Sharpening the Critical Gaze: Teaching Literary Theory in a Japanese University

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For some years, we have been surprised and distressed by the intellectual trends in certain precincts of American academia. Vast sectors of the humanities and social sciences seem to have adopted a philosophy that we shall call, for want of a better term, "postmodernism"...

(Sokal and Bricmont 1)

For all that numerous commentators have expressed concern over - or even outright argued against - the incursions of critical theory into the humanities, it appears to have become an accepted part of the backdrop to the understanding of literature and culture internationally. Schools of thought often vary widely in approach, however, and coming to grips with the different vocabularies can be intimidating even for experienced academics, so it is little wonder that students frequently find it difficult. More so when so much of the primary literature is in a language other than their first.

This, then, is the root of a pedagogic problem. Theory, however, can have a lot to offer developing scholars and may lead to insights that become, quite literally, life changing in some cases. A tremendous amount depends on the initial approach undertaken by the teacher, as they bear the primary responsibility for deciding whether the study of theory will be arduous and forbidding or an intellectual journey that presents much to the traveller. This discussion therefore considers some criticisms and suggests an approach to simplifying literary theory in English at a tertiary level in Japan, along with considering breadth, depth and pedagogic techniques.

What Theory Offers

One might argue naively that critical theory has little application beyond providing a new way to consider a text, but this is a fallacy. Consider postmodernism, which is an umbrella term, but informs almost everything in modern society from art to television - or postcolonialism, which forms a cornerstone of much of modern politics and international relations. Modern economics uses Marxist thought, while psychoanalytic readings of everyday behaviour and cultural events

are apparent in numerous ways. Baudrillard's philosophy provided the basis for the plot of the ***Matrix*** trilogy of films. The ideas of Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Adorno, Butler and a host of others have permeated the world, entering everyday discourse although the users of such concepts might not ever have heard the names of their originators, let alone studied their writings. The language of such schools of thought has become so common as to be almost invisible. When one speaks of a person having "a complex" about something, or feeling "alienated," then one is using a vocabulary that has come from theory.

This, then, offers one key to clarifying the value of theory in a pedagogic context. It already exists in culture and society and permeates these at such a level that it is often invisible. Just as a music theorist might examine the chord structures and harmonic progressions that provide form and texture to a composition, so might a cultural theorist look at how ideas come to underpin social phenomena.

Critical theory does not generally provide a primary source per se in the usual sense. It offers, rather, a set of methodologies, or ways of approaching and thinking about a problem. Just as there can be a multiplicity of readings of a given text, so there can be a multiplicity of critical approaches. Within those are even more variations, leading to what can appear an almost infinite number of ways of interpretations. The certitudes of positivism have apparently faded far into the distance in a postmodern world, and especially in one in which the text is such a varied and variable starting point. Theory offers frameworks for the otherwise unframeworkable, although not in a banal, structuralist sense. It allows one to make connections between shifting cultural elements, to create a map of a landscape that is ephemeral, and to derive something that may resemble meaning from something which appears meaningless.

In practical terms, a grounding in critical theory offers students a way to look beneath the surface of the text. My own graduating seminar recently told me that they now find it impossible to go to a movie or even a shopping mall without considering the competing discourses at play. They are now constantly asking themselves what subtexts are in action, from whence the power might come and to where it might go. ***Cui***, in other words, ***bono***?

Teaching students not to accept things at face value might seem like a trivial achievement, yet it is anything but. Social movements have a tendency to spring from the simple questioning of authority or assumptions, and changes to climates of disparity need insight as a basis. People must understand that a problem exists before addressing it. Also, critical theory is a validator of choice, allowing someone a more objective cognitive process than simply relying upon a feeling of unease about a situation.

Such an approach does not, however, directly address the justification for using theory to ex-

amine literature. It is, after all, chronologically impossible for Shakespeare to have been aware of the post-Freudian psychoanalytic approach to texts. How can one justify using it, therefore? Why not, an opponent of theory might ask, instead simply examine the story and characters, or revel in the play of language? Is this not what the author wanted?

If one sets aside for the moment the fact that this is, itself, a theoretical stance, a two-pronged potential answer to this is first that theory offers new perspectives, and, secondly, that the study of literature is arguably not about the simple understanding of a text. The fundamental act of reading books and talking about what the author says or implies might be entertaining, but it can be argued with considerable force that this is a conversational pursuit rather than a serious attempt at an academic study. Looking beneath the text is the beginning of analysis, but theory offers many, many more opportunities to do so in a complex and intellectually challenging way.

