Teaching Literary Theory to Undergraduates: What Have We Learned?

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This essay investigates the difficulties experienced by lecturers teaching contemporary literary theory to undergraduates.¹ The oral evidence for this investigation was gathered in a series of 56 candid in-depth interviews with experienced theory teachers. In the present climate of teaching quality assessment, several interviewees were reticent about expressing their opinions publicly and did not wish to be identified for fear of causing embarrassment to their department or for fear of retribution. Through respect for their concerns, all comments reproduced here are identified solely by an interview number rather than attributed by name.

Since the late sixties there has been a major shift in English away from a conception of the literary text as a self-sufficient item of inquiry towards a more broadly-conceived notion of the text as a socio-cultural document. This poses questions about the relationship between literature, readers and society:

'What is this doing and who is it doing it for?' becoming more important, and 'when was it doing it originally and what difference does that make?' becoming more important (122)

On a national scale, changes in undergraduate English teaching which are the direct result of this shift are easy to detect. Indications of the combined effects of various strands of feminist, marxist and poststructuralist literary theory are evident in the fundamental revaluations of the traditional canon (and the process of canonization) which have taken place since the mid-seventies. New work on language and culture has resulted in a profusion of books dealing with, amongst other things, black and post-colonial writing, feminist re-readings of
traditional texts and the discovery of hitherto neglected women writers — all undertaken within a broadly 'interdisciplinary' frame of reference which links the study of literature to linguistics, history, sociology, media and cultural studies. The idea of what constitutes a 'text' has been opened to debate as the power-relations behind cultural orthodoxies have been unearthed and challenged. Within English departments new courses intended to cover these advances have been started and continue to be modified in the light of further developments. This 'contextual turn' can be detected in the tendency for departments to replace what many now apparently perceive to be the restrictive title of 'English Literature Department' with a more pluralistic variant such as 'Department of English Studies'. However, it is too simplistic to assume that the corollary of this has been the national growth of a theoretically informed undergraduate student body, capable, or even desirous, of using theory in their own literary analysis.

Insensitive attempts to denaturalize the critical assumptions instilled by traditional A-level teaching can have negative effects. Students can be distressed by what seems like a 'tyranny of theory' (19) the purpose of which is apparently to undermine the significance of their previous reading experiences and to devalue their investment in liberal-humanist conceptions of 'great literature'. (127) portrayed students' resistance to theory as follows:

[They] get very annoyed with you ... and say 'you're just making this up and this is ridiculous and why can't we just read the text without any of this theory?' Some students don't like that at all, they're here because they're successful. What are they successful at? talking about Shakespeare's characters. They can do that and get an A, why should they bother what I say?

Since courses introducing contemporary literary theory first began to appear in the late seventies, the task for teachers has been to devise introductory strategies which persuade students that aspects of this theory are relevant to their own reading. This has not been easy.

The ethos of different introductory strategies since the late 1970s

I asked interviewees

In the light of your experience as a teacher, what is the best way to introduce students to theoretical work?
The complex and contradictory replies I received to this question stand as testament to the difficulty of the task. One experienced teacher cautioned me he didn’t ‘think anyone has actually answered that’:

I don’t know a single course anywhere in the world — and I have been to quite a lot of the anglophone world — where anybody has really sat down and said ‘Let’s start from Day One, let’s build a textual studies, literary studies course which really does what we want it to do’. (125)

In Britain, courses intended to familiarize students with aspects of theoretical work have typically been devised using one of two teaching strategies. Taking my cue from the vocabulary which my interviewees often used to differentiate these approaches, I will refer to them as nominalization and problematization.

Identifying two broadly distinguishable introductory strategies is enabling for analysis, making it possible to adopt a perspective from which to generalize about the development of literary theory teaching in a way which detailed scrutiny of a handful of courses does not permit. Working from such a perspective, I will begin by defining nominalization and problematization and examine the experiences of teachers from a wide range of institutions who have used these approaches. Before discussing the relatively recent signs of a shift towards the latter, I will suggest some reasons for the original popularity of nominalization in the eighties.

The two approaches are characterized by the following features.

**Nominalization strategies:**

— have a dominant emphasis on promoting student awareness of certain attributed theoretical ideas and terminology;

— are usually designed and taught as discrete survey courses (optional or compulsory) presenting synopses of the work of individual theorists or ‘schools of thought’;

— are usually organized around a weekly lecture format, with or without back-up seminar activities;

— vary in length from a single term to three years, but whatever the length, the range of material considered is usually similar;

— try as far as possible to preserve a chronological structure.
Problematization strategies:
— encourage students to denaturalize their own experiences as readers, but resist the implication that the insights of this experience are somehow secondary to a foregrounded corpus of theory;

— offer theoretical writing to students at relevant junctures, but ensure this work is approached within the context of questions prompted by the literary (or other) text being studied;

— do not require students to extend their knowledge of individual theorists beyond the parameters of the relevance to the question in hand, although the hope is that students will develop an interest in theoretical issues and undertake a more extensive engagement with the theory;

— are increasingly used as an integrated part of literary courses since they do not require a specific slot on the timetable if staff are committed to such an approach;

— are organized thematically around general questions of culture and reading rather than named theorists if offered on a discrete course.

Two observations can be made about these strategies for teaching contemporary literary theory. First, every undergraduate theory course to date is loosely classifiable in terms of a dominant nominalization or problematization ethos. Although, it is important to recognize this ethos has always been significantly affected by other factors such as: the allocation of resources (human, environmental, temporal and textual), whether theory is taught on compulsory or optional courses, and if it is taught discretely or formally integrated into literature courses. Second, there is an important historical dimension to the nominalization versus problematization dialectic. In the late seventies and throughout the eighties, the first literary theory courses run by most of the institutions I visited had been based on some kind of nominalization strategy, and, although the debate is an old one, the replacement of these courses with more issue-based discursive approaches is a relatively recent development which is still in process.

Nominalization strategies
The difficulty facing teachers trying to interest students in theory was well described by (13):

How do you give them an insight and an understanding of the central problematic of a tradition or a position by selecting materials, key movements in a tradition,
without over-simplifying, without making them feel 'yeah, but....', without ending up in the position where you're the only one who can talk about it because you know where it comes from, you know what its significance is in relation to the development of a tradition and they don't? What sometimes happens is you give them a terribly difficult piece of Marx, or Raymond Williams and you lamely say 'What do you think?' and the answer is they can't say anything because they're too intelligent to just give a random response.

