HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP


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Literary Theory

In Theory of Literature, the classic manual for graduate education in literature in the United States from the 1950s until the 1970s, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren wrote that "literary theory, an organ of methods, is the great need of literary scholarship today" (19). Forty years later, few critics or scholars would subscribe to this statement. The proliferation of theoretical writings and the importance of theory in debates about literary study have, if anything, led critics to call for less rather than more theory (although they frequently call for more theory of one sort or another). Formerly a marginal activity of philosophically inclined critics, literary theory has become a general and variegated reflection about the relation of literature to other activities and about the stakes of different ways of thinking about literature and other discourses. Once seemed an obscurantist, reductive, and irrelevant, theory is now criticized for its complicity with structures of patriarchal authority and its contribution to a false universalism — criticisms that themselves emanate from theoretical reflection and debate.

Institutionally, literary studies in the United States have passed from a phase where theory was something unnecessary (except, perhaps, in a department’s single graduate course on methods of literary study) to a phase where every department had to have one theorist (theory became a legitimate subfield of literary specialization), to a phase where theory seems pervasive, where its existence is largely taken for granted and arguments are mounted against the hegemony of theory. But the widespread notion that theory has “taken over” literary studies in the United States since the late 1970s comes not from the number of scholars or critics who consider themselves theorists or who “work in theory” but from the fact that, increasingly, for a piece of critical writing to appear generally significant, it has to seem theoretically significant.

If such a change has occurred, it’s no doubt because the character of literary studies has been modified by work identified as “theory.” Three modes whose impact seems greatest are the wide-ranging reflection on language, representation, and the categories of critical thought themselves undertaken by deconstruction, the analysis of the role of gender and sexuality in every aspect of literature and criticism by feminism and their gender studies, and the development of historically oriented cultural criticism that study a variety of discursive practices involving many objects (the body, the family, the race, the medical gaze) not previously thought of as having a history.

What seems to have occurred in literary studies—a field where critical and scholarly writing usually focuses on individual authors and particular works—is the breakdown of an older framework that supported one notion of “generality.”
Generality as theoretical significance

(i.e., a notion of how a piece of critical writing becomes of general interest) and its replacement by a notion of generality as theoretical significance. It is difficult to characterize earlier notions of generality, perhaps because such conceptions were the unspoken unifying factors of a disciplinary space. One might suggest, however, that in the field of English in the 1940s through the 1960s, for example, the general interest and import of a critical study was likely to come from some combination of raising or lowering the estimation of a major literary figure or from claims about the shape of English literary history: what belongs to the "great tradition," whether Romantic poetry is central to English literature or a detour from the main line that connects the metaphysicals to the modernists, for instance. In the 1980s arguments of this sort were less likely to be the goal; studies aspiring to general significance rather than theoretical points about the operation of language, the relation between text and reader, or the political complications and resistances of literary discourses. As publishers and their critics tell us, a theoretical point or claim has come to be what you aim for when you are trying to reach a broad audience in literary studies. The influential journal Critical Inquiry, for example, has favored the prescription that its articles—although they may focus on particular writers, artists, or works, always have some theoretical matter at stake, for this is what makes them of general interest. The payoff is not a new interpretation of a literary or cultural work but, even in interpretive articles, an engagement with some recognized theoretical issue. (As a result, points of general interest are taken to be theoretical positions even if they do not rely on anything like theoretical argument.) The success of theory lies not in the number of those who practice it but in its status as the stake of work presented as of general interest.

Theory of literature, the title of Wellek and Warren's book, suggests an account of literature's defining and distinguishing characteristics and, perhaps, of its social, ethical, intellectual, and political dimensions and uses. A good deal of theoretical writing in the 1960s and earlier did focus specifically on the nature of literature. For Roman Jakobson and the Russian formalists, the "literariness" of literature involved the foregrounding of language itself, the dependence of a work's effect and significance on its relation to other works of the literary tradition, and its compositional unity—the integration of its levels of linguistic structure and the inseparability of form and meaning (see Erlich). Writings by such French structuralists as Roland Barthes and by various Anglo-American New Critics, emphasizing the central role of ambiguity in literary language (see Empson) or arguing that "the language of poetry is the language of paradox" (Brooks), identify literariness with certain linguistic structures or conventions. A second approach has taken the fictionality of literature as its defining feature: literature consists of fictional imitations of ordinary or "real-world" speech acts (Smith, Margins). But in both cases it seems that any feature taken to define literature can turn up in nonliterary works as well, and the variety of literary works is such that to find significant properties possessed by all is exceedingly difficult. A novel—Jane Eyre or A la recherche du temps perdu—may closely resemble an autobiography, and what distinguishes them may have little in common with what distinguishes a lyric poem from a song. Given the historical variations in what has counted as literature and the similarities between literary and closely related nonliterary forms, it is not entirely surprising that, as Northrop Frye concludes, "We have no real standards to distinguish a verbal structure that is literary from one that is not . . . " (11). Research in the theory of literature has analyzed many structures characteristic of literary works, but instead of uncovering defining qualities, it focuses attention on important aspects of literature and orient literary studies toward analysis of them.