Criticizing Criticism

Theory has its opponents, and they are, if nothing else, legion. Criticizing criticism might seem ironically self-reflexive as a process, but it remains a favoured pastime nonetheless. Everyone seems keen to get in on the act, from certain scientists, who apparently regard the whole thing as hopelessly muddle-headed and vague, to an older generation of pre-theory scholars, to whom contemporary French philosophy will ever remain a closed *livre*.

Thus, it is possible to feel, with a certain amount of justice, that the concern about critical theory comes most from those who do not understand it. In this author's experience, at least, the most vehement opponents of theory tend to be those who have not spent the necessary time in learning how it works, what it can offer and why it might remain of value. Few of those who attack theory have taken the time that Bricmont and Sokal, for example, spent on debunking the pseudoscientific claims of major writers in the field. Most people instead argue on the basis of misunderstandings or oversimplifications.

The next section of the present discussion will consider the process of simplification in some depth, but a word here about its potential dangers might, perhaps, be timely. Consider the case of deconstruction, which is a complex argument about the self-dismantling of texts through a process of analysis, but which is often reduced - incorrectly, as it happens - to the rather banal idea that you have to look at things in parts in order to understand the whole (Ralph 17). Thus, one can find magazine articles which purport to offer, for example, the deconstruction of celebrities or similarly mainstream topics (Wiener 43), but which are, in reality, nothing more than recontextualized biographical sketches. What this means is that those opponents of critical theory who are

undereducated in the area have no choice but to focus on such simplifications, which are, almost inevitably, wrong. It is rather like someone who has only ever encountered ducks arguing about swans.

At the same time, opponents of theory may very well argue that its supporters remain such precisely because they have invested so much in gaining the knowledge needed. Someone might, for example, devote years of their life to learning the Latin names of fish, and would hardly be likely to then turn around and state that their knowledge was worthless, despite the fact that most of the rest of the world gets on perfectly well without sharing their piscean insights. The process of learning about something creates converts past a certain natural point of resistance.

This is a hard argument to counter, and is a point that Alan Sokal exploited extremely effectively when he produced a now notorious paper entitled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermenutics of Quantum Gravity" for the journal ***Social Text*** in 1996. Timed to appear a couple of weeks after the journal's release was another article, this time in ***Lingua Franca***, revealing that the first was a hoax, filled with meaningless buzzwords, bad science and flawed argument (Sokal xiv). The intention was to expose what he saw as a lack of integrity with regard to scientific claims in modern critical theory. From here, with Jean Bricmont, he released the book ***Fashionable Nonsense***, which examined - with startling clarity and often brutal logic - the scientific misappropriations of such leading lights as Derrida, Kristeva and Lacan.

Devastating as such an attack might be, and, indeed, felt to many in the field at the time, it was directed only at a small part of the edifice of critical theory. Specifically, Sokal and Bricmont were concerned with abuses of scientific terminology, and the book is filled with amusing asides such as "One would be hard-pressed not to notice the high density of scientific and pseudo-scientific terminology - inserted in sentences that are, as far as we can make out, devoid of meaning" (152). As good scientists, they do, in fact, caution against generalizing about theory from their very specific criticism:

> ...we do not purport to judge Lacan's psychoanalysis, Deleuze's philosophy, or Latour's concrete work in sociology. We limit ourselves to their statements about the mathematical and physical sciences or about elementary problems in the philosophy of science. (12)

Rather than destroy critical theory, therefore, what has come to be known as the Sokal hoax has become something of a landmark and redefined the epistemological map to a certain extent. The borders of science would appear to be slightly more securely protected. This is not the only example of such an attack, but may well be the best known due to the controversy created and the resulting media reportage. It provides a cautionary tale for aspiring philosophers and critics

who might wish to construct metaphors around, say, the language of quantum theory without fully understanding the original context. In fact, it has come to be seen as a key battle in what is popularly described as the "Science Wars".

The broader issue of preaching to the choir, to borrow a tired idiom, however, remains unresolved. If critical theorists must undergo considerable training in order to understand the discipline, then how can non-acolytes judge or criticize? Ultimately, this is something of an epistemological question, just as it would be if attempting to understand quantum physics or Schenkerian harmonic analysis without an appropriate background. Ironically, perhaps Sokal's hoax provides an answer: boundaries are there for a reason. To "dumb down" or decontextualize theory for a non-specialist audience potentially robs it of its force in a similar way to the same process in other disciplines.