The most impressive argument I encountered for giving students an unmediated introduction to theoretical material was: since students find this material difficult to understand, they need to be introduced directly to it by teachers who can help them come to terms with it, otherwise they will never develop sufficient confidence to read it for themselves and will remain reliant on summaries and introductory texts. The following comments are representative:

If they never develop that confidence with me they're never going to develop it at all. (I26)
I try to produce safety ... to enable them to find ways of finding their feet. (I24)

(I42) believed students found it easier to learn about theoretical ideas if they understood they were the product of historically important thinkers who have become influential in the development of the subject:

People feel happier with big names ... It's very important for people and I don't think you can ignore it ... there's something unsatisfactory about not telling students where things come from ... The whole issue of where you're going to give historical contextualizations [is] ... part of the question 'Do you name or not?' — ie. do you value something? — 'now you're learning something by somebody important' — that is important too: the fact that the idea was said by someone famous. It is important at a level so students think they're learning something.

However, whilst some interviewees strongly advocated a direct introduction to named theorists and their work, almost all were ambivalent or condemnatory about the chronological survey-style courses many institutions operated during the eighties which tried 'to give an overview of the building blocks of literary theory' (I14).

A major criticism of nominalization strategies was that they have resulted in predominantly descriptive courses leaving students as passive receivers of information. In most cases new theoretical material was simply added on to, or grew out from, existing 'history of criticism' or
traditional ‘theory of criticism’ courses. The unfortunate outcome was that these extended surveys ended up trying to provide a summarizing linear narrative introduction of the work of important critics from Aristotle to Derrida. Interviewees were clear that the general lack of enthusiasm for contemporary literary theory amongst their students throughout the eighties was ‘due partly to the à la carte presentation of material’ (I54). (I30), for example, felt

The big mistake of so much theoretical writing and teaching assumes that if you tell somebody they will know it, whereas they will only know it in some measure if they do it ... Initially theory teaching in the eighties was not dynamic, not interactive, not applied. Yes, it was descriptive and actually in the model of old-style textual analysis. It was purportedly subverting those while being all the time written about in those ways. A number of theorists [ie. teachers of theory] were and in many ways continue to be blind to the need to help people to theorize in practice rather than just consume theory. Students were complaining that they couldn’t see why they were doing it, they couldn’t relate it to other things.

Nominalized courses were accused of encouraging a ‘stamp-collecting’ mentality (I42) which resulted in reification of individual theorists or concepts rather than a sustained engagement with the implications of the theory itself. If students receive little help from staff except a summary of some major concepts delivered in lectures, the inevitable result is that

They’re unlikely to be engaging actively and if you can’t engage actively then you either repeat what you’ve read, or revere what you’ve read or you’re bamboozled by what you’ve read. You’re not actually engaging with it on any kind of level footing. (I21)

In (I40)’s department a discrete theory module had been offered in the early eighties, but this was stopped in 1985 ‘because the students hated it’:

It didn’t work with undergraduates, it was not that staff did not want to do it, but it was a no-hoper because all you got back were sort of garbled versions of one’s own lectures or garbled versions of summaries of people’s books and it was really kind of (and I’ve seen this in other institutions) totalitarian teaching where you handed it over and the students had to hand it back and don’t do awfully well in doing so.

In the eighties the assumption that students could read theory the same way they read literature and traditional criticism led to expectations of
their ability to work with theory that were often rashly over-optimistic. Teachers were guilty of ‘an over-expectation in the old way of actually organizing the teaching of theory’:

There was a certain amount of jumping Derrida on people. What was supposed to happen was that the student was supposed to go away and encounter it as best as he or she could and then come along and say what they made of it and then try and work it out together. And that’s what you were supposed to do with Heart of Darkness and that’s what you were supposed to do with Paul de Man. (122)

The inevitable consequence was that the majority of students were unwilling or unable to work productively with the theories they encountered.

The common impression that students gained from such courses was that contemporary literary theory was being taught for its own sake and a superficial knowledge about general theoretical approaches was more important than a serious engagement with the implication of those approaches for one’s own reading. This was the inevitable result of courses based on ‘a kind of labelling of theoretical positions rather than teaching people to theorize’:

You could get out of the bag your structuralist or marxist or feminist approach to whatever it was, but it might not be applied with very much commitment or discrimination and was much more a matter of sticking labels on things. (130)

Trying to summarize the work of writers like Lacan and Derrida and then expecting students to somehow go away and use these summaries productively was ‘a recipe for disaster’:

Lectures often fly over their heads. They’ve got a vague sense that there are funny ways of talking about these things but they haven’t got much to do with what they have to do in the course of their reading and engagement with literature ... The real teaching difficulty is to get students to see that, as it were, some of these questions being debated here matter, that they come from particular intellectual histories, in turn emerging from wider social and cultural histories, and that people might be fiercely committed to this or that ... and it makes a difference and it has implications. (117)

A common observation made by interviewees was that it is not acceptable to talk about contemporary literary theory as a number of clearly-defined, integral areas of work, though they accepted that the nominalized courses they had taught on gave this impression to students.
Such courses were criticized both for imposing artificial divisions between various bodies of thought and, conversely, for eliding under general headings work which ought to be differentiated and kept separate:

'Theory' is not a homogeneous theory like science, it is generated out of separate, specific enterprises which in retrospect may have something in common ... There is insufficient understanding of the historical matrices out of which theory is generated. Different theories were presented like a set of targets you fire at. (15)

Nominalizing introductory courses failed to accurately reflect the diverse epistemological and methodological backgrounds of the theorists included. What they should have shown was

If it is unified, it's unified on an amalgamation of dissent from a mythical construct of traditional mainstream literary criticism. To think it's unified in any other way is a disservice to, and is disrespectful to, intellectual ideas. Althusser, Baudrillard and Derrida do not just kind of 'fit together'. It would be a misunderstanding of literary theory to assume a base, first of all addressing the same questions, or coming up with the same answers, or even working through the same methodologies. (121)