Wellek and Warren called literary theory "an organ of methods" for literary study, but even that definition has grown too narrow. Today the writings that the academic profession calls "literary theory" range far beyond questions of critical and interpretive method. T. S. Eliot, de Saussure, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Lucie Ingrain, Frantz Fanon, Jürgen Habermas, Clibert Geertz, Erving Goffman, Nancy Chodorow are none of them theorists of literature, though their writings unusually belong to "theory," as it is called. Then, what is theory? Literary studies people have come to speak of taking or teaching a "theory course," of being interested in or hostile to theory, or of working in theory, without further specification (theory of what?). Theory in this sense is not a set of methods for literary study but an unbounded corpus of writing about everything under the sun, from the most technical problems of academic philosophy to the body, its relations to medical and ethical discourses. Jacques Derrida calls the concept of theory a "purely North American artefact," which takes on sense only from its place of emergence: in certain departments of literature" ("Statements" 71). The genre of theory includes works of anthropology, art history, gender studies, linguistics, philosophy, political theory, psychoanalysis, social and intellectual history, and sociology. Its works are tried to argue in these fields, but they become theory because their visions or arguments have been suggestive or productive for people not working primarily or professionally in these disciplines.

The philosopher Richard Rorty gives this protein genre an illuminating pedagogic: "Beginning in the days of Goethe and Macaulay and Carlyle and Emerson, a new kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual philosophy, nor epistemology, nor social prophecy, but all these things mingled together into a new genre" (Consequences 66). The most convenient designation of this miscellaneous genre is simply the nickname theory, which has come to designate works that succeed in challenging and altering thinking in domains other than those to which they ostensibly belong because their analyses of language, mind, identity, or culture offer novel and persuasive accounts of significance, works that shape the future and perhaps persuade students to conceive of their own thinking and the institutions to which it relates in new ways. Though these writings may relate on familiar techniques of demonstration and argument, their
force comes not from the accepted procedures of a particular discipline (whether Lacan's work commands the assent of psychoanalysts or Foucault's that of other historians is secondary here) but from the persuasive novelty of its redescptions or reconceptions. When, for example, Foucault maintains that what has generally been interpreted as a nineteenth-century repression of sexuality is in fact part of an incitement to discourse that seems to make sexuality the secret of the individuality of the individual, this hypothesis does not just make possible readings of nineteenth-century novels and other writings of the period; it stimulates a general reconsideration of the relation of sexuality, discourse, and social control. When Derrida's Of Grammatology argues that classic discussions of language set writing aside as a supplement (a representation of a representation) because it exaggerates basic yet troubling features of language in general, which are relegated to the periphery in order to create a conception of language and as functioning based on an idealized model of speech, his argument not only reframes thinking about speech and writing but provides a powerful general model of the relation between terms of the hierarchical oppositions that structure much of our thought. When Laura Mulvey's pioneering article of feminist film theory, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," shows how the cinema reproduces male voyeurism, making women an object observed rather than an observer, this provokes not only controversy about what sort of cinematic cases are described (a particular tradition of narrative cinema, a range of cinematic genres, or the cinematic apparatus itself?) but also a questioning of the nature and effects of representation in other media as well, including literature. Or, in the theoretical project that starts from literary representations, when Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in Between men studies what she calls "male homosexual desire" in English literature, describing a continuum of male-male relationships or male bonding (male friendship, mentorship, rivalry, competition for women) ranging from the homosexual to the homophobic, she encourages both literary and nonliterary scholars to study the relations between attitudes they had not previously thought related and the role of the historically contingent forms of male homosexual desire in the power relations that organize the lives of men and women.

Theory is not theory of literature, but it relates to literature in several ways. Since literature takes as its province not just all human experience—the articulating, ordering, and interpreting of experience—but the incoherences and impossibilities of experience as well, any compelling theoretical discourse will have some potential relation either to literature as institution and practice (the making or unmaking of meaning) or to matters treated in literature. Since literature analyzes the relations between men and women; the most common and pleasurable manifestations of the human psyche; the effects of material conditions, social organization, and political power on individual and collective experience; and the human and inhuman dimensions of the play of language and representation, the theoretical writings that most powerfully and insightfully explore such matters will have a bearing on the workings of literature. The very comprehensiveness of literature draws theoretical discourses from other fields into theory. Or, as Leslie Fiedler wrote in 1950, when theory in this sense was scarcely imagined, "Literary criticism is always becoming 'something else,' for the simple reason that literature is always 'something else'" (564).