Simplification

To simplify is, at some level, to destroy. Omission of detail requires intelligent choice, and is based not only on the understanding of the simplifier, but a prediction of the understanding of the potential audience. In essence (itself a term signalling that a simplification is about to take place), this was one of the criticisms levelled at structuralism in the second half of the twentieth century: the reduction of elements, whether literary, cultural or otherwise, led to a multitude of texts, with their various complexities and differences stripped away, appearing to be much the same. *Hamlet* and *Oedipus*, for example, could never be mistaken for each other in their original forms, but, when reduced sufficiently along certain thematic lines, become almost identical.

This, therefore, is the first major hurdle that a teacher of critical theory must overcome. Giving students extensive, difficult readings in their second language might be a cruel and unusual form of punishment, but it is unlikely to yield good results pedagogically. A way forward must be found that allows the teacher to address major ideas and themes without losing the associated complexity of meaning – or, at least, distilling it too far. It is a difficult intellectual juggling act at the best of times.

In order to explore different levels of reduction, let us consider the following passage of text, the famous opening of Derrida's *On Grammatology*:

> However the topic is considered, the *problem of language* has never been simply one problem among others. But never as much as at present has it invaded, as *such*, the global horizon of the most diverse researches and the most heterogeneous discourses, diverse and heterogeneous in their intention, method, and ideology. The devaluation of the word "language" itself, and how, in the very hold it has upon us, it betrays a loose

> vocabulary, the temptation of a cheap seduction, the passive yielding to fashion, the consciousness of the avant-garde, in other words-ignorance-are evidences of this effect. This inflation of the sign "language" is the inflation of the sign itself, absolute inflation, inflation itself. Yet, by one of its aspects or shadows, it is itself still a sign: this crisis is also a symptom. It indicates, as if in spite of itself, that a historico-metaphysical epoch must finally determine as language the totality of its problematic horizon. It must do so not only because all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language finds itself recaptured within that play but also because, for the same reason, language itself is menaced in its very life, helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness, brought back to its own finitude at the very moment when its limits seem to disappear, when it ceases to be self assured, contained, and guaranteed by the infinite signified which seemed to exceed it. (6)

If one were to simplify this progressively, the different versions might look a little like this:

Simplification A (selective quotation):

> …the *problem of language* has…invaded…the global horizon of the most diverse researches and the most heterogeneous discourses, diverse and heterogeneous in their intention, method, and ideology. The devaluation of the word "language" itself,…in the very hold it has upon us,…betrays a loose vocabulary, the temptation of a cheap seduction, the passive yielding to fashion, the consciousness of the avant-garde…This inflation of the sign "language" is the inflation of the sign itself…Yet, by one of its aspects or shadows, it is itself still a sign: this crisis is also a symptom…all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language finds itself recaptured within that play but also…language itself is menaced in its very life…when it ceases to be self assured, contained, and guaranteed by the infinite signified which seemed to exceed it. (6)

Simplification B (higher-level interpretation):

> Derrida states that what he calls "the problem of language" (6) is now deeply related to a broad variety of research and philosophical areas. The idea of language itself creates an issue, as there is a tendency to attach too much importance to the concept, leading one to assume that the flaws in language and discourse are the same as the flaws in society. The problem is essentially self-referential. When language talks about language, it threatens constantly to lose definition and dissolve as a concept, especially as it moves away from a view of itself as the signified within the paradigm of the sign.

Simplification C (lower-level interpretation):

> The idea of language has become important in many disciplines. A problem, however,

is that it ceases to be a tool that can be used for understanding and becomes, instead, a subject of research. In this sense, it loses its function as describer and becomes the described, making it hard to define.

Simplification D（major reduction）:

Language is useful for talking about stuff but can disappear if it tries to define itself.

One must decide where on the scale to aim. For all but the most advanced students, the ‘A’ version is probably too complex unless they already have an established context and solid English skills. At half the word length of the original passage, it also glosses over some of the more subtle points that are made, although the primary purpose is to remove a certain amount of circularity and hyperbole. ‘D’, on the other hand, is so simple as to be virtually meaningless. Therefore, ‘B’ and ‘C’ are the most likely choices, and the decision of which might work best depends on the class level. Also, they need to be further clarified by the teacher. All of the simplifications have the same problem in that they ignore the broader sense of the passage within the text. Here, Derrida is trying to situate his topic within a context. He is also establishing the historical breadth of his examination, albeit with what another might regard as wild, Gallic ambition. These factors need to be understood in order to follow why he can argue that the foundations of language seem to dissolve in the way that he suggests.

