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**BEYOND THE SCHOOLS APPROACH:
CHRONOLOGICAL AND THEMATIC COURSE
DESIGNS FOR TEACHING LITERARY THEORY**

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Since its first appearance on the literary studies¹ curriculum in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the undergraduate survey course on literary theory and criticism has been beset by ambiguity. On the one hand, most scholars in the field agree that student exposure to what is often simply known as “theory” is necessary both as a guide for literary analysis and as a means of complicating the intuitive notions about literature with which students typically begin their first degree. On the other hand, the ubiquitous “lit crit” offerings have long had a reputation for presenting difficulties to the point of being “unteachable”;² and these teacher complaints are typically echoed on the student side, with many undergraduates struggling to find their bearings in a field of intense rhetorical and conceptual difficulty.

For a long time, the former point took precedence over the latter. As long as literary theory was considered the vanguard, not only of literary studies, but often also of the humanities at large, the pedagogical challenges of the standard theory course tended to be a secondary consideration. What carried these courses was the radicalism and sheer intellectual excitement of the subject matter itself rather than the prevailing teaching approach which remained remarkably conservative. In fact, the material to be taught, and to some extent the style of teaching, seemed to a certain degree predetermined – partly because theory courses from the outset stuck closely to the traditional historical survey format, and partly because of the emerging conception of literary theory as a canonical succession of “schools” extending from formalism and New Criticism in the 1920-40s to poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and gender

studies from the late 1960s to the 1980s. As a consequence, the chronological approach has become the default mode of teaching theory to undergraduates.

Recently, the fortunes of literary theory as an independent academic endeavor have been on the wane. This can be explained in part as a case of innovation drying up; as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2007: 215) notes, while the mid-twentieth century was period of constant transformations, it has now been more than 30 years since the emergence of the last major theoretical paradigm. However, this lack of innovation might itself be an indication that the field has simply pivoted away from “high theory”. Today, theory is often something looked back on (Rorty 2006), attacked as an out-dated orthodoxy (Patai and Corral 2006), or denounced as too one-sidedly committed to a hermeneutics of suspicion (Felski 2009) – hence the recent proliferation of the memes of “after theory” or “the end of theory” (Mitchell 2004; Eagleton 2004: 23-40). While this language of supersession overstates the case, it is evident that literary theory no longer generates the excitement, nor commands the authority, that it did a generation ago. For this reason, the traditional literary theory course has become a hard sell and seems increasingly reduced to a specialist interest – an interest in disciplinary history rather than current theoretical debates.

The post-theoretical turn therefore returns us to the question of the “unteachability” of literary theory courses; and since theoretical schooling is as necessary as ever, this question constitutes one of the key pedagogical challenges of literary studies today. In what follows, I argue that the difficulties involved in teaching theory to undergraduates must be seen in relation to the continued authority of what I call the “schools approach” – that is, the idea that literary theory is best taught as a chronological survey of theoretical paradigms. My argument proceeds in three steps. Firstly, I undertake a study of course designs and teaching materials with the aim of highlighting the remarkable dominance of the schools approach at leading universities across the world. Secondly, I offer a critique of this teaching approach based on

the idea that it privileges the learning of pre-established knowledge rather than the acquisition of skills in theoretical thinking. Thirdly, I present an alternative thematic approach based on a comprehensive redesign of a standard literary theory course undertaken at the University of Newcastle, Australia. My claim is that this approach offers a more dynamic, problem-centered learning experience better suited for a situation where the schools and -isms of theory have lost their former allure.

Prevalence of the Schools Approach

A key concern in the pedagogical literature on literary theory classes is to develop ways of activating theory as a skill rather than a knowledge: instead of learning the established critical positions by rote, students should ideally be trained to engage with literary texts in a theoretically informed way (Shumway 1992: 101-4; Barry n.d.). Few teachers would scorn this advice, conforming as it does to the well-established pedagogical precept that learning is enhanced when approached actively with a view to contextual application. Yet, as I demonstrate in this section via a survey of course descriptions, textbooks, and scholarly introductions, the historical overview – a quintessentially non-dynamic teaching mode – remains virtually unchallenged as the teaching approach of choice in literary theory courses across the English-speaking world.