In fact, exactly the opposite message was implied because nominalized courses generally reflected the structure of traditional period or genre literature courses which grouped authors together and taught them chronologically:

Just as you might have a week on Dickens, you'd have a week on some theoretician. The old course was week one a chapter by Barthes, week two a chapter by somebody else ... we had chapters with McQuail and Pynchon — all sorts of things ... Imagine going from A-level to that six weeks later, you can imagine what sorts of results there were! (121)

(I34) taught on a core three-year long theory course whose initial format was a weekly hour-long lecture and a two-hour team-taught seminar, but even with this generous allocation of time and personnel, trying to establish an integrated chronological approach was difficult:

I will take Macherey in the third year as my example ... He was introduced on the back of Althusser, on the back of quite a substantial knowledge of Marxist writing on history, some encounter with the Frankfurt school, but he was not introduced on the back on any knowledge of Freud or Lacan. The question that
dramatically posed itself was do you stop after you’ve introduced Macherey and say ‘Okay, now to understand Macherey we need to go back to Freud, from Freud to Lacan and then we arrive back at Macherey all in due course?’ In the end there wasn’t time to do that. Then the question arises should we have re-designed the course and brought Freud and Lacan in earlier? — almost certainly not ... So we tried to get round the problem by making our study of Macherey dependent on his Althusserian co-ordinate and setting aside any detailed engagement with Freud and Lacan.

In reality, introducing contemporary literary theory through nominalization strategies was usually little more than a downloading of information to students, only a very few of whom were able to derive much benefit from the experience. Students hardly ever had time to come to terms with any individual theoretical position whilst the course was in progress. (I14’s) students complained ‘each theory is knocked down by the next one’ and ‘the rug is constantly being pulled out from under their feet’. In his estimation the pace of the course in his institution, and many others like it elsewhere, meant

students had no opportunity to even arrive at a question. They could only think initially in response to the frame provided by the lecturer.

This ‘frame’ could be schematic to the point of being useless. The first-year lecture on Marxism at his institution in the eighties went something like this:

This is Marx, this is what he says about literature, now we’ll turn to marxism in the Soviet Union — a bit of Trotsky, then on to Raymond Williams and possibly back to Lukacs. All in an hour!

By the late eighties the comments about the course written by students on end-of-year evaluations constituted an incriminating archive of remarks about this approach. The course has recently been re-designed in response to this ‘rolling negativity’ which (I14) paraphrased as follows:

I don’t understand this, I feel stupid, what’s the point of it? I don’t see how it relates to what I really want to do which is reading books.

In a different institution, even on a third-year course, nominalization proved equally unsatisfactory:

You’re doing so much aerial survey stuff, so much compact summary, you begin
to feel a bit guilty in the end. And this, after all, is literature students having a crash course in philosophy, learning about Husserl, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel and so on. They feel, and I began to feel, it was not the best context for this sort of thing. It’s difficult enough for MA students working for a year and doing an option, say, on deconstruction, taking a term over it and reading around frantically ... So to expect a poor bunch of third years to pick up on these things is, I think, quixotic really and perhaps unfair. (139)

A further criticism of nominalized courses was that they rarely had any structured links with other more ‘literary’ areas of the syllabus. This lack of connection was a disabling feature which reduced the potential impact of theory on traditional literature courses. Some staff teaching more traditional courses were actively discouraging students from using new theoretical approaches:

It used to be the case that you had quietly to warn students ‘By all means use these ideas if you are writing an essay for me or for so-and-so or so-and-so, but don’t for God’s sake apply them across the board or you’ll find yourself being marked down savagely’. (139)

From a student point of view, the failure of teachers to make strong connections between contemporary literary theory and the traditional liberal-humanist critical approaches they were being encouraged to practice elsewhere seemed to undermine the claims for the importance of theory:

We were asking them to theorize on the one hand and the one hand was very far away from the text on the other. Although we sought to make connections we made them read theory in relative isolation and it was a big problem — it was emasculated and effeminized from the beginning. (130)

The lack of applied work made it inevitable that the majority of students saw theory as being irrelevant to the rest of their studies:

Students did the theory course but nobody else was using the theory in other courses so it wasn’t being applied by other colleagues. Students felt that ‘mature sensibilities’ were still going on elsewhere so why did they need to have all this theory? (135)

From the evidence it is clear interviewees did not perceive nominalization to have been an effective teaching strategy. But if nominalized courses generally proved so unsatisfactory, why were they
almost universally adopted as the preferred format for theory teaching in the late seventies and eighties?

Why nominalize?

It may be helpful to begin by citing Jonathan Culler's 1983 description of the body of material which 'is known in the singular without an article as “Theory”' (120)

Its individual works are tied to other activities and discourses... ‘Theory’ is a genre because of the way its works function ... what distinguishes the members of this genre is their ability to function not as demonstrations within the parameters of a discipline but as re-descriptions that challenge the discipline boundaries. The works we allude to as ‘theory’ are those that have had the power to make strange the familiar and to make readers conceive of their own thinking, behaviour, and institutions in new ways.²

Culler's definition suggests theory should be considered as work which encourages an inquiring attitude and a desire to understand relationships between cultural values and social organization. Broadly speaking, all my interviewees agreed with this interpretation. To give just one example:

‘Theory’ is a name for an area that you yet have no other proper name for. It's a deeply mongrelized and bastardized field, if it’s a ‘field’ at all. It's a kind of space or semi-space carved out partly because it's able to raise some bigger fundamental questions on which the traditional disciplines have reneged. It’s saying, ‘Well, if we’re confronted with a history of philosophy of sociology of psychology of linguistics and so on, which share certain kinds of problem, there has to be a hybrid discourse’. It’s the contemporary name for what the best of education’s always tried to do, which is to address some very fundamental questions which are not simply instrumental or technocratic or pragmatic. (156)

The question which I believe should be asked of contemporary literary theory teaching is: If ‘theory’ was generally construed as the nurturing and development of an inquiring attitude towards socio-cultural orthodoxies of all kinds, why did the majority of early courses present theory to undergraduates as a series of positions to be learned and internalized as so many sets of rules?