Going beyond this to the broader outlines of a theoretical school, one must also decide which ideas are important pedagogically and which are not. It is clearly impractical to present all of Marx, for example. What, then, are the core concepts? When I was faced with exactly this issue, I decided that a little background information was desirable, and, after considerable thought, determined that the main ideas I wanted students to take away from a discussion of Marxism would be materialist history, anti-capitalism, the proletariat revolution, alienation, exploitation and base and superstructure. If they could grasp these concepts, then they would be able to go on and do further research on their own if they wished, having already established a framework. I explained each idea simply with examples, and then engaged the students in small group discussion, encouraging them to both create and solve their own problems.

I went through a similar process with the other schools of theory that were chosen. Eventually, I decided upon the following format and thinkers over ten weeks:

1）Essentialism and relativity（Plato and Aristotle）

2）Psychoanalysis（Freud, Jung and Lacan）

3）Marxism（Marx and Althusser）

4）Structuralism（de Saussure）

5) Semiotics (Eco)

6) Poststructuralism (Barthes)

7) Deconstruction (Derrida)

8) Discourse (Foucault)

9) Postcolonialism (Fanon and Said)

10) Feminism (de Beauvoir, hooks and Butler)

These were my decisions, but I am painfully aware that much more was left out than was included, and that even the chosen areas were too broad to be covered in a single class. The way in which I approached the teaching of these subject areas is examined in the next section of this chapter.

The Mini-Lecture Format

Once the appropriate level of information to be offered to the students has been decided upon, a strong delivery system is needed. Personally, I like to use what I call the "mini-lecture". This is a simple process that yields surprisingly effective results. The process can be broken down into six basic stages:

1) Prepare an appropriate lecture for the class level of between seven and fifteen minutes.

2) Present the lecture to the class with students taking notes.

3) Allow some time for a discussion and comparison of notes.

4) Distribute focus questions and re-present the lecture.

5) Allow time for discussion of questions and check answers in plenary.

6) Distribute reading with discussion questions for the next class.

In an average 90-minute lesson, I find that it is quite possible to discuss the reading from the previous week and get through two mini-lecture sets. Each step presents potential issues that are relatively easily overcome with a little forethought.

Finding a class level is, naturally, a matter of personal experience and judgment. There are tests, such as TOEFL and Paul Nation's Vocabulary Size Test that purport to offer some form of rating system, but these seem to be unreliable classroom indicators at best for subjects other than those based primarily on EFL concerns. When it comes to using them to predict how well a given class might respond to the sort of discussions that critical theory can generate, they are highly problematic. My personal experience suggests that it is sometimes precisely those students with the smallest vocabulary who have the most to say. Why this may be is something of a mystery. Perhaps the resistance to being a conventionally 'good' student within the Japanese system indicates a critical bent.

In any case, I have provided a couple of examples of class materials at the end of this chapter. The first is a pair of lectures on Foucault, aimed at a mid-level undergraduate class. With explanation of some ideas and minor digressions, each lecture lasts about ten minutes. The next is a series of related discussion questions designed to get students to engage with the core issues presented in the lectures, also broken into two halves. The questions are asked at the end of the lectures with more to come in the next week, after the reading (in this case I used part of Terry Eagleton's ***Literary Theory: An Introduction***) has been studied. The questions also form a useful study framework for a mid-year exam on theory, which forces students to review the key points.

Is a Critical Theory Teacher also an EFL Teacher?

There are many teachers who do not allow Japanese in the classroom or who limit its use severely, requiring all discussion to be in English. If the primary object of the course is to educate students in language skills, then one can argue that this is a potentially effective approach. If, however, the most important class objective is for students to grasp the ideas, then an English-only approach is perhaps both overly prescriptive and possibly inhibiting.

Numerous universities in Japan ask non-Japanese professors to offer what are often described informally as "content courses". This is something of a worrying designation, as it implies that there must be other courses that are free from content (which hardly sounds desirable). Concerns over labelling aside, however, when such courses are given under the aegis of an English Department, as happens frequently, there can be the expectation that studying something other than basic language skills will offer students a broader perspective on English language and culture. There is often the further implication, however, that language teaching is the underlying goal, which can restrict how content courses might be taught.

Personally, I am very much in favour of allowing both English and Japanese in the classroom when teaching critical theory. Aside from anything else, students have often studied many of the core concepts in Japanese beforehand, yet may never make the connection without discussing in and switching between both languages. An example I encounter frequently is Plato, who is "Pu-ra-ton" in Japanese. Some class members can go through an entire lecture without realizing that the two names refer to the same person.

