

**REHABILITATING
LITERARY THEORY**

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**A Practical Guide for the Critical and
Semiotic Analysis of Poetry and Drama**

KHALED BESBES



BrownWalker Press
Boca Raton

*Rehabilitating Literary Theory:
A Practical Guide for the Critical and Semiotic Analysis of Poetry and Drama*

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To my Parents who made it all possible

To my wife Wafa Souissi
and my sons Walid Besbes
and Khaled Besbes who
granted me true love

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the past few years Literary Theory has known a disquieting phase of distrust and skeptical review due to the rise of anti-theory announcements in several academic institutions and circles around the world. The publication of a number of counter-theory works which overly reduced critical theories to their inadequacies has somewhat knocked off the balance of literary theory as a uniquely accredited discipline in the humanities. Accusing critical theory of becoming a dogmatic orthodoxy after having 'lost its novelty', many of the above-stated declarations questioned the prominence of literary theories in the general domain of literary studies and raised issues as to whether or not the study of literature will still need Theory and its 'anthologies' in the future.

Since literary theory, there can be no doubt, has significantly revolutionized the way literature is looked at and has played the dominant part, and deservedly so, in giving critical discourse a vital portion of coherence, it is by all means the responsibility of the painstaking literary scholar to think of ways of loosening the lock of skepticism that was fastened so firmly on literary theory in the past few years. It is similarly the responsibility of all those critics and academicians who have largely benefited from the eruption of theory to do it justice now and to think of viable ways of expanding its practical potential and of purifying it from the imperfections that such phenomena as theory-celebrity, theory-professionalism, theory-institutionalism and theory-esotericism have brought to it over the last three decades.

After having read an important share of what was written against literary theory, I became fully aware that most of those who wrote in the anti-theory direction did not actually write against the intellectual content of theory, but rather against its institutional standing and very much against the excesses made in the name of theory. Believing that many readers are keen on reading about literary theories being revitalized and rehabilitated, I offer them the present work where I seek to bring literary theory in line with the most recent 'Practical Turn' the humanities are witnessing and to demonstrate that when simplified, succinctly presented, unswervingly

shown at work, smoothly purified from flaunting jargon and skillfully used in multi-coded interpretation within the *semiocritical* framework I am offering, literary theories become practical exercises in criticism not only facilitating the interpretation of literature, but also making it more enjoyable and more rewarding.

Following these preliminaries, I should now like to express my thanks to all those who not only made it possible for me to work on this book, but also positively encouraged me to do so. My most profound gratitude must go to my much-respected teacher Mongi Raddadi who devoted much time and energy in instructing me and who supported me at different stages of this work.

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INTRODUCTION

A book that announces itself with such a title poses several initial questions for the responsive reader. Why should literary theory be rehabilitated and how can the complex body of critical theories that have controlled the humanities for more than thirty years be possibly rehabilitated? Can one still bank on literary theory while the declarations against its professed hegemony have now become fairly audible in academia? How can literary theory survive, as a momentous achievement of the human mind, despite the recent claims about the retirement of theorists and theory practitioners? Should one let oneself be won over to a shy acceptance of what a limited number of academicians or critics decide as to when theory is born, when it is dead and when it has to be buried alive? Should the student of literature discard all the stuff of theories and revert to the old convention of reading literature as a spiritual experience incarnating superior truths and high-minded values? What is one to make of the ingenious venture of theorizing about literature? Should one stop thinking theory and give in to a state of cerebral paralysis, waiting for the *next big thing* to come?

Being against barren theoretical enquiry, the present book provides scrupulous answers to all these questions. It does so not so much by defending literary theory in a self-serving way as by demonstrating, quite manifestly, that literary theory is still, and shall always be, an excellent exercise of interpretation, imparting coherence, flexibility, suppleness, awareness, efficiency and far-sightedness to the critical mind. It also does so by demonstrating that through practice-led theory and theory-inspired practice, literary theory can always liberate itself from the skepticism that has recently started to creep into its widely stretched spectrum. It has to be stated, in this connection, that what made a number of observers distrust theory and others receive the 'news' about its 'death' with a sigh of relief and with cynical statements like 'this is the end of the empire' or 'thank God the nightmare is over' is the way literary theories have so far been presented, handled and diffused in academia.