As part of this research, I collated course descriptions for the relevant course offerings at the top 20 universities listed in the 2012-13 *Times Higher Education* ranking of Arts & Humanities institutions (“Top 50”). Not all English and comparative literature programs offer a dedicated theory course, and in some cases detailed information is not freely available to non-students. Nevertheless, the survey unambiguously testifies to the dominance of the schools approach; in fact, no examples were found of course descriptions advertising the use of other teaching methods.

In the present context, a few characteristic examples can stand in for a full account of the findings (for details, see Appendix). Thus, at the University of Pennsylvania's Comparative Literature Department, the undergraduate course COML094: Introduction to Literary Theory aims to expose students to the "discourses of contemporary theory," defined in this context as the "main schools of the twentieth century" ("COML094"). The wording here is characteristic both in terms of its strongly taxonomical orientation and its suggestion that the theoretical schools of the past century can still plausibly be badged as "contemporary". Similar rhetoric can be found in virtually every course description in this area. At UC Berkeley, English 161: Introduction to Literary Theory focuses on "the major theoretical schools: formalism, structuralism and post-structuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, New Historicism, identity politics, and post-colonialism" ("English 161"). At Princeton University, COM 301: Theory and Methods of Comparative Literature revolves around the "foundational texts of contemporary critical theory" from New Criticism to Poststructuralism ("COM 301"). And at Cornell University, COML4999: Seminar in Theory similarly offers an overview of "trends and issues in contemporary literary and cultural theory, with attention to structuralism and post-structuralism, feminism, psychoanalysis, queer theory, and human-animal studies" ("COML4999"). Importantly, even though American universities dominate the *Times* top 20, this type of course design is not restricted to the United States. As shown in the appendix, the relevant course offerings at University College London, Edinburgh, the Australian National University, and Toronto are all advertised in identical terms as survey courses organized around the successive -isms of literary theory.

In actual classroom practice, these courses will no doubt be much less similar than the short content descriptions suggest, and the teaching approach and persona of the individual instructor can undoubtedly make a significant difference in terms of creating a dynamic learning environment – even to the point of approximating the thematic approach I am advo-

cating in this essay. Yet, the fact that the wordings are almost interchangeable cannot be dismissed by arguing that the descriptions are simply thumbnails and not necessarily indicative of in-class pedagogical practice. Clearly, since they inform student enrollment choices, these descriptions can reasonably be expected to offer an accurate representation of actual course contents, and the syllabi and learning objectives of the above courses do in fact confirm, to the extent that they are available to the public, that the chosen approach is that of the chronological survey. Moreover, the course descriptions in themselves send a powerful signal to students about the organization of the material and the learning that needs to be done. In doing so, they help internalize the notion that what matters in literary theory is its segregation into distinctive “schools”.

If the teaching of literary theory is characterized by inertia, this is due not only to the convenience or pedagogical advantages of the traditional historical survey course, but also to the availability of teaching materials. Far from simply being tools for teaching, readers and introductory guides help define pedagogical practice inasmuch as they canonize specific texts, theoretical positions, and segmentations of the field. As a complementary survey of the most widely used study materials demonstrates, the schools approach reigns supreme in the existing literature on theory and criticism, and this fact it itself complicates the adaptation of alternative teaching approaches.

Unsurprisingly, the courses surveyed above typically prescribe the same textbooks. As course reader, the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (Leitch et al. 2010) is unrivalled in terms of popularity. This voluminous compilation does offer readers a choice between chronological and thematic tables of content and provides a comprehensive index that allows for multiple entry points. Nevertheless, the schools approach remains its basic organizing principle. General editor Vincent B. Leitch’s lengthy keynote article, “Introduction to Theory and Criticism”, is a précis of the dominant theoretical schools of the twentieth century, and

the “Preface” similarly assures us that the anthology covers “all the main schools and movements, ranging from Marxism, psychoanalysis, and formalism to post-structuralism, cultural studies, race and ethnicity studies, and many more” (Leitch 2010: xxxiii). Other popular textbooks such as K.M. Newton’s *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory* (1997), Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan’s *Literary Theory. An Anthology* (2004), David H. Richter’s *The Critical Tradition* (2007), and Robert Dale Parker’s *Critical Theory. A Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies* (2012) also explicitly subscribe to the segmentation of literary theory into distinct “schools.” These readers have numerous overlaps between them, not only in terms of the positions they cover, but also in terms of the chosen essays – indeed, some essays appear in three or even all four volumes, and many are included in Norton’s offering as well. Thus, the existing textbook literature consists of multiple school-based anthologies with almost identical contents. It appears that no major anthology has been published that does not adopt the schools approach and does not pay deference to the relatively restrictive canon of “high theory”.