Leaving aside the perennial pressures of time and resources which are common to all courses of study, I suggest that one can identify three main factors which combined to make nominalized linear narratives the
most popular kind of structure for early theory courses in Britain. These were: 1) the anxiety of largely young and sometimes inexperienced teachers about the level of their own theoretical knowledge; 2) the synthesizing effect produced by a concentrated period of translation of theory and the style of the first student-oriented introductory guides to theory; 3) the problems posed by the rise of a new critical terminology. I shall discuss each of these in turn.

Anxieties about coverage
During the seventies and early eighties most teachers interested in contemporary literary theory found themselves in the position of trying to ‘catch up’ with work from abroad — a process which was largely dictated by the order in which translations became available. It was a very confusing time. There were new books with odd covers in the shops with foreign names being bought in ever-increasing numbers by people looking for intellectual ammunition to reassure themselves they [the Leavisites] weren’t right. (I3)

Amongst younger teachers there was trepidation about their level of knowledge of the new material they wished to teach:

A lot of early theory courses were modelled on the idea that we are going to teach ourselves about theory. (114)

(I1) remembered attending discussions about new courses where

The content of theory courses was the focus of attention ... not how to link it to other work.

Such anxiety about coverage led to courses which had a ‘piecemeal effect’ (I3) and which lacked any strong thematic coherence. Far from giving students some kind of totalized and coherent view of theory, students got the impression that ‘we made it up as we were going along’. (I3)

The majority of those involved in designing early theory courses were relatively inexperienced teachers who had come to this material through their involvement in postgraduate reading groups or their own exploratory reading. Most had begun a serious engagement with theory during the politically-charged atmosphere of what Antony Easthope has called the ““moment” of British marxism’. As (156) remembered:
High theory in the mid-seventies corresponded to a politically up-beat moment. It was being funded in unconscious and implicit ways by that political phase. It was confident, it was sometimes arrogant, it was moving with a wider current so that in those days to be a Marxist theorist, people may not have agreed with you, but it made some general sense within a wider Left culture.

But this experience had not provided them with many indications about how to teach literary theory in a structured way to large numbers of people, most of whom did not share their sense of the importance of the material. A concern with content eclipsed interest in developing appropriate teaching strategies. Nominalized teaching strategies were the path of least resistance for teachers still struggling to come to terms with much of the theory themselves. It seemed less problematic to produce summaries of the theoretical work they had read than to try and demonstrate in a sustained fashion how some of these concepts could be put into practice on texts their students were reading.

Further, many young teachers interested in theory had been reluctant to admit the limited extent of their theoretical knowledge either to other staff, or to their students:

To be worthy of your position you had to [have] this all-encompassing wisdom ... if a lecturer is seen to say “Well, actually, I can’t make this theory work on here” the response is: a very bad lecturer. (115)

If teachers were unable to provide a relatively clear and concise explication of the material they were directing students to, students were entitled to conclude ‘you don’t know what you’re talking about, you’re not an expert’ (115). Sympathizing with teachers who had experienced this difficulty, (126) said good theory teaching should be about

getting students to the point where they can challenge you and put you on the spot because if they can put you on the spot it’s more exciting, and I’ve had to say ‘I don’t know’, but you have to be fairly confident before you can say ’I don’t know’.

It is difficult to acquire that confidence if you feel unsure of your understanding of the material you wish to teach and have uncertain support from your colleagues. I would suggest that anxieties about maintaining one’s professional status were one important reason for the introduction and longevity of nominalized literary theory courses in Britain.
The role of translations and introductory texts

One lasting impression of the decade from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties shared by my interviewees was the sheer pace at which translated theoretical material became available during this frantic and destabilising period in the history of English:

Theory came at us very hard in the seventies and early eighties. It was like you've got Macherey under control, Althusser — they kind of blew up on you — and then you're on to Lacan, then Foucault, then Derrida ... I wanted to get off the wagon myself, I wanted to get off this train, it was going too fast. I don't think there ever was theory the way it was fetishized in England. (I48)

(I12) recalled

There was a period in the mid-eighties when it was absolutely ridiculous, you know, it was next-week shudder — who's going to come up with a theory next week?

During what (I48) called this 'rush to theory':

English studies in England ... became progressively an importer rather than an exporter of ideas. [There has been] a running battle between progressives and conservatives which has taken the form of the innovators always wanting to apply ideas which they've borrowed from outside, from other countries or other cultures, either from Europe or America — or Europe via America. (I37)

It has been noted that 'translations retain a certain alien aura' which can become 'a source of fear and/or power as well, including a terror of falling out of step or out of fashion',\(^4\) Several interviewees suggested that in reaction to this importation the attitudes of some traditionalists had hardened into a kind of intellectual xenophobia:

I don't know if you can understand the anxiety of somebody who hears somebody talking about something which they cannot understand in the sort of way that if you try and explain to a seven year old what sex is like, you're talking about something which is not within their purview, What it must be like to come from a quite traditional department and have a traditional cast of mind and to find that there are these strange sharks swimming around in the murky waters with awful French names like Derrida, Lacan, Roland Barthes ... There are certain manoeuvres for dealing with these anxieties, one of them is to say 'they're French, they're foreign, they're outside, they are a fashion'. (I25)
Theory [was] powerfully perceived as foreign ... something that comes from Europe and it carries with it Francophobe, Germanophobe attitudes. There is a sense in which it represents a betrayal of the core values of English as a subject [and the] attachment to close reading. (14)

In some departments this new material was felt to be so alien that it might as well have come from another planet: (112) said his senior colleagues had viewed it as an outlandish imposition which had arrived uninvited ‘like an asteroid on earth’. (125) went further, suggesting some of his colleagues might actually have been more amenable to theory if it had been an extra-terrestrial invention, being French was just too much:

The bottom line is: ‘We are decent moral protestants and they are catholics — what do you expect?’. The problem of Eng. Lit. is the problem of English national culture and the crises around Macherey are linked with the crises around Maastricht.