In fact, the volatile expansion of theory at the expense of practice, the excessive deployment of literary theories in the syllabi of English departments, the reliance of some practitioners on

buzzwords and pompous jargon in discussing literature as well as the boasting of credulous academicians about their knowledge of critical jargon and of the names of famous theorists, together with the excessive propensity towards theorizing at the expense of practice, have made a number of scholars draw away from the whole subject and endorse a straightforward reading of literature.

Similarly, most of those scholars, critics and observers who had an unassuming background in the field of literary theory and who did not have the least motivation to reread Nietzsche, Marx, Foucault and other relevant philosophers were among the most scornful of literary theories. It was in some way their feeling of exasperation and isolation, at some stages, that made them amplify the idea of the breaking up of the 'dynasty' of theory and rush to announce the triumph of such conservative and idealist beliefs which were by all means an offshoot of romanticist and classicist absolutism. What even worsened the mishandling of theory was the fact that some practitioners who were not keen on keeping in tune with the general orientation towards 'theorizing' in the 1990s found a less torturous way of adaptation to critical theory by learning how to simulate it, that is how to gain knowledge of a number of concepts, catchphrases and critical terms and use them in seminars of literary criticism for the simple reason that they 'seemed to work'. All these factors and all this feeling of defeat and retardation among some scholars have nurtured the anti-theory context that started to take a blurry shape at the beginning of the third millennium. But such a context, subjective, defenseless and halfhearted as it was, did not furnish any solid arguments that could possibly support the predisposed claims about the death of theory. For subjectivity never defeats historical evidence. This is at least what history teaches the settled intellectual. Literary theory is evidence, a historical landmark in the field of human studies and we cannot expect it to perish away or become worthless as soon as a few antagonistic books are published by discontented authors whose motivations are certainly not quite impartial. It goes without saying that Aristotle's *Poetics* is still valid today despite every change and every revolution in human thought and the ruminations of Longinus, Dante, Sir. Philip Sidney, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, William Wordsworth and Mathew Arnold still inspire a lot of literary critics and still help present-day readers to appreciate the sublimity of the literary work of art. How can we, then, expect the tremendous impact of twentieth-century literary theorists to disintegrate so easily?

If literary theory, as mentioned above, has always been a key into the cryptic labyrinths of the literary world and if it has always been an interrogative tool expanding the horizon of interpretation, it would be so uncritical on the part of the informed observer to accept such simplistic and totalizing labels as pre-theory and after-theory. Theory dates back to the old times of the Greek as we said earlier and it will definitely continue to exist. Perhaps it is more tenable to talk about pre-eruption and post-eruption of literary theory or also pre-theoretical turn and post-theoretical turn. But it makes no big difference whether this or that label is applied. What has to be remembered is that it is, beyond any doubt, an act of intellectual disloyalty to shut the door on a discipline that has taught successive generations of critics the art of close reading and to genially greet publications like *After Theory* (2003) by Terry Eagleton and *Theory's Empire* (2005) by a number of dissenting writers with consent and appreciation. What has to be remembered as well is that the real problem does not lie in literary theories themselves, but rather in the way they have been practiced as we explained above and as we shall elucidate thoroughly in this introductory chapter.

The main problem with literary theory that the present work seeks to resolve is the lack of a guided practice, a practice that simplifies rather than complicates, that liberates rather than locks the horizon of interpretation, a practice that makes the study of literary texts an enjoyable rather than a torturous task. What this book therefore seeks to do is to consolidate this kind of practice and to make the analysis of literature, namely poetry and drama, with the support of 'tamed' literary theories and semiotics, an easy and pleasant task for students of literature and literary criticism. What the book equally seeks to demonstrate is that the practice of critical theories outside the confines of disciplinary commitment to critical schools and the introspective use of several theoretical codes within the framework of *semiocriticism*, as an overarching model of semiotic interpretation, can certainly expand the practical potential of literary theory and *rehabilitate* it in a way that would allow it to speak into the space of the most recent orientation towards practice (*practical turn*) the humanities are currently witnessing.