The same is true of introductory works. The most widely used student guide over the past three decades has been Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory. An Introduction* (2008). This volume itself opts for a minimalist division of the field into six broad and loosely chronological positions: Leavisianism and New Criticism, reader-oriented theories, Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, Psychoanalysis and Marxism. Yet, by virtue of its considerable popularity, Eagleton’s book has contributed more than any other introduction to the canonization of the schools approach. A survey based on the amazon.com “Best Seller Sales Rank” provides a clear picture of exactly how dominant this approach has become. Of the top-selling introductions at the time of the survey,³ nine – including widely used works such as Peter Barry’s *Beginning Theory* (2009), Charles E. Bressler’s, *Literary Theory* (2011), and Paul H. Fry’s *Theory of Literature* (2012)– can unambiguously be classified as using this approach. These titles

differ in terms of coverage, target audience, and whether or not they employ literary examples to illustrate the theoretical points, yet the framework in each case is the understanding of theory as a series of successive positions with a high degree of internal homogeneity. The one exception on the list is Jonathan Culler's *Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction* (2011). The short format of this volume means that it cannot reasonably be placed alongside full-scale introductions. However, by pursuing the assumption that "to introduce theory, it is better to discuss shared questions and claims than to survey theoretical schools", it does represent one of the few attempts to break the pedagogical uniformity of the field.⁴

This brief examination of course descriptions and teaching materials invites two conclusions. First, it shows that the field of literary theory and criticism pedagogically speaking is at a standstill. When it occurs at all, innovation is aimed primarily at lowering the entry barriers into this notoriously impenetrable area – hence the fashion for "inclusive" subtitles such as "A User-Friendly Guide", "A Guide for the Perplexed", and "A Reader's Guide". However, the field as a whole is dominated by the rarely questioned consensus that the schools approach is the most effective way of literary teaching theory to undergraduates. Secondly, the survey demonstrates the degree to which literary theory has become an industry (James 2011), and that this commodification of the field prescribes the standard course design due to the absence of viable alternatives. Most major academic publishers offer textbooks or introductions to literary theory, and, as evidenced by the amazon.com sales statistics, those using the schools approach are eminently marketable. In this way, the inertia of academic canonization and the inertia of the marketplace raise practical barriers to the adoption of alternative teaching practices and effectively discourage pedagogical innovation.

Problems with the Schools Approach

Having established the dominance of the schools approach, I now turn to the pedagogical problems it presents. It should be acknowledged from the outset that this approach does offer some advantages. Above all, it excels when it comes to the history and evolution of theory as well as the historical contextualization of individual positions and theoretical memes; moreover, it organizes the vast archive of theoretical ideas into manageable packages, thereby reducing complexity and helping students gain an overview of the area. However, the sheer dominance of the schools approach tends to obscure its weaknesses. Tellingly, support for this approach in the pedagogical literature is very scarce – an indication that the chronological organization is simply a default position that has achieved predominance not because it has been established as best practice, but because it is practical. While the scholarly literature has already raised a number of objections (Myers 1994; Calder 2006), a more systematic critique of the schools approach is needed as a platform for pedagogical innovation in this area. To this end, I present three critical points that ultimately boil down to a single intuition, namely that this approach is appropriate for teaching disciplinary history, but less appropriate when it comes to imparting skills in critical and theoretical thinking.