The proliferation of translations and introductory books cataloguing and abridging major critical movements had a compressing effect on diffuse bodies of theoretical writing. They produced an artificial synthesis which obscured the circumstances of production of the original material and gave a distorted sense of the critical development of the writers themselves. To demonstrate this compression I will take the work of Barthes as an example. Below is a selective bibliography of Barthes’s work showing the original year of publication of his work in France and the date it was published in translation in Britain and the USA.6

**Selective bibliography of the work of Roland Barthes**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>UK/USA</th>
<th>Delay (in years)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Writing Degree Zero</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mythologies</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>1972</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elements of Semiology</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical Essays</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>Criticism and Truth</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>1987</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Fashion System</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>S/Z</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empire of Signs</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>12</td>
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It is clear from this list that Barthes's work did not appear in Britain in the same order as in France. A telling statistic is that of all the books listed here only three were originally published in France in the 1980s. By contrast, half of the English translations appeared between 1980 and 1986. Of the other translations, five appeared during the seventies as the rush to theory gathered momentum and some of these texts have become particularly influential in English studies. For example *S/Z* and *The Pleasure of the Text* were translated relatively soon after their French publication as interest in structuralist and poststructuralist poetics spread amongst English-speaking critics.

Stephen Heath's highly-acclaimed selection of Barthes's essays published as *Image, Music, Text* is a good example of the kind of compression which might have made young theory teachers feel it was possible to teach this material in a summarizing fashion. The following remark reveals both the appreciation of a pioneering theory teacher for a book that included representative essays by Barthes, and the power of such a collection to encourage teachers to adopt nominalized teaching strategies:

*Image, Music, Text* was brilliant. It gave you the essential Barthes. (147)

Because the book provided 'the essential' themes, concepts and ideas of Barthes's oeuvre, I suggest it also provided — deliberately or inadvertently — a format for handling Barthes which was transferable to a teaching situation. This desire to abridge and purvey 'the essential' Barthes, Derrida, or whoever, was, of course, encouraged by publishers vigorously.

In 1981 Elizabeth Bruss wrote that

... in Barthes it is the pattern of an entire career that has been telescoped, even rearranged, under the pressure of translation. The order and tightly compressed form of the translated oeuvre means that Barthes's work is ... capable of
provoking wildly discrepant enthusiasms and complaints. The tangle of his references, artificially superimposed on one another, and the seemingly abrupt, almost whimsical shifts of critical position arrived here all at once, to be met by our own diffuse and slowly-formed allegiances ... the interplay that results reveals as much about the current state of our own literary establishment — its contradictions and contending factions, its strange mixture of fashion and uncertainty — as anything the texts themselves actually embody.

Bruss is speaking of American academic culture, but her observations are equally apposite for the British experience.

I would suggest that the sense of compression engendered by the ‘rush to theory’ has been influential in reinforcing the nominalizing impulses of course designers and their tendency to highlight certain ‘key’ concepts of a theorist’s work. This is difficult to establish, but one avenue of inquiry might start from the observation that discussions amongst theory teachers of what constituted the most important ideas of major theorists led to a consensus of sorts about what each thinker was ‘really saying’. Such consensuses tended to produce profiles of theoretical work drawn from a few pivotal ideas that were themselves sometimes offered more like aphorisms than principles of analysis:

In the case of [theoretical arguments], in order to understand them you’ve got to boil down their specificity into certain formulae or positions. And then what do you do? You watch students disinter these basics again and again. (137)

Several interviewees commented on the distortion caused by compression and pointed out how few critical theorists have written coherent system-building monographs from which it is possible to extract all the fundamentals of their critical thought:

Roland Barthes was not a theorist, he was an essayist. It’s very difficult to find any of the work of people like Lacan or even Derrida which is pure theory. It’s always engaged with reading, basically. That kind of enquiring essayism was taken across, so we turned Barthes into a semiologist.

(Barthes, of course, was once keen to call himself a semiologist, but the general point is valid.) (118) agreed:

There is almost no book-length constructing of theoretical models which are tested and thought through in all their parts and then carefully put together. That kind of thing was not going on. Derrida doesn’t do that really — you can make him out to be doing that by writing a book about him. The summarizing books
create the coherence, such as it is.

It is no accident that the first introductory books and anthologies share the nominalized, chronological structure of most early contemporary literary theory courses. (137), the author of a successful critical/theoretical anthology published in the seventies, said:

It is significant that the actual order in the book is chronological because to do it any other way [seemed] a more sophisticated intellectual operation .. the simplest way to grasp it was as a sequence.

Possibly teachers assumed historicised linear introductions to theory would work because students were already familiar with the logic of chronological investigations and the unfamiliarity of the theory could be made less intimidating if the material was introduced through a familiar analytic methodology. Even if historical contextualization on such courses could only happen on a relatively superficial level, it did give students a sense of being introduced to this strange new world rather than simply being confronted by it.

Several popular introductions to theory published in the early eighties offer concise summaries of the most influential theoretical movements. Books such as Ann Jefferson and David Robey’s Modern Literary Theory. A Comparative Introduction (1982), Terry Eagleton’s Literary Theory. An Introduction (1983), and Raman Selden’s A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory (1985) were intended to help readers gain an over-view of the general field of critical theory. Jefferson and Robey attempt ‘to provide within the compass of a single volume an introduction to the major developments in this field’; Terry Eagleton intended ‘to provide a reasonably comprehensive account of modern literary theory for those with little or no previous knowledge of the topic’; and Raman Selden found ‘the questions raised by modern literary theory are important enough to justify the effort of clarification’.

It is interesting to note the editorial difficulties Peter Widdowson found in trying to make the format of the third edition of Selden’s book reflect the changed critical culture of English in 1993:

The book now falls into two halves whereas it certainly didn’t in 1985. I reorganized the chapters significantly ... taking the reader response chapter back into the first part where it was actually the penultimate one in the second edition, because what I said, rightly or wrongly, was that they were now historical, they
are movements which are no longer, as it were, dynamic, and that would include structuralism ... You can say well, we know now that formalism was important, had its day, and then had a second day when it was translated in the sixties, and we must start with Eliot and the New Critics because that's where much of our education and literary theories in the Anglo-American literary tradition began, but then what you hit is now, really, and the kind of problem 'How do you write about feminism?' — it's all over the place. equally, post-colonialism, poststructuralism, postmodernism — you can only make an attempt to sketch in some of its pre-history, that's all a book like this can do ... It would be a quite different book if you were engaging with those contemporary theorists now.