As an initial step into this interesting subject, a passage by Frank Raymond Leavis on the strategic significance of 'complete reading' and its relevance to the practice of literary criticism might provide a proper line of communication. Reflecting on the critical analysis of literature, Leavis wrote the following:

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The business of the literary critic is to attain a peculiar completeness of response and to observe a peculiarly strict relevance in developing his response into commentary; he must be on his guard against any premature or irrelevant generalizing – of it or from it. His first concern is to enter into possession of the given poem (let us say) in its concrete fullness, and his constant concern is never to lose his completeness of possession, but rather to increase it ...¹

Attaining completeness of response and developing response into commentary is exactly what the literary critic is supposed to do, according to Leavis. This also amounts to saying that if the literary critic fails to achieve full possession of the literary work of art, he/she may not be able to bring its reserves to the light of day and may not be able to bring its unlimited repositories of images, ideas and values to the surface. But what does this have to do with students of literature and literary criticism? How profitable can the works of the literary theorist and the literary critic be for their urgent and immediate academic needs?

Responding to these questions might lead us to another prolific argument which is the complex relationship between the theorist, the critic and the reading public. But since the purpose of this introductory chapter is to shed light rather than expound or elucidate the questions we have just raised, we shall limit our emphasis to the ways students of literature and literary criticism may benefit from the works of the theorist and the critic. Let us now present a brief account of the state of the art.

Students of literature and literary criticism are generally faced with two major challenges. One has something to do with their general background in the field of philosophy; the other concerns the way literary theories are practiced and introduced to them. To begin with, many of the students who enroll for courses of literature and literary criticism have a certain lack of interest in philosophical issues. Although this does not affect their learning directly, it clearly poses difficulties for them when they try to understand the works of the literary theorist and the literary critic which are meant to consolidate their grasp and appreciation of literature. Assuming that literary theories are quite frequently grounded in philosophical views and

¹ Frank Raymond Leavis, *The Common Pursuit*. Chatto & Windus: London, 1962, p. 213.

bearing in mind that philosophical undercurrents tend to underlie the practice of literary criticism, it is very hard to imagine how students who lack knowledge of the intricacies of philosophical discourse can have full grasp of the issues raised by the literary theorist/critic. Moreover, students' handling and use of literary theory and literary criticism always carry pragmatic implications. In other words, most students have recourse to theories and critical works only to the extent that they help them write better assignments and obtain better grades. Students are, therefore, neither ready to engage analytically with the ramified abstractions underlying critical discourse, nor are they scientifically or philosophically well-equipped to do so.

In fact, students of literature do not always clearly realize why the critic emphasizes certain elements in the literary text at the expense of others and why he/she overlooks some details and throws into relief other details, but they definitely realize whether or not the piece of critique they are handling answers their immediate academic needs. The question we need to ask here is: to what extent do the books of literary theory and literary criticism that are available now satisfy the practical/realistic interests of students and their quest for a type of knowledge that is immediate and straightforward?

This question leads us back to the second major challenge which we outlined above and which concerns the nature of critical works and the way they are presented to the reader. Although we are not in a position to evaluate the scientific quality of the works that have been produced in the fields of literary theory and literary criticism, we can still wonder whether or not they have completely achieved the target of making students' engagement with literary texts, particularly poetry and drama, a less demanding and a less disquieting task.

