches to literature, to 'literary theory', we have a catch-all term which puts everything together effortlessly. The act of naming implies a great power for whoever controls the act, whoever has the ability. At the same time, the act of naming does a degree of violence to the different objects. In making the different identities all the same, we make them manageable, we contain them, we don't respect their differences, we make life a little bit easier for ourselves.

This may seem to be making too much of this question of a single identity, but the harm implicit in such an act cannot be underestimated. The importance of the point can be seen if we think for a moment, not of literary study but of attitudes towards cultures, or, even more simply, if we name everyone who comes from some place other than where we are from, foreigners. In doing so, we immediately engage in a way of thinking about the world which is reliant on an ability to define, and separate, an 'us' from a 'them'. And as an example of 'literary theory' demonstrates, the act of separation is also an act of containment. All those feminists, all those Marxists, all those ... well it's all just literary theory, isn't it?

This leads me to the second question, though with a qualification, given that I wish to resist thinking about 'literary theory' in the singular. How has it developed? Let's begin straight away by saying that 'literary theory' is not an 'it', and precisely for the kinds of reasons I've already suggested or at least implied. If we accept the argument that literary theory is composed of many strands, the question of how 'it' developed can be re-cast as 'how have theories developed?'. Various theoretical approaches to literature have evolved and developed in part because in the twentieth century the study of literature had itself developed from a limited range of perspectives, beliefs, and ideological or philosophical assumptions which had not been questioned from other places and the proponents of which largely did not examine their own assumptions or grounds of articulation. This meant, in brief, that certain questions could not be asked about literature or even that only certain works were deemed worthy of study in the first place.

Theoretical approaches developed, employing the language of other disciplines from outside the field of literary studies as a means of redressing the balance, of finding ways of asking previously unarticulated questions, and as a means of bringing back into focus texts which have been neglected. At the same time, theoretically informed approaches to the study of literature and culture provided various vantage points from which different 'voices' could be heard, different identities other than those implicitly understood (Christian, humanist,

western, male European) in the conventional institutional approaches to literary study. Not all these voices agreed with each other, although out of the disagreement and debate came yet other inflections, further positions and identities, yet more ways of addressing what it is we call 'literature', as Ruth Robbins suggests in her introduction to feminism, where she makes the point that there are various feminist discourses and philosophies, and that feminisms themselves cannot, today as we come towards the end of the twentieth century, be reduced to a single feminism.

All questions of what has been termed 'literary theory' come down therefore, as Martin McQuillan suggests, to questions of reading. Not just reading in the narrow sense of picking up a novel and gleaning the story from it; rather 'reading' suggests a manner of interpreting our world and the texts which comprise that world. No one single manner of reading will do, so heterogenous is the world, so diverse are its peoples and cultures, so different are the texts, whether literary, cultural or symbolic by which we tell ourselves and others about ourselves, and by which others speak to us about their differences from us, whether from the present, from some other culture, or from the past, from whatever we may think of as our own culture.

Theoretical approaches to literary study have developed and established themselves in part in the academic world, though not without often bitter struggles which still persist, as a means of comprehending, acknowledging and respecting heterogeneity and difference, rather than seeking to reduce the difference to one identity which is either a version of ourselves, a version of the same, or otherwise as an other which cannot be incorporated into a single identity. This is what theoretical approaches to literary and cultural studies can do, what they are 'good for' to put it both baldly and pragmatically; it is also why they are necessary: as the beginning steps in a process of revising how one sees, how one reads. Such approaches are also necessary because they provide the means, as already remarked, for alternative voices, even dissenting voices, instead of being spoken for by some single authoritative voice, to challenge the power of those who had previously assumed the right to speak for all, whether in the form of a single, dominant political party or politician, or through the voice of a critic such as F. R. Leavis, who presumed to tell us that there was a 'great tradition' in English literature and what exactly did or did not belong to that tradition. Literary theories contest not only the composition of the tradition but also the right of any one voice or group of aligned voices to argue for a single tradition.