My first concern regards the implied temporal structure of the schools approach. Courses designed using this model tend to be conservative and progressivist at the same time – which is likely the reason why they, as the above survey demonstrates, almost invariably combine a rhetoric of contemporaneity with an actual focus on material from the past century. The conservatism is native to the historical survey format. This format prescribes an emphasis on established schools of theory, and since the establishment of new paradigms is a slow process, it will always struggle to keep abreast with more recent developments in the field; for this reason, the typical theory course still concentrates on what Eagleton (2004: 23-4) calls theory's "golden age" from c. 1965 to 1980. Yet the schools approach is also progressivist in the

sense that it implicitly subscribes to an idea of incremental advancement – the chronological ordering carries with it the problematic implication that more recent positions are somehow more refined and complex than those of previous generations. As a result of this conservative progressivism, theory courses tend to cast some form of poststructuralist consensus as the current state of the art even though the writings informing this position were typically published first in the 1960s and 1970s. Skilled lecturers might of course forestall or at least complicate this conclusion. However, the main pedagogical problem remains, namely that the schools approach envisions literary theory as a progression of positions (hence the frequency in theoretical discourse of temporal markers such as “new”, “after”, or “post-”). This outlook in effect hinders dialogue between schools and invites students to regard theory through the lens of disciplinary history rather than as an encouragement to critical engagement and debate.

Secondly, the schools approach institutionalizes a segmentation of theory into a series of self-contained critical vocabularies. As natural and inevitable as this may seem, it has the undesirable effect of homogenizing the field, forcibly entering certain critics into the ranks of a specific school while letting others fall by the wayside because they cannot convincingly be assigned to one grouping. Moreover, this approach makes individual schools appear as monoliths, each with a claim to being internally consistent and offering a complete framework with which to analyze literary texts. In terms of pedagogical practice, this siloing of literary theory fractures the syllabus and compels students to work their way into a new school of thought almost on a weekly basis. Yet, a perhaps more serious problem is that it promotes a certain methodological laziness. The schools approach short-circuits methodological reflection by encouraging students to adopt the posture of a specific school and apply its tenets to the analysis of individual literary texts. The result is twofold. On the one hand, it leads to what might be called the default relativism of literary studies, claiming that the various theoretical posi-

tions constitute different “approaches” to literature that, in their practical application, produce different, yet equally valid “readings”. On the other hand, it provides students with a “cheat sheet” of officially sanctioned answers and thereby forces individual texts to conform, however awkwardly, to a pre-established set of theoretical ideas. This theory-application model, sometimes referred to as the “cookie cutter” or “shoehorn” approach, has been widely derided (Graff & Di Leo 2000: 113; Rorty 2006: 64-5; Felski 2009: 29). Nevertheless, while finding little support among scholars, it is in fact embedded in the way literary theory courses are taught at the undergraduate level, and as a result these courses fail to equip students with an appropriate degree of methodological awareness.

Finally, the schools approach conceives of literary theory as a static body of knowledge to be appropriated rather than an occasion for independent critical thinking. This problem has not gone unnoticed and has been met with two attempts at redress. First, Gerald Graff (1993: 12-15) has suggested a conflictual model of teaching in the humanities where ideological or theoretical controversies are not glossed over, but highlighted and utilized as a learning tool. This idea of “teaching the conflicts” has become a key part of the self-representation of most literary theory courses, yet the schools approach arguably obstructs an effective implementation of this otherwise sound pedagogical principle. By insisting on chronology and fixed positions rather than ideas and arguments, this approach tends to *minimize* conflict, treating individual schools as stand-alone ways of thinking about literature; instead of the conflict of ideas, it teaches relativism and mutual indifference. Secondly, critics such as Kathleen McCormick (1992: 115) and Peter Barry (n.d.) have proposed that we teach “theorizing” rather than “theory.” Drawing on Paolo Freire’s critique of the “banking model of education”, this view holds that theory courses should not simply present students with accomplished facts, but should enable them to think critically and independently about literature. While this is likewise a useful pedagogical insight, the advocates of such a transformation of theory from a

state to an activity often fail to ask whether the schools approach is the optimal way of teaching “theorizing”. Once again, this approach seems to do the opposite: it induces students to internalize the tenets of each school of theory rather than teaching them how to think and argue theoretically.

As these critical points make apparent, the teaching of literary theory is in need of pedagogical innovation. The schools approach was well suited for a period where the main concern was to establish theory as an independent scholarly activity with a history, a canon of key contributions, and a place of its own within the literary studies curriculum. However, in the present situation where literary scholars are increasingly moving away from “high theory”, theory courses have a different role to play and should be taught with the aim of equipping students with a developed theoretical and methodological awareness. For this to happen, it is necessary to break the fixation on established critical schools and refocus the standard theory course on the main theoretical problems and challenges of the field.