Over the past three decades, there has been an outburst of publications in the field of critical theory. A plethora of Books of theory have come to be marketed on a large scale and collections of theoretical material in the field of literary criticism have come to occupy a significant space in specialized libraries as well as on particular websites. Among these books, we mention: David Lodge's *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (1972), Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), K. M. Newton's *Twentieth Century Literary Theory* (1988), Raman Selden's *A Reader's Guide to Literary Theory* (1989), Fokkema's *Theories of Literature in the Twentieth-Century* (1995), Jonathan Culler's *Literary Theory: A very Short Introduction* (1997), Richard Harland's *Literary Theory From Plato to Barthes: an*

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Introductory History (1999), Hans Bertens's *Literary Theory: The Basics* (2001) and Mary Klages's *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2006). Yet, no matter how intellectually advanced most of these books are, they apparently do not match the works of practice in terms of quantity. The range of publications in the field of theory still outweighs, by far, the range of publications in the field of practice. This is certainly one of the factors that nurtured the distrust in theory we have mentioned at the beginning of this introduction.

During the 1990s or slightly before, a number of critics and practitioners became aware of this negligence and started alerting scholars of literary criticism to the uselessness of publishing books of theory without supplementing them with books of critical practice. Newton (1992), for instance, summarized the whole situation in the following statement:

There would also be little point in producing theory readers and introductions to theory if there was no intention of encouraging students to apply theory themselves when they interpret texts. Yet such volumes are unlikely on their own to have a significant influence on critical practice. If the practice of criticism at a general level is to be significantly changed by developments in modern theory, students must be convinced both that the theory does work in critical engagement with texts and they can apply it. Theory collections therefore need to be supplemented by examples of theory operating in relation to the interpretation of texts, especially as it is often not clear from theoretical discourse alone what form of critical practice it would entail.²

Newton was certainly among many other scholars who made a substantial effort to narrow the gap between theory and practice. As a result of this general orientation, a number of books of critical practice became available during the 1990s and at the beginning of the third millennium. Students of literature, therefore, came to have better chances to get acquainted with the practical side of theories. Even so, the question that still needs to be answered is: how immediately beneficial have the above-stated publications been for the academic interests of students of literature and literary criticism?

² K. M. Newton, *Theory into Practice: A Reader in Modern Literary Criticism*. London: Macmillan Press, 1992, p. 1.

Or also: have the consecutively published readers and anthologies *fully answered* students' needs?

In fact, we cannot say with certainty that they have. For the problem does not lie in familiarizing students with the application of theoretical concepts to literary texts only. The real problem, which sums up the main *raison d'être* for this book, is whether or not these publications are practical and practice-oriented enough to train students to make use of theoretical insights and critical terms without getting confused or put off by the intricate labyrinths of disciplinary and philosophical abstractions.³ There are a number of difficulties with respect to the above-mentioned publications. To mention but the most salient ones: the sophisticated language of certain applications, the use of students' essays as models of application, the disproportion between the amount of theory and the amount of practice, as well as the recurrence of the same canonical/canonized texts chosen for illustration.

To begin with, great deals of the published materials in the area of critical practice include essays that are written by critics who are themselves theorists or exponents of certain critical theories. We cannot naturally expect professional practitioners to minimize the element of theory in their works even if those works are expected to be exemplary models of application. The ideal reader of this kind of material is therefore not the student but rather the scholar of literature and literary criticism who is intellectually more equipped to distinguish in his/her reading of a given application between that which is theoretically relevant and that which is not.

It may be argued that literary theory, due to its speculative nature, should always involve discourses and counter-discourses. But this does not mean that it has to be metamorphosed into a kind of language that only a limited number of specialized individuals can understand. Raman Selden, in his book entitled *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature* (1989), summarizes the state of the art in a very eloquent statement: "Theorists", he says, 'are too often talking to one another in what looks like a private language of forbidden abstraction'.⁴

³ There are a number of exceptions to this general observation. Raman Selden's *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature: an Introduction* (1989) is one such an exception.

⁴ Raman Selden, *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature: an Introduction*. Harvester Wheatsheaf: London, 1989, p. 4.