(Peter Widdowson — comments attributed with permission)

Widdowson’s difficulties in finding an appropriate format for the book are significant. They indicate the kind of problems progressive teachers have addressed since the late eighties as they have tried to integrate theory with critical practice rather than simply describe the genealogy of particular theories. Such concerns are at the heart of the problematizing teaching strategies to which I shall shortly turn, but before doing so there was one more possible reason for the popularity of nominalization which should be mentioned.

**Terminology**

An emphasis on learning the new critical terminology associated with various literary theories has been a strong feature of nominalization strategies. A few interviewees felt there was educational ‘shock value’ in nominalized courses which deliberately foregrounded such vocabulary. However, the majority were suspicious of this argument, suggesting it was used to justify bad teaching, or to deflect attention from problems such as a lack of connection between theory and literature courses, or the teacher’s lack of confidence in the classroom. The general view was that downloading a volume of information to students in an unfamiliar discourse represented a low-risk but ineffective teaching strategy because students were overwhelmed by the unfamiliarity of the material:

Slamming students with Marx or Freud and saying the shock is valuable is a way of keeping yourself safe. You feel so exposed in the classroom ... and the more you can control the teaching situation the safer you are. To go about teaching theory in a way that parades its difficulty and therefore reinforces your own status and importance, the safer you are in relation to your students. (124)

The effect of teachers self-consciously parading a repertoire of
theoretical terms was intimidating for students:

It is a barrier ... a kind of mental muscle flexing to announce you have a certain expertise ... that's off-putting for students who say 'It's not for me, I can't do this language, I don't talk like that so I can't do that. This is for the clever people'. (19)

(144) complained that in his department problems arose when colleagues 'who had previously been going along in a very traditional mode would suddenly “discover” theory':

It's rather like people who get interested in computers and they suddenly start telling everybody about megabytes and this, that and the other, they become mesmerized by the language and they then insist on a linguistic, a kind of critical, cleansing so that you must only use this kind of terminology.

There is a danger that students will emulate this behaviour without engaging fully with the issues behind the theoretical concepts:

You get to know what hegemony means and you can say it in the right place. (120)

There's the attitude 'All I've got to do is learn up some terms like this and write them up in a slightly incomprehensible way and people'll think I'm very clever'. (119)

There was another, more persuasive argument than 'shock value' for introducing new terminology to students. This was couched in terms of empowerment:

If you're going to ask interesting questions about [authors you study] you're going to have to have a more sophisticated vocabulary than you've got at the moment and anyway you'll be wanting to stretch the kind of questions you're asking of those texts and stretch your understanding of them by reading a certain amount of criticism and you're not going to be able to place that criticism, even sometimes to understand that criticism, unless you've got some more words, vocabulary. (132)

Teachers should not back away from using relevant critical vocabulary in dialogues with students because it is important to give them more in the way of technique, vocabulary, critical questions to ask about things like genre, stylistics, about language. We are after a process of
defamiliarization, I think that people can be thrown by the unfamiliar in linguistic terms when actually they should be being thrown by that which is unfamiliar in other ways. I think the way at present that quite a lot of us integrate basic critical concepts from the reading of a variety of texts is to ensure that they don't really seem two areas of their own reading or work that are anything other than completely interconnected. (132)

But, as (122) warned, teachers introducing new terminology to their students must be aware 'It makes the tutor an expert':

Any student can make totally original points about literary texts, that's what makes it so marvellous... That was so marvellous and what theory does of course is undermine that.

(I21) outlined the measures he believes are necessary to improve the quality of student engagements with the new technical discourses of contemporary literary theory:

The material people are expected to comment on is largely linguistic, but they are deprived of the systematic terminology with which they could talk about it. This amounts to disenfranchisement of the students ... There is a need to have units which develop relevant conceptual skills and which draw on a number of things: anthropological terms, philosophical terms, in a way which many theoretical people would dismiss as simplistic and utilitarian. [There should be] a greater concern with lower level concepts and strands which you might discard in due course, which you grow through.

This proposes opening up the theoretical issues — even at the sake of some finer points of accuracy — in order to encourage students to engage with the material. It has much in common with the more recent problematizing strategies to which I shall now turn.

Problematization strategies

It isn't a theory course, it's a course using theory. (I22)

Problematization strategies do not imply a reluctance to name those who have contributed most to furthering the ideas and questions about texts which arise. They are attempts to make sure that the inquiries one undertakes are guided by the questions one wishes to explore, rather than just those defined by the theorists. Since the late eighties there has been a shift away from the practice of labelling and describing
theoretical positions and then trying to indicate to students how these might be useful. This shift has been towards a more applied approach which is grounded in the students’ own experiences.

The general ethos of problematization and its tension with the nominalized strategies described above is apparent in (I43)’s comment:

I think there’s a feeling that our literary theory paper should be addressing an attitude of mind: ‘are you aware of what you’re doing?’ There is still resistance to this more largely from people in the department who think in terms of testing people’s knowledge of pre-existing theories. There are still quite a lot of people who would prefer to see a question on Althusser, a question on the significance of Levi-Strauss or Saussure, etc.

Students encountering theory through nominalized courses find their learning experience characterized by what I have termed an ‘expectations gap’. This operates as follows. Students who come to university to read subjects in the humanities or social sciences — such as political science or philosophy, for instance — expect to be introduced to the work of a range of figures about whom they previously have known little or nothing. They come to college knowing they will be expected to read widely in order to familiarise themselves with the work of important thinkers and schools of thought, and that they will be expected to engage actively with what they read. Thus, it does not feel peculiar in a political theory seminar to be told you must read an essay by Burke or Kant for next week and come ready to discuss it. However (both in the past and now) the legacy of A-level teaching means that when English students are requested to read essays by linguists, psychologists, political philosophers and social anthropologists (amongst others), many challenge the relevance of this work to their received idea of what an English degree entailed. Like their political theory counterparts, English students also come to college expecting their teachers to ask them to read widely and to engage with figures previously unknown to them. The crucial difference is that most English students have, consciously or unconsciously, reserved all the space on their mental landscape for the work of more authors. That is what A-level English has primed them to expect. But the teachers of nominalized literary theory courses want to appropriate some of that space for the work of Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva, Saussure, Williams and others. The ‘expectations gap’ is then experienced by students who challenge their teachers to explain why they should learn about these
thinkers, most of whom are hardly ever mentioned by other members of the department.