Case Study: A Thematic Approach

At this stage in my argument I want to switch from the abstract to the practical and discuss an example of a course design that departs from the schools approach, albeit without altogether abandoning its historical outlook. At the University of Newcastle, Australia, I took over ENGL3654: The Critical Tradition – the English program’s main theory unit – in 2010 and have since taught this course on three occasions. In the process, the course was gradually redesigned, and a new thematic structure was introduced whereby literary theory is presented to students as an array of recurring issues and challenges – the fundamental theoretical questions of the discipline.

In its original form, ENGL3654 was a standard historical survey course conforming to the precepts of the schools approach. In terms of structure, it differed from the courses surveyed

above only by virtue of its unusually ambitious scope: in 13 weekly seminars, students were not only meant to become familiar with the main theoretical paradigms of the twentieth century, but with the entire Western tradition of literary theory from ancient Greece to Postmodernism. The first revision in 2010 retained the chronological format, but refocused the course on late twentieth-century criticism while at the same time introducing a number of recent developments in the field such as world literature, theories of the affective and material dimensions of the literary text, and the debates concerning a possible “end of theory”. Nevertheless, many participants still struggled with the extent and difficulty of the readings as well as with the breakneck pace, which required them to grapple with a new critical position every week. Several students requested more class time to do justice to each school, and one commented that a two-hour session “was barely enough to get your head around one theoretical idea before quickly moving on to the next.”⁵

The conclusion drawn from this feedback, my own evaluation, and the student assessment performance was that the course was indeed “unteachable” in its existing form. The main problem was evidently the course design. The schools approach is based on the assumption that an historical overview facilitates student learning by seeing individual theoretical memes as stages in a gradual evolution of ideas and positions. Yet, in the present instance, this assumption had not been borne out. The seminar presentations had emphasized the historical lineage of the individual schools as well as the ongoing discussions and disagreements between them. Moreover, the course materials included an elaborate chronological/thematic matrix that summarized the position on each school on a range of key issues (meaning, authorial intention, historical context, gender etc.), thereby facilitating comparative and lateral perspectives. Nonetheless, most students remained committed to the view described above as the default relativism of literary studies, which regards the various critical positions as complete and self-contained systems of thought rather than participants in an ongoing critical debate.

Here, theory was still a matter of learning an established body of “truths” – of “theory” rather than “theorizing”.

For the second and third iterations, I consequently replaced the focus on theoretical paradigms with a purely thematic approach. The pedagogical aim of this revision was to relocate the discussion to the level of individual arguments and problems, thereby uncovering a layer of debate that the schools approach tends to cover up. Each weekly seminar focused on a single critical problem or key concept of literary studies. The topics were loosely organized into segments of 2-4 weeks, charting a progression from basic categories to more complex issues. Drawing loosely on M.H. Abrams’s (1971; 3-29) classic model of critical orientations, the first four weeks were dedicated to the author, the reader, the text and the world as basic orientations of critical theory. The following 2-week segment expanded on this discussion and examined some of the core problems of literary interpretation: close vs. distant reading, unity vs. plurality of meaning, as well as the recent debates between hermeneutic and non-hermeneutic approaches to literature. The final segment, spanning 4 weeks, explored different ways of contextualizing literature; beginning conventionally with a discussion of literature and social power, students proceeded to examine the representation of collective identities in literature and ended with a highly topical investigation of national and global frameworks of Literary studies. The first and last classes were dedicated to theory itself: on the one hand its uses and potentials in terms of challenging naive assumptions as well as guiding and informing critical analysis; and on the other hand its own historicity, its limitations and the contention that “theory” might be coming to an end as an independent critical endeavor.

In terms of actual classroom teaching strategy, this course retained a firm focus on key concepts and themes. A case in point is the treatment of the current interest in world literature. It would have been entirely possible to introduce World Literature – in capitalized form – as the most recent school of literary theory, complete with a canon of contributors, over-