Let us take a few examples to illustrate this problem. We can start for instance with K. M. Newton's *Theory Into Practice: a Reader in Modern Literary Criticism* (1992). In fact, this is a very interesting and consistent work. It is accurate in its presentation of critical discourses, intelligent in its selection of essays and pointed in its choice of the relevant cases of application. However, as we read through it, the volume gives the impression that it is more suitable for teachers of literary criticism than students who are less theoretically and philosophically equipped to put up with the high level of abstraction and theorizing we find in a number of the included applications. As we examine the exemplary essays, we realize that their level of proficiency is so elevated and so advanced that we are led to wonder: if the targeted readers are students of literature and literary criticism, how much knowledge are they likely to acquire from such applications? And how immediately relevant are the essays to their academic interests if many of them involve sophisticated responses to other theoretical or ideological discourses? Following are a few examples taken from Newton's volume:

In his essay on John Milton entitled 'Transmuting the Lump: Paradise Lost, 1942-1982', Stanley Fish, who is one of the major exponents of Reader-Response Theory, does not begin his essay by introducing the tools he shall use for textual analysis, but rather by formulating a principled answer to Raymond Waddington who has adopted a formalist view in his discussion of Milton's work. As we review the poignant critique Fish addresses to Waddington, we encounter statements like: 'his vocabulary is at once charged and ideological', 'In a sense, then, Waddington writes against himself', 'a formalist perspective on literary matters will deny the title 'poet'...to anyone else whose intentions are overtly didactic or political', etc.⁵

Almost in the same mood of demanding abstractness, J. Hillis Miller, who is one of the leading figures of the Yale school of deconstruction, opens his essay entitled 'Thomas Hardy, Jacques Derrida and the 'Dislocation of Souls'' with very unsettling and convoluted quotations that are addressed to those who believe in the ability of language to represent the world and to perform well-defined acts. The first is by Kafka who argues that writing means 'denuding' oneself before the ghosts and that letters can scarcely be regarded as media of communication: 'How on earth did anyone get

⁵ Stanley Fish in K. M. Newton, *Theory Into Practice: A Reader in Modern Literary Criticism*. London: Macmillan Press, 1992, pp. 98-100.

the idea that people can communicate with one another by letter??. The second is by Derrida who tries to deconstruct the belief that a particular utterance has a particular performative effect that is defined by extra-linguistic factors like: intention, ideology, presupposition, occasion, etc. Clearly, Miller is not addressing a student audience here, but rather delivering a resolute and sturdy answer to all those theorists or critics among the practitioners of structuralism and literary pragmatics who believe in the possibility of assigning specific meanings to words and utterances. Miller also includes a statement by Derrida who criticizes J. Austin for trying ‘unsuccessfully’ to ‘limit the terrible and always to some degree unpredictable power of a performative utterance.’⁶

Another case in point is *Literary Theory at Work* (Ed. Douglas Tallack, 1987). In this book, which consists of a collection of essays written on canonized authors, Diana Knight starts her structuralist discussion of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* by quoting Terry Eagleton – one of the fiercest opponents of structuralism – as he tries to destabilize the assumptions of structuralists, those ‘who wish the world to be within their control, to carry its singular meaning on its face and to yield it up to them in the unblemished mirror of their language.’⁷ She then sets out to prove the fallacy of Eagleton’s claim by demonstrating that an application of Gérard Genette’s theory of narratology can yield very positive outcomes in terms of analysis and interpretation.

In fact, such aspects of theoretical and ideological debate are quite recurrent in the area of critical practice. However, due to the intricacy of the language used in much of those theory-infused discussions, one may wonder: does the ‘principled’ and frequently biased dialogue between theorists and critics develop the student’s ability to understand and apply literary theories in the most viable and effective way?

As we have mentioned earlier, the theoretical language of professional practitioners we frequently encounter in their critical essays is very often too advanced and too sophisticated to be easily assimilated by students of literary criticism. This has led a number of writers to opt for another alternative, which is the reliance on

⁶ Quoted by J. Hillis Miller in Newton (1992), pp. 126-127.

