

Jeremy Hawthorn

UNLOCKING THE TEXT: FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES IN LITERARY THEORY

London: Edward Arnold, 1987. Pp. 138. \$4.95

Reviewed by Jerry A. Varsava

Unlocking the Text joins a number of other introductory studies brought out by Edward Arnold in recent years, books such as Hawthorn's own *Studying the Novel* (1985), Malcolm Kelsall's *Studying Drama* (1985), and R.T. Jones's *Studying Poetry* (1986). As with his introduction to the novel, *Unlocking the Text* is written for undergraduates, perhaps even junior undergraduates. Unlike more advanced introductions to theory such as Raman Selden's *A Reader's Guide to Poststructuralism and Postmodernism* (1989), which are concerned with major theorists and major theoretical schools, *Unlocking the Text* focuses on a number of key issues such as language, reference and fictionality, reception, and evaluation. A point Hawthorn makes in his preface is quite legitimate given his intended audience: introductions to theory are often too theoretical, too aloof of the imaginative literature that they ultimately seek to understand. Consequently, *Unlocking the Text* uses frequent references to imaginative literature, especially British fiction, to illustrate theoretical problems and general theoretical claims. This strategy both clarifies and enlivens the issues at hand.

The lengthy introductory chapter of *Unlocking the Text* is the weakest aspect of the book. Appropriately enough, Hawthorn is intent, at the outset, on cataloguing the basic elements of literary exchange—author, text, reader, and world—and defining basic scholarly enterprises. It is in the latter that he gets bogged down in a hair-splitting taxonomic exercise, the benefits of which are doubtful at best. Teaching is often the art of communicating the obvious. Perhaps, junior undergraduates do require detailed definition of terms like "scholarship" and "explication" and "interpretation" such as Hawthorn offers. But can the same be said of "analysis," of "discussion"? These are not technical terms used by specialists but rather common generic nouns used by everyone. To claim otherwise is pedantry. Further, while it is inevitable that a short survey such as this will overlook some positions, it is equally inevitable that these oversights be noted here. Foucault's view of the author and the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur *might* have been mentioned; Fish and Iser *should* have been mentioned in the chapter on reception.

It is probably more difficult to write a short, elementary introduction to a complex subject than it is to write a longer, more advanced version. *Unlocking the Text* acquits itself of the former task reasonably well. Its references to theorists and theories are generally wide-ranging and without overt tendentiousness. (Hawthorn identifies his own theoretical biases in a forthright manner early in the work when he admits to having a relativistic/contextualist view of interpretive truth [10-11].) This study will serve as a useful reference in lower-level literature courses, particularly in courses where instructors wish not only to read literature but also to consider the presuppositions that inform interpretive practices. Very readable, it will help interested instructors "sneak in" theory without traumatizing their students.