arching viewpoints, and controversies. The implied learning objective would have been to internalize key tenets of theoreticians such as Franco Moretti, Emily Apter, and David Damrosch with a view to establishing a procedure that students could put into practice in their subsequent critical work. Due to reservations about the pedagogical utility of this approach, I decided to implement a teaching practice centered, not on prescriptive answers, but on the ability to ask incisive questions. The course readings, which essentially remained unchanged, were consequently taken as an opportunity to introduce a set of general problems as well as to return to issues addressed earlier in the course: What are the key differences between national and global perspectives on literature and what arguments can be put forward on either side? Which kinds of literature are likely to cross borders and which are not? What are the hermeneutic implications of a literary text being read outside its place of origin? Are some works untranslatable? What are the processes of literary canonization at the national and global level? In which ways does the focus on world literature reopen the discussion concerning “close” and “distant” modes of reading? The expectation was that such an open-ended and discussion-centered approach would enable students to understand theoretical texts from the point of view of the larger issues to which they respond. At the same time, this approach was designed to provide them with the skills needed to join theoretical debates in the field with higher degrees of competence and independence.

Prior to each class, students were emailed a set of 4-7 study questions for the week’s readings along with a short statement of the theme. The initial lecture elaborated on this statement, highlighting in particular the conflicts and problems inherent in the chosen topic. From there, we progressed to a freer discussion taking the cue from the critical readings, and students were encouraged to identify conflicting views and weigh arguments against each other. The assessment tasks, comprising two short reports as well as two essays, were designed to support this thematic approach; thus, the essay questions asked students to discuss a specific

problem in literary theory or compare the views of two or more theorists on a given topic. Moreover, the assessment criteria were redesigned so as to reward independent critical discussion as well as the ability to make connections and comparisons across the syllabus.

One of the strengths of this thematic approach is that it encourages students to explore links and lateral connections between individual texts and topics. In the present case, some of these links were planned for in the syllabus while others emerged serendipitously. For example, the status of the author was discussed in week 2 by contrasting three very different viewpoints: Wimsatt and Beardsley's "intentional fallacy", E.D. Hirsch's opposing defense of authorial intention as a standard of correct interpretation, and Michel Foucault's influential historicization of the "author-function". Passing through the traditional territories of New Criticism, hermeneutics, and poststructuralism, this class already invited inter-school debate by virtue of its thematic setup, and the lecture part correspondingly stressed both the unity of the topic and the differences between the critics in terms of basic theoretical outlook. However, the overall course design made it possible to revisit and reframe the concept of authoriality on several later occasions. Thus, week 3's discussion of the "reader" naturally led back to the author, with critics such as Stanley Fish and Roland Barthes disputing that the author's biography or intention should guide our understanding of literary texts. Further, two later classes (weeks 9-10) on literature and the representation of collective identities (sex/gender and race/ethnicity), which themselves highlighted the common ground between varieties of gender studies and postcolonialism, reopened the discussion of the author, and Toril Moi's essay "I am not a woman writer. About women, literature and feminist theory today" (2008) explicitly addressed the notion of authorship in a gender context, drawing on the essays by Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault that students had engaged with in the first weeks of the course. Along with several other lateral pathways through the course, this ongoing discussion of authoriality

allowed students to re-examine ideas encountered earlier in the semester, thereby furthering their active mastery of the field.

In opting for a thematic approach, the intention was not to abandon all discussion of the schools of literary theory, let alone to marginalize historical aspects. Undergraduate students majoring in literature will inevitably encounter concepts and vocabularies specific to a particular theoretical school (not to mention repeated references to various -isms), and a theory course would fail its purpose if it did not equip them at least with a working knowledge of these and the discussions through which they came into being. Acquainting participants with the major positions in twentieth-century criticism was therefore a secondary objective of this course, and this objective was supported by a range of learning activities. First, two school-oriented survey articles were assigned for the first and last class of the semester. Secondly, as a recurring feature, classes included short lecturer presentations of individual theoretical paradigms whenever the topic or the readings made this relevant. Thirdly, a collection of handbooks, introductions, and dictionaries was made available for short-term loan in the university library. Finally, a chronological overview of critical schools was posted on the course Blackboard site along with an assortment of links to online resources on theory and criticism such as the Purdue University Online Writing Lab's "Literary Theory and Schools of Criticism" guide (Brizee and Tompkins 2012). To further advance student learning in this area, as well as to test learning outcomes, two substantive group activities were scheduled for weeks 7 and 13. The first, a puzzle game assessing passive knowledge, asked students to match up a set of paper slips (50+) containing either short theoretical statements or names of literary theorists with a second set with the names of the major schools. The second activity, which tested active knowledge, required students to summarize in the form of a chart the viewpoints of various critical schools on the general topics addressed in the course. Unsurprisingly, student performance was stronger in the first task than in the second. However, taken together, the

two group exercises demonstrated that students had in fact acquired an adequate grasp of the major theoretical schools even though this had not been the a primary course objective.