Problematization seeks to avoid the 'expectations gap' by using strategies which have a greater degree of 'cognitive empathy' with students. It is a direct response to fact that teachers find it is very hard to spend all their lives in this trade to think themselves imaginatively into the situation of somebody coming and having enormous rebarbative difficulties with the language of ideas. (156)

There are signs that debates about how to make engagements with theory more productive for students have moved beyond the kind of content-oriented discussions which dominated course design meetings throughout most of the eighties:

It's becoming conceptualised rather than nominalized ... people had to learn how to mediate and live this intellectual material through and you cannot just transmit it. (147)

Teachers are coming to understand that their students do not find it interesting to be told about theory the same way they might be told about some important historical figures. More effort is now directed at trying to interest students in the kinds of questions which theorists explore, rather than simply telling them about the conclusions drawn from such inquiries. Problematization has proved to be a more effective means of focusing on important questions about the processes of reading, interpretation and cultural valorization, because it reduces concern amongst students about the relative importance of individual thinkers and the anxiety to know about everything they wrote:

I'm really not interested at all in what any particular person says, because I think that's both a reification and its also a personality cultist type of thing to do, and I think it's stupid. It goes against the point of education, which is not to 'let us now talk about great men' which is how literary theory courses work, or great women sometimes ... those things [ie. different theoretical approaches] are supposed to be ways of reading, exactly. (142)

For all theory teaching

The test comes, not whether students can be made to learn a discursive routine, but whether they can be made to have a critical relationship with it. (120)
Developing this ‘critical relationship’ is an active process more readily encouraged by problematizing strategies:

The theory would say that what you’re doing when you’re learning about poststructuralism is learning a language in effect. Now, you wouldn’t learn French by listening to a lecture, you would learn French by listening to a tape, having a book, and then doing it, alternating between instruction and the doing. You have to think, how do people learn? They learn by being enlisted, they learn by being motivated, they learn by having their curiosity — and most people are enormously curious — triggered ... You must get them to encounter problems ... you’re not going to change the world by describing a few things to students and say now reproduce what we’ve just described. We wanted them to see what the implications were. But you must start from where they are. (126)

In (I30)’s department students now perceive theory to be ‘much more relevant’ to their reading because the theoretical concepts are introduced only within the context of discussions about what kind of questions can usefully be asked about the texts they study:

I think the students are much more engaged, they’re much better at all the things we’re doing as a result of not feeling they’ve got this dead weight of theory with a capital ‘T’ ... There are still some complaints when you ask somebody to read Derrida, but by and large they can see the reasons for it now and that’s just because we never do it on its own. (I30)

Problematization strategies encourage students to reflect critically on their own attitudes and beliefs about literature. In this sense they try to start from where the students ‘are’. And if this is done in a non-threatening way through a framework of general questions such an introspective activity can be a liberating experience. It is certainly more likely than nominalization to develop students’ confidence to express their opinions about what they think they do when they read. It is also more likely to stimulate an interest in the ‘theoretical’ problematics of reading and interpretation which may become explicit during discussions. The questions and issues which arise are perceived to be relevant and are given high status by the students because they relate to their own experience as readers. Addressing the difficulties posed by reading texts remains a paramount aim, so students are less likely to be sidetracked into fetishizing those theorists whose work is used to contribute to discussions. Ideally it should be the issues of textual analysis, not what particular theorists say, that are the main concern. Theory then becomes a resource to aid the investigation, not a set of
rules to follow:

It is about issues, a series of interlocking problems, ways of trying to open up thoughts about issues without describing which way those thoughts should go. If there are general issues to be explored and tackled then those are what we should be discussing in the first place rather than trying to abstract them from somebody else's example. (I21)

(I34) described how his department struggled to achieve these objectives:

We constantly agonized over how we could get the students to engage with the theorists without a process occurring in the seminars where willy-nilly the lecturer assumed control. We progressively came to emphasise more and more the students beginning with a text — understanding the word text in its broadest possible terms — looking at that text, analysing it and identifying certain problems of interpretation and then inviting them to think about how [these could be addressed], then introducing them to a theorist and asking them whether that theorist had anything to say ... We were pushing students to engage in a really sustained way with the ways in which the theories could be related to the text and what derived and what didn't derive. We were inviting the students to think about what problems existed within the text and then we would look at the theorist and say does this theorist help or not help in looking at a text. Actually very often we engaged with theorists in this process to show the limitations of the theorist as much as the advantages. (I34)

Thus, problematization strategies allow the work of individual theorists to be encountered and judged by students principally in terms of how useful this work may be in helping them solve problems which originate from the texts they are studying, or which are identified in general discussions about textuality. A good example of such an approach in practice is the new first-year course at this redbrick university:

We're no longer going to introduce them to theory as such. What happens in the first year is that we're going to get them to think about theoretical issues in literature, problems of reading in literature. And we're going to base this on three texts: the Norton Heart of Darkness, the Norton Hamlet, and Sylvia Plath's Ariel. That's going to be their reading, three genres, poetry, novel and play. We're going to have a series of twelve lectures. Now, let's imagine lecture 3, we've had the introduction and so on. Lecture 3 might be about problems of language — you know, what problems about language emerge from Sylvia Plath's work? What problems about language emerge from Conrad's Heart of Darkness? There will be other lectures on characterization: how do these texts construct a character? Just to get them out of those old habits, to start reflecting on their
common reading practices. So you can see there’s a sort of Socratic thing going on here, we’re trying to sow the seed of theoretical desire in them. (114)

Such an approach involves students in an ongoing process of questioning and reflection, rather than positioning them as passive recipients of information.

