

Michael Butter

Short, but not always sweet

- Mary Klages, *Key Terms in Literary Theory*. London: Continuum 2012. 132 pp. [Price: EUR 18,14]. ISBN: 978-0826442673.

Mary Klages's *Key Terms in Literary Theory* is intended as a companion piece to her *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2006), both of which are geared at first- or second-year students coming into touch with literary theory for the very first time. As she explains in the introduction, guides like the earlier book »don't yield information quickly or concisely; they are more like textbooks you read for detailed information.« The new book, by contrast, is supposed to be »different. It is the one you pick up when you come across an unfamiliar term in another resource, and you want an understandable definition, or you encounter a name you don't recognize« (1). And, indeed, Klages generally does a good job explaining complex concepts to newcomers to literary theory in a brief and very down-to-earth manner.

The book, which is only about 130 pages long, is divided into three parts. Moving from *abjection* to *value*, the longest part, »Key Terms and Concepts« (3–89), provides definitions of terms and concepts related to the most important literary theories of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As is to be expected of a book in English, there is a certain bias toward theories developed in the UK and the US, but continental approaches also figure prominently. The second part, »Major Figures« (90–117), features short biographical sketches of prominent figures in the field, beginning with Adorno and ending with Žižek. The final part, »Important Works« (118–24), does not, as one might expect, list works of literary theory by these figures but provides an overview of introductory guides, anthologies and studies of individual theorists (whose works are listed in the second part anyway).

Most of the definitions offered in part one are indeed short and precise. Seldom running longer than half a page, they offer students enough information to get a first understanding of the issues at stake while not burdening them with too much information. Moreover, Klages goes to great lengths to keep things as simple as possible. Sentences rarely run for more than three lines and are seldom as convoluted as they so often are in other books of the same type (especially those written in German). In fact, some of her explanations – for example, *archaeology of knowledge*, *anxiety of influence*, *race*, *ethnicity* or *subaltern* – are truly excellent, and I will definitely use them in introductory classes in the years to come.

Other definitions, however, are less successful. The explanation of *narratology*, for example, begins with what I consider, in this context, unnecessary information on Aristotle's theory of narrative and ends with »Post-structuralist narratologists, such as Mikhail Bakhtin« (56). Thus, Klages does not take any recent developments in narrative theory into account. Moreover, she buries the crucial distinction between story and discourse in the middle of the one paragraph devoted to the entry and falsely likens this distinction to that between *langue* and *parole*. Finally, if any reader now decided to look up Bakhtin's theory of dialogicity, they would be fairly confused because the entry on *dialogic* explicitly states that »Bakhtin was *not* a Marxist or a post-structuralist« (23; my emphasis).

Admittedly, though, the entry on *narratology* is not typical since most definitions are stronger and problems usually occur in those texts where Klages devotes more than one paragraph to a concept. As a general tendency, the more space Klages assigns a concept (most entries are less than a page long but some run up to three pages), the less precise her definitions become because she then provides too much unnecessary information and often loses focus. Compare, for example, the entry on *deconstruction* (3 pages) and the immediately following one on *desire* (half a page). The first opens with the sentence, »Deconstruction begins when Jacques Derrida observes, in »Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences« (1966), that there is a ‘scandal’ in Lévi-Strauss’ analysis of the structure of myth and culture in *The Raw and the Cooked*« (18). Lots of information follows but never a precise definition of the concept, let alone an explanation of what words were blended in the term *deconstruction* and for what reasons. By contrast, the entry on *desire* begins with a far more abstract sentence – »Desire is a complex term in literary and cultural history, referring to specific concepts in psychoanalysis that have been adopted and modified by a number of post-structuralist theories« (21) – and then goes on to provide the original definition and the transformations in the sentences that follow.

Another problem is that some concepts are explained several times because the explanations are needed for related concepts. While this surely could not be completely avoided, cross-references (which are entirely lacking) might have eased the problem, enabling Klages to shorten definitions in one place or to define terms together. For instance, the definition of *monologia* is repeated in its entirety, albeit in slightly different words, in the entry on *dialogic*. Shifting the definition of the former entry to the latter and indicating this accordingly would have avoided the repetition and freed some space for entries on concepts that are unfortunately missing. While various aspects of Marxist theory are explained in entries of their own, the concept of class as the most central one is not.

Other concepts that, to my mind at least, would have deserved an entry are *space*, *femininity*, *masculinity*, *repressive state apparatuses* (mentioned in the entry on *ideological state apparatuses*, though) and *knowledge* (only discussed in the entry *power/knowledge* with no reference to it under »K«). Including them would have been possible if some of the longer entries had been abridged, if some repetitions had been eliminated and if some very specialized entries such as Henry Louis Gates’s concept of *signifyin’*, which is probably only relevant for scholars in African American Studies, would have been left out. The same goes for some concepts from structuralist linguistics such as *langue* or *parole*. They are of course important in accounts of the historical development of literary theory, but I seriously doubt that students come across them frequently in works of literary criticism these days and thus feel the need to look them up.

I will keep my remarks on the other two parts of the book short, as the first part is surely its centerpiece. The part that lists introductory guides and characterizes them in a sentence or two is quite useful especially for undergraduates. But the part that contains biographical information appears superfluous to me, especially because most entries are less than ten lines long and only list dates of birth (and death) and the most important works without explaining what they are about. There are a couple of entries that are much longer which once again creates a certain imbalance particularly since it is not explained why these figures were singled out to receive heightened attention. At a time when even Wikipedia (at least the English version) features quite decent articles on Derrida, Foucault and other thinkers, the available space could have been used better, for instance, for more definitions. In sum, then, the book has certain weaknesses but since it is quite cheap and since many entries are really helpful it is a useful addition to any university library.

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