It could be argued that the schools approach serves a propaedeutic function, grounding and individualizing key theoretical concepts that would otherwise appear as free-floating and ahistorical entities; accordingly, the traditional survey course should be a prerequisite of a thematic course, which would be more suitable for postgraduate students. However, the experimentation with course design at the University of Newcastle, Australia, does not support this view. For the most recent iteration, the course, now labelled ENGL2000: Key Concepts of Literary Theory, was rebadged as a second-year unit and made a mandatory component of the English major. Even though these changes tripled enrollment numbers and ended the self-selection of theory-minded students, the course received significantly higher student satisfaction ratings than in past offerings (4.47/5 vs 3.9/5 prior to design changes). At a more anecdotal level, instructors agreed that the thematic approach led to higher levels of student engagement, stronger assessment performance, and a generally better grasp of the fundamentals of the discipline. While this feedback does not constitute firm evidence, it does suggest that a thematic approach offers several pedagogical advantages and represents one possible avenue of innovation in undergraduate teaching of literary theory.

Beyond the Schools Approach

One of the most remarkable features of the schools approach is that while almost everyone is using it, seemingly nobody advocates it as pedagogical best practice. The obvious conclusion is that this approach is chosen more for its familiarity and convenience than for its inherent advantages in terms of achieving a set of desirable learning outcomes. In fact, it does suffer from a number of shortcomings. The main problem is an implied “Gradgrindian” pedagogy whereby theory is seen as a set of established facts to be internalized, and students as

vessels into which these facts are poured. Under this regime, students risk being reduced to passive addressees of information rather than empowered as skilled practitioners of theoretical reasoning. As Andrew Campbell (1997: 141) notes, this latent pedagogical authoritarianism is strangely at odds with the anti-authoritarian bent of the subject matter; whereas the classic schools of theory advocate the challenging of orthodoxies, the standard teaching approach for theory courses view literary theory simply as “a series of positions to be learned.”

As I have argued in this essay, the pedagogical failings of the schools approach have been exacerbated by the relative decline of literary theory over the past two decades. If the weaknesses of this approach were previously hidden to some degree by the excitement generated by the topic itself, they are now impossible to overlook and more than ever pose a barrier to successful teaching in this area. In a nutshell, the problem is that today’s literary theory courses are geared towards a specific conception of literary theory (“high theory”) that has lost its former sway over the field. However, this does not entail that theory in general is obsolete; on the contrary, theoretical training is still indispensable as a core element of a literary studies undergraduate degree.

What is needed, then, is a redesign of the mandatory undergraduate theory unit, ideally backed by similarly redesigned textbooks and introductions. As a first step, we would do well to abandon the schools approach as the primary way of organizing the subject matter. One promising way of replacing it is to develop course designs that focus on key concepts, problems, and themes within the field – on recurring questions rather than authoritative answers. While this thematic approach may not map on directly to any of the prevailing attitudes in current learning and teaching research, it seems well matched to the topic of literary theory itself. More than anything, theoretical reasoning in the context of literature is a matter of weighing up conflicting views against each other, fostering methodological self-awareness, and underpinning analytical and historical claims with meta-level arguments. This is precise-

ly where the thematic approach excels. The aim here is not to provide instruction in authoritative vocabularies, but rather to introduce students to some of the basic theoretical questions of the field, thereby enabling them to reflect critically on their own interpretative practice – ideally with a keen sense that methodological awareness goes beyond selecting a theory and then applying it wholesale to a literary work. In the current situation, it matters less that students know the whole catechism of “high theory”, or that they can list all the schools and the duration of their reigns. What matters is an understanding of the enduring theoretical issues of literary studies as well as an ability to activate theory for the purposes of analysis and argument.

Notes

¹ For the purposes of this article, I use “literary studies” as general term encompassing any undergraduate program with a predominant focus on literary texts, English and Comparative Literature being the most important instances.

² “There are many ways of teaching literary theory. The tragedy is that none of them work” (Barry n.d.).