⁷ Terry Eagleton, quoted by Diana Knight, “Narratology, Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*” in Douglas Tallack, ed., *Literary Theory at Work*. Bastford: London, 1987, p. 10.

students' essays as examples of application of theories to texts. Again, unfortunately, this alternative does not really help much in attaining satisfactory results as far as students' digestion and acquisition of practical skills are concerned. This is due to at least two reasons. On the one hand, even if students can apply theories to literary texts in the way they have been instructed, their essays can never become ideal teaching materials no matter how successful they might be. After all, students' essays are primarily meant to satisfy teachers' instructions rather than make other students learn properly how a given theory is being applied. This amounts to saying that even if they are proofread and improved, students' essays will always lack the instructive and pedagogical insights a scholar's application is usually nurtured with, especially when that application is initially meant to guide and train. On the other hand, as shall be elucidated later, students' essays are often confined to limited paradigms or fractions of theories. This is quite evident since we cannot expect students, at a learning stage, to be able to navigate freely within the realm of a given theory and to use the maximum of its analytical paradigms to produce a model application that can be used later as a suitable material for instruction. A student's essay may be given as an example among other examples of interpretation of the same text, but not as the only example illustrating a whole theory.

Although detailed textual analyses are not very common in introductory chapters, I believe that a few illustrations pertaining to the above raised issue are worth bringing forward for the sake of elucidation. They might also provide an incentive for the reader to go on exploring the point we are trying to make in this book in the forthcoming chapters.

The examples we are presenting here are taken from Charles Bressler's *Literary Criticism: an Introduction to Theory and Practice* (2003). The first is an attempt to conduct a structuralist analysis of James Thurber's *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* by Conie Krause. As Bressler states, the essay 'revolves around two major binary oppositions or tensions and several minor interrelated tensions'.⁸ The student manages to demonstrate properly how the text is structured on the main opposition between fantasy and reality and how many other binary oppositions such as superiority vs. inferiority, strength vs. weakness, knowledge vs. ignorance and confidence vs. insecurity

⁸ Charles E. Bressler, *Literary Criticism: an Introduction to Theory and Practice*. Upper Saddle River: New Jersey, 2003, p. 89.

support the basic tension between that which is imaginary and that which is real. However, the essay remains locked within the concept of binary opposition and fails to draw the reader's attention to many important formal features of the text. It is true that binary opposition is one of the fundamental premises of structuralist methodology, but the interpretation of Thurber's short story could have been conducted in a much more effective way had the student placed additional emphasis on the form and structure of the text; namely, the type of modality used (deontic and oneiric verbs), character analysis (the actantial model which comprises: the main thematic force, the object of desire, the receiver, the arbiter, the helpers and the opponents) in addition to the spatiotemporal structure (the relationship between the inner space and the outer space as well as historical and psychological time). Actually, the remarks about the lack of depth and the lack of instructive input in the student's application of the structuralist analysis of the story can be elaborated thoroughly, but since the present chapter is introductory only, we shall content ourselves with the observations we have outlined, believing that the coming chapters will contain more comprehensive illustrations of how a structuralist reading *addressed to learners of literary criticism* may proceed in a more focused way.

Comparable remarks can be made regarding the application of deconstruction by the student Jennifer Douglas which is also included in Bressler's introduction to literary criticism. The student manages to demonstrate that the short story *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros can be read against its own logic. This is a commonplace deconstructive practice: the critic usually explains how the text dismantles itself as it attempts to communicate supposedly existing meanings. But deconstruction does not stop at this level. Apart from showing how a text can be read against its own logic, deconstructionists often seek to explore how a literary text subverts certain hierarchies of meaning that are taken to be absolute and irreversible values. The student, here, should have tried to identify and explore the areas where the text reverses those hierarchies of meaning that are thought to be irreversible, such as: the notion of private ownership, the idea of dispossession, the notion of freedom or independence in relation to private ownership, the notions of the 'real' and the 'imaginary', the moral values associated with 'priesthood', the interdependence between possession and social success, the concept of class consciousness, etc. The point is that students' essays cannot really become appropriate and reliable

examples on the basis of which other students may develop their understanding of literary theories and may perfect their practice of criticism. Bressler himself states that ‘the student essays should not be viewed as literary masterpieces but as undergraduate attempts to exemplify differing literary theories. Instructors and students alike should feel free to critique these essays and explore both their strengths and weaknesses.’⁹