(151) emphasized that although it may be necessary to rapidly move beyond the rather superficial kinds of answers that basic problematizing questions can generate, it is nevertheless vital to keep the original questions firmly in view as the inquiry becomes more sophisticated:

In response to very real questions you’ve got to ask yourself quite complicated theoretical and analytic material. But I absolutely do not believe that you give them Barthes, Derrida, Foucault. But that’s what people do. You should say ‘there are these set of problems, who can help us with this?’ you’ve got to start from problems. At that level, you know, without getting too student-centred, what you’re doing is introducing them to a tradition of thinking. You can do that in various ways but it seems to me that the most obvious way is to start from an interest of theirs and to introduce that interest as a problem and say ‘How do we solve this problem? How do we address it? What are the useful or interesting materials that can address it?’

We have seen that one of the big difficulties posed by nominalizing courses was the lack of time for students to assimilate all the material they were told about. One might think that because problematization strategies involve a certain amount of preparatory discussion in order to contextualise the theory within general questions, they would result in even longer, slower-paced introductions to theory. There are two reasons why this has proven not to be the case.

First, problematization strategies are not concerned with imposing some kind of blanket coverage of all the major theorists on students. Thus (140) told me that neither she nor her colleagues are now interested in any kind of coverage.

That sort of thing is going back to a medieval notion of appeal to authority and unless one is interested in instituting a new orthodoxy which I certainly am not and I would say my colleagues aren’t either ... That’s not how you do it. You present students with a range of possibilities and then they run with the one that’s right for them.

(130) said
The time needed for theory to ‘bed down’ is not so much of a problem if you abandon idea of coverage in favour of idea of practice where ... there’s a whole range of operations involved in doing something apparently quite simple, if the emphasis is on challenging and changing, if the emphasis is on practice then the theorizing as a practice will tend to develop.

However, in his department, the temptation to be overly optimistic about students’ capacity to apply theory for themselves, which dogged many nominalized courses, re-surfaced in 1993:

We found that we didn’t have enough, as it were, free-standing theory explained and we’re going to put some extra lectures in this time... It was clear from student evaluations that what they wanted was more explicit guidance on theories ... We’re moving between the need to describe and the need to activate, and we actually went too much the other way ... We were trying to activate without describing some of the models you could appeal to.

If the relevance of conducting an inquiry into the value judgements and discourses of criticism can be established, the educational value of explicating pieces of theoretical argument for students is greatly enhanced, even if some of the material they are offered is ultimately presented in a nominalized fashion. (I27), amongst others, identified Saussurean linguistics as one area of theoretical work which could be summarized openly and economically with only limited reference to primary sources once the logic of the inquiry was already established.

There are certain things that you can just explain as a package. I can explain the structuralist notion of language to a student in half an hour summing up all sorts of research that’s been done and they then at the end of that time have a notion about language which they didn’t have before, which if they then start to think about it and apply it, is very useful to them. But you need that half hour, that bit of material to be laid out carefully ... if you give them something solid and say ‘Look, you cannot have this view of language which you have because of this, this and this. I want you to read this, this and this and realise that’, then they can’t ever deny that there is this blockage in their way.

It was interesting that Saussure’s work was the body of theoretical material most often alluded to as suitable for summary. Some interviewees were very unhappy at what they took to be the distortion of Saussure’s work which such summary engendered for (I21) there was a danger of
creating a mediating theoretical culture so that 'Saussure' becomes not just the six pages of Saussure people used to read, but the one page about those six pages. So anyone who does go and read Saussure finds it has little resemblance to what they've read.

The debate about the suitability of Saussure's work for such summarizing treatment is not the key issue here. More to the point is that interviewees felt that what begins as problematization can lead to a closer engagement with the implications of the theory because the crucial concepts are encountered within a debate which has already begun, which does not rely on knowledge of theoretically-derived concepts to exist, but which can be taken forward further by an appreciation of the potential insights to be gained from such work. This goes some way towards counteracting the natural tendency of

the student who sits there, is wonderfully entertained by a charismatic teacher and gets back and writes an essay about the character of Hamlet and what was going through Hamlet's head. (I27)

The second reason why problematization strategies may ease the pressures of time when trying to introduce students to theory is that, being question-oriented, such approaches are potentially easier to integrate into literary courses. Problematization is not a teaching strategy which is exclusively useful for teaching theory, and there is a methodological congruence between it and more traditional practical critical activities. For example, (I22) described how 'after three or four weeks of a course on theatre in a literary historical cultural context'

We'd say, 'Well, what have we been doing? What's the theory? ... I'd get them to read three or four essays, chapters or whatever and then I'd take them one by one and say 'What's this about then? let's talk our way through it, see what are the important things here, what are the problems here, where are the awkwardnesses, where are the things which can really jump out and be useful to us in what we've been doing thus far. Then how does it work in conjunction with another of the texts, how does the one reverse the other?' ... For many people practical criticism is where a theory shows its worth.

In one of several departments I visited where there was very little discrete theory teaching any more, the staff had found that their attempts at integration had eased the pressure of time and had freed up areas of the syllabus for more courses:
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What we're looking for now is to get people in touch with a number of methods and techniques which yes have models, but those things which we think are most useful and not to try and teach people theory. We haven’t got the space for it and it doesn’t actually work in our terms. Nobody does a theory course separately ... it permeates the rest of the course unevenly depending on whose doing what. (130)

Conclusion

Different institutions have obviously reached different stages of development in their teaching of theory, but I hope this discussion has shown that the move towards talking about difficulties of textual analysis with students, rather than telling them about theory, is proving effective. As a pedagogic strategy, problematization has a number of benefits. It foregrounds students’ own experiences as readers and encourages them to engage with important questions about the cultural value and provenance of texts. In so doing, it simultaneously works to demystify theoretical ideas and assuage the impact of the 'expectations gap'.

Notes and References


For (115) things changed after she took part in a workshop run by the Development of University English Teaching (DUET) group which ‘gave me a justification for using “I don’t understand this” as a legitimate teaching practice with a group of students’.


Some of these books were published co-terminously in Britain and America, others were only put out by American publishers but were distributed in Britain. My list is adapted from the more extensive bibliography of Barthes in Mary Bittner Wiseman’s The Ecstasies of Roland Barthes (Routledge, 1989), pp. 195-199.

The full French version of Mythologies has, in fact, never been translated in one volume in Britain or the United States. Bruss, pp. 364, 366, 368.