This point is argued in part by K. M. Newton (1997) whom I quote in the introduction on this issue. Newton, as you'll read, has pointed out that any form of reading, 'even the most naive' (1997, xv) is in some way theoretically formed. One of the reasons why the various literary theories have proved challenging, provoking and have caused on some occasions hostile resistance, is because they insist on this theoretical aspect in reading. Newton points out that critics and scholars who are threatened by theoretical approaches are resistant to what

they call 'literary theory' precisely because in the face of theory it is impossible to maintain a calm, undisturbed vision of a 'single community'.

Michael Payne (1991), who is also cited, points to how theoretically informed approaches to literature have led to both the broadening of the literary canon, the texts we study, and to the raising of questions, concerning, for example, race, gender, national identity, which previously had not been asked – which could not be asked because of the implicit ideological and philosophical assumptions behind the study of so-called great literature. Forty years ago it would hardly have been appropriate to raise the issue of either Shakespeare's or Dickens's depiction of Jews or women. Today, Caliban can no longer be considered merely as a somewhat fantastic figure, the offspring of a witch; instead, his role and *The Tempest* in general are explored in relation to questions of race, of miscegenation, and the cultural history of England's colonial expansion.

If you look at Gail Low's exemplary reading of Kipling as another example of the exploration of the ways in which colonial ideology is mediated in literary forms in this collection of essays, you will understand how necessary it is to ask different questions, to move beyond aesthetic considerations which had always been the purview of conventional literary criticism, in order to see how the literary is not separate from the world in which we live.

Finally, the other aspect of theoretical discourse which encounters objection raised by Payne is its difficulty. The obviously political question aside, there is, as Payne points out (1991, vii) the sense, especially expressed by those who are 'anti-theory' that it is, well, hard to read, drawing as it does on the specialised languages of other disciplines. As I discuss below, such a reaction has more to do with the challenge felt to the identity of literary studies as, in Newton's words a 'single community' on the part of members of that community, than it has to do with theoretical discourse itself. Theoretical discourse often is difficult, not simply because of the way in which theories of literature are expressed but also because of the questions differing approaches to the literary text demand we ask, often of ourselves and our understanding of what we think of as literature, as 'good' or 'great' literature, and how we come to think of the literary in such a manner in the first place. The language of some of the essays contained herein will, no doubt, seem difficult. It will require that you approach the essays openly, responsively, reading attentively and patiently for what they have to say, rather than rushing through in order to get the gist of the argument, so to speak.

What follows in the introduction is not then an introduction to literary theory, strictly speaking. There are in this volume numerous introductions to different theoretical approaches, all of which, explicitly or implicitly stress the plurality of their own approaches. What I seek to do here is place you in the midst of particular debates while, at the same time, introducing the study of literary theories in the broader context of literary study in the university, The most significant introduction to the subject still remains Terry Eagleton's

Literary Theory: An Introduction. Indeed it is Eagleton to whom I first turn. In order to introduce the study of literary theories in the broader context of literary study in the university, I turn to particular debates, using the work of Terry Eagleton as an example. Beginning with the epigraph which opens the introduction, I draw on Eagleton's agricultural or rural metaphor as a means of introducing the debates around so-called 'literary theory'. Looking at how Eagleton has returned over the years from his position as a Marxist to question the need for theoretical approaches, I move from this and from Eagleton's own arguments to a consideration of the significance of theory and its sometimes fraught relation to the more conservative elements in the institution of literary study.

Following Eagleton's metaphors as a means of addressing the movement of theory, I develop the idea of theory as something which crosses over the border of literary studies from other places. In doing so, I suggest that the various identities of theories, in being perceived as 'foreign' to some 'native' identity of literary studies, have had to undergo some form of naturalization process, some reinvention of their identities in order to allow them into the field of literary studies. Yet, this being the case, it is now necessary to recognise what has happened and to find ways of reading, looking again at literary theories so as to return to the theoretical a sense of the radical difference of theories in order to question the very process of institutionalization which Terry Eagleton had been concerned with, back in 1976.