This choice is an individual one and must be decided based upon the primary focus of the class. I suspect that, if the main goal is to improve the English fluency of students, perhaps a less challenging area than critical theory might be best. On the other hand, getting students to think critically in a language other than their first has the benefit of self-alienation. They can become their own "other," to borrow a much-used critical term, able to consider things from a different

perspective purely because they are doing so with unfamiliar vocabulary and within a difficult syntactic framework. This is especially true if they have already studied some of the ideas in their first language, as they are likely to have focussed on a very different approach to the information.

As one of my students once said to me, “I would never dare to think this way in Japanese”.

Appendix One: Mini-Lecture Text

Foucault and Discourse

Mini-Lecture A

Our previous theoretical investigations have looked at the breakdown of the signifier-signified relationship and the way in which poststructuralists and others have questioned essentialism and started to search for hidden assumptions and absolutes in texts.

Alongside Derrida and Barthes, another figure of great importance is the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Like Derrida, as a young man he knew Althusser and was influenced by him. Foucault was also moved to question authority. His PhD dissertation looked at institutions and their power, and would become the foundation for his most famous idea – discourse.

In Foucault’s terms, a ‘discourse’ is a set of assumptions that lie underneath institutions. He defined it as “an entity of sequences of signs in that they are statements (*enoncés*)” (141). Essentially, this means that signs group together and can be used to define the boundaries of an institution, such as “the law”, “the church” and so forth.

Others have extended or clarified this definition. For example, Iara Lessa has described discourse as: “systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak. He [Foucault] traces the role of discourses in wider social processes of legitimating and power, emphasizing the construction of current truths, how they are maintained and what power relations they carry with them.”

Last week, we looked at deconstruction and how it showed that texts contained assumptions and contradictions. These assumptions are also the foundation of discourse. For example, when we looked at the passage from Titus, we found evidence of what could be called a “patriarchal discourse” in action. The idea is that women are inferior to men, supported by the attitudes of

those with power in society (priests and male leaders), sustained by social practice (women are expected to be quiet in the home and punished if they are not) and eventually presented as right and proper (validated by relation to an all-powerful God) – as a belief. Truth is "constructed" within a discourse by the holders of power.

Discourse limits what is acceptable, or speakable. If a discourse is powerful enough, those who are oppressed by it have no voice to change matters – imagine being a woman living in the society described in the Biblical passage. Speaking up is not simply a matter of opening one's mouth. It is an ongoing process that is often dangerous to the speaker.

Mini-Lecture B

Foucault argues that language and power are closely related. Power is not a conscious process all of the time, but rather arises out of cultural practice. It is based on language – on what is said and thought within a society. Foucault asked questions about our definitions of normality and abnormality, of sanity and insanity, of legality and illegality, of sexual regularity and irregularity. Who decides what is 'right' and what is 'wrong'? Where do these ideas come from?

Foucault was interested in what are now described as 'discursive practices' within a society. Knowledge of these discursive practices over a period of time gave a picture of a society (Herrick 249-250), and thus Foucault could describe himself as an "archaeologist of knowledge".

One last point I wanted to make was related to what is now described as "queer theory". Although the term is not Foucault's (it comes from a 1991 essay by Teresa de Lauretis), the field rests on his work. The idea is that gender and sexuality are social constructs – they are, themselves discourses, or what Herrick calls "symbolically based meanings negotiated in public as well as private settings" (252). Foucault questioned the supposedly natural ideas of gender in society, and argued that these boundaries – "gay", "straight", "masculine", "feminine" were actually artificial rather than natural.

It would be possible to give you an entire lecture on this topic, but I think that the core idea expressed here is probably enough for you to be going on with, until we get to the work of Judith Butler and other postmodern feminists. As long as you understand the idea that gender and sexuality may not actually be as simple as we are taught to consider them by our societies, then you have a grasp on the core concept. We will look a bit more at the construction of gender in coming weeks.

Appendix Two: Discussion Questions for Small Groups

In Class (after lecture 1):

1) What are two things that Derrida and Foucault had in common?
2) What is discourse? Please offer a definition.
3) Is there such a thing as “truth”? What do we mean when we talk about it?
4) What does discourse limit? Please offer an example of your own.

In Class (after lecture 2):

1) What is the relationship between language and power – and where does the latter originate?
2) What are some examples of things thought to be absolute that can possibly be questioned? Please add your own examples.
3) What do you think “discursive practices” might be?
4) What does Foucault say about the boundaries of gender? Do you agree? Why or why not?

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