As we hinted above earlier, Bressler’s book is an excellent introduction to literary theories. It contains all that students need to know about the different schools of criticism: their historical developments, their assumptions and their methodologies. But in terms of practice, the amount of textual space devoted to actual applications of theories is very limited compared to that devoted to theory: out of three hundred pages or more, only thirty-three pages which represent the students’ essays are actual illustrations of the introduced theories. Though this remark does not diminish the scientific and pedagogical value of Bressler’s work, it confirms what we stated at the beginning of this introductory chapter that the alternative of *intensive practice* in the field of literary criticism needs to be given more attention and more emphasis in the effort to make the application of literary theories more accessible and more pleasant for students of literature.

The next point we would like to explore in this introductory chapter concerns the type of texts that are commonly chosen for illustration in a number of readers that have so far been published. In fact, many of the authors of the published materials in the area of critical practice select only those texts which lend themselves readily to the theories they wish to illustrate regardless of which literary genre they belong to, ignoring therefore students’ need to deal with different varieties of texts and to see a single theory being applied to different literary genres.

Indeed, as one skims through readers of literary criticism, one can easily notice that some texts have been transformed into palimpsests by successive generations of literary critics. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, for instance, is quite frequently used to illustrate Freudian psychoanalysis.¹⁰ The same thing holds true for *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster which have been overused by Marxist and Post-Colonialist critics and which are

⁹ Charles E. Bressler, p. xiv.

¹⁰ See Raman Selden, 1989, p. 81.

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still discussed as models for the practice of any ideologically- or politically-marked criticism. Similarly, texts by Anne Bradstreet and Jane Austen have become a very fertile ground for the practice of feminist criticism, etc.

In fact, even though the type of reading that is frequently offered as a demonstration is not exactly the same in all essays, the meanings that are often ascribed to the above-mentioned texts have become predictable by force of reiteration and recurrence in similar contexts, and the response to them has become quite conventional in the process. The weakness involved here is not insignificant: in the absence of sufficient variation of text typologies, students will always remain prisoners of those interpretive paradigms or parameters that are applicable to the text(s) chosen for illustration and that do not necessarily apply to other texts. This is added to the fact that most critics tend to select texts whose signifying modes and verbal features are generally in tune with the demonstrations they wish to make.

Actually, the failure to vary the texts used for illustration of critical theories and the frequent deviation of critics from practice for the sake of persuasion, argumentation or theorizing provide a solid *raison d'être* for the present work. Yet, it would be too negligent an attitude to underestimate the value of readers of literary criticism or cast doubt on the scientific rigor and richness that distinguish them from other types of criticism. The point we rather wish to highlight concerns the disproportion between the quality of these works and the nature of the readership to which they are primarily addressed. It is quite evident that the high degree of proficiency of many of the current readers does not match students' limited knowledge in the field of the humanities and in the field of literary criticism in particular. If one takes into consideration the essays' advanced level of competence and the students' modest scientific and philosophical backgrounds, one is tempted to say that a considerable portion of the available material in the domain of critical practice lies outside the confines of immediate utility as far as students' academic needs and interests are concerned.

However, in order to help students of literature to benefit from literary theories without getting aligned with a particular current of thought and without getting stuck in the mud of philosophical and terminological intricacies, we need to teach them how to be selective/eclectic in handling the material that is available to them in the field of literary criticism as a whole. In other words, we need to help them to choose from different theories and different sets of