³ Survey conducted May 28, 2014.

⁴ For further examples of an alternative approach, see Rapaport 2011 and particularly, albeit outside the amazon.com list, Bennett & Royle 2004.

⁵ Student comments were drawn from an anonymous online survey conducted in 2010 at the University of Newcastle, Australia.

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Appendix

Schools-based theory courses in *Times Higher Education* top-20 Arts & Humanities Institutions

#	Institution	Term	Course	Description
1	Stanford	n/a	n/a	n/a
2	Columbia	Spring 2015	ENGL W3001 Literary Texts, Critical Methods	"a variety of critical schools and approaches"
3	Harvard	Fall 2012	ENG 194 Literary Criticism	"modernism, classicism, romanticism, the New Criticism, structuralism and post-structuralism, as well as feminism, formalism, and other -isms."
4	Chicago	Winter 2013-14	ENGL23413 Introduction to Literary Theory	"formalism, structuralism, deconstruction and poststructuralism, Marxism."
5	Pennsylvania	Fall 2015	COML094/ENGL 094 Introduction to Literary Theory	"New Criticism, Feminism, Cultural Materialism, New Historicism, Minority Discourse Studies, Colonial and Postcolonial Studies, and Cultural Studies."
6	Oxford	n/a	n/a	n/a
7	Berkeley	Fall 2014	ENGLISH 161 Introduction to Literary Theory	"Our focus will be on the major theoretical schools: formalism, structuralism and post-structuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, New Historicism, identity politics, and post-colonialism."
8	Cambridge	n/a	n/a	n/a
9	Princeton	Spring 2016	COM 301 Theory and Methods of Comp. Lit.	"modern philology, new criticism, hermeneutics, speech act theory, semiotics, structuralism, Marxism, the Frankfurt School, and poststructuralism."
10	UC London	2013	CLITG001 Modern Literary Theory	(units on Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, authorship, Marxism, Postcolonialism, Feminisms, representation, Postmodernism, Sexuality and Queer Theory, Historicisms)
11	Edinburgh	2015-16	CLLC11025 Theories and Methods of Literary studies II	"The sessions focus on the Theory of the Novel, Russian Formalism, Structuralism and Poststructuralism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and Feminist Criticism."
12	New York	Summer 2015	ENGL-UA 712 Major Texts in Critical Theory	"Russian and American formalism, archetypal criticism, structuralism, psychoanalytic criticism, feminism, reader theory, deconstruction, and historicism."
13	Australian National University	Sem 2 2016	ENGL2009 Introduction to Literary Theory	"some of the major theoretical methodologies in literary studies", including e.g. "post-colonialism and postmodernism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, feminism and queer theory, and historical and cultural materialist approaches to literary texts"
14	Duke	Spring 2015	English 482S Contemporary Theory	"Psychoanalysis, Marxism, Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, theory of film and the image; theory of race, gender, sexuality, with a concentration on materials since 1950"
15	Yale	Spring 2015	ENG 300 Introduction to Theory of Literature	"Critical analysis of formalist, psychoanalytic, structuralist, poststructuralist, and feminist approaches to theory and to literature"

16	UCLA	Winter 2015	ENG 121 Modern and Contemporary Aesthetics and Critical Theory	"structuralism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, ecocriticism, affect theory, and thing theory"
17	Toronto	Winter 2015-16	ENG382Y1 Contemporary Literary Theory	"structuralism, formalism, phenomenology, Marxism, poststructuralism, reader-response theory, feminism, queer theory, new historicism, psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory, and cultural and race studies"
18	Michigan	Fall 2015	ENGLISH 298 Introduction to Literary studies	"the major movements in literary and cultural theory since the 1930s, from New Criticism, Structuralism, and Psychoanalysis, to Queer, Postcolonial, and Race Studies"
19	Cornell	Spring 2016	COML4999 Seminar in Theory	"trends and issues in contemporary literary cultural and theory, with attention to structuralism and poststructuralism, feminism, psychoanalysis, queer theory, postcolonial theory, media theory, and ecocritical/animal studies approaches"
20	Rutgers	Spring 2013	195:301:01 Introduction to Literary Theory	"Formalism, Structuralism, Poststructuralism and Deconstruction, psychoanalysis , gender and race studies, postcolonial studies, and eco-criticism."