Theory might, then, appear to mean philosophical, psychoanalytical, historical, political, or anthropological theory that provides frameworks for the interpretation of literature. In the Anatomy of Criticism, one of the first attempts in North America to give a theoretical account of the domain of literary studies, one confronted against the use of theoretical frameworks and categories from other disciplines, fearing that literary works would be reduced to manifestations of something nonsensical. But, in fact, one of the features shared by many works treated as theory is their discovery of the "literariness" of nonliterary phenomena.

To psychoanalysis, for example, Lacan's argument that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (Evin 234) and the retractions of Freud undertaken by Jacques Derrida, Shoshana Felman, Samuel Weber, and others, stressing the role of verbal connections and wordplay, the importance, in the functioning of the psyche, of a logic of signification that is most clearly observed in literary discourse. Philosophical inquiry has postulated the inaccessibility of figurative language and rhetorical structures thought to be especially characteristic of literature; even the philosophical attempt to separate the literal from the figurative depends on concepts, such as "clarity" and "directness," that are themselves scarcely free from metaphorical qualities. In anthropology Claude Lévi-Strauss identified a "logic of the concrete" at work in myths as well as in forms of social organization; the totality of the totemic systems are selected not because of their economic significance but because they are "good to think with," lending themselves to the construction of the powerful thematic polarities through which literary works characteristically organize the world—inner versus outer, day versus night, terrestrial versus celestial, and so on. Or, again, discussions of the character of historical understanding have probably focused on what is involved in understanding a story, thus taking literary narrative as the model for historical intelligibility. Hayden White argues, for example, that to describe historical narratives we must consider them as verbal fictions, whose explanatory effects depend on operations of emplotment: "By emplotment I mean simply the recollation of facts contained in chronicle as components of specific kinds of plots, in preciseterm the Northrop Frye has suggested is the case with fictions in general" (83). These discourses, in short, make literatures not simply a property of poetry, prose, and novels but a set of semiotic mechanisms that can be studied by analysis from many different domains. Critics' interest in theoretical discourses drawn from other fields has not, as Frye and others feared, led to a takeover of literary studies by linguistics, philosophy, or psychoanalysis; instead, a loose interdisciplinary has emerged that might be conceived as an expanded rhetoric: a study of signifying structures and strategies, in their relation to systems of signification and to human subjects.

The multifariousness of theory has another aspect as well. As scholars and critics trained in literary studies engaged with theoretical writings from other
disciplines, they discovered that literary modes of interpretation could enrich and complicate the discourses on which they were drawing. Consequently, these scholars began to read philosophical texts, psychoanalytic case histories, and historical documents with the attention and resourcefulness hitherto reserved for fictional and poetic writing, and their work has ever since come to constitute interventions in these other fields. In fact, theory courses and research projects developed in literary departments may not have the elucidation of literature as their goal at all, but may aim to show, for instance, how conceptions of the body in the Renaissance support the discourse of state power, or how images of the machine affect the discourse of the caring professions, or how structures of imperialism and colonialism affect the ways in which the national identity of colonial powers is perceived. Students of law and anthropology, but also of history, music, classics, and even occasionally history and psychoanalysis, have increasingly taken note of developments in what literary critics call theory and have sometimes turned to it for stimulation. Barry claims that in England and the United States literary studies have come to play the central cultural role that philosophy once played but has lost because of "the Kantian and anti-historicist tenor of Anglo-Saxon philosophy" (Philosophy 168), but in fact theory in literary studies is more diverse in its concerns than philosophy has been, at least in modern times.

The very expansion and diversification of theory has, though, produced resistance. The most intimidating feature of theory in the 1980s and 1990s is that it is endless: an unbound corpus of writings that is always being augmented as the young and the restless, in critiques of the guiding conceptions of their elders, promote and exploit the possible contributions to theory of new thinkers and rediscover the work of older, neglected ones. Theory can seem obscurantist, even terrorist, in its resources for endless upstaging: "What haven't you read Lacan? How can you talk about the lyric without addressing the specular constitution of the speaking subject?" Or: "How can you write about the Victorian novel without using Foucault's account of the deployment of sexuality and the hybridization of women's bodies and Gayatri Spivak's demonstration of the role of colonialism in the construction of the metropolitan subject?" At times, theory presents itself as a diabolical sentence to which everything is less relevant than the phenomena of conscious life may be produced by unconscious forces whose logic requires analysis. Reconstruction characteristically shows that the hierarchical oppositions that structure everyday living and behavior are not normal and inevitable but are constructions, ideological impositions—demonstrating this in a work of deconstruction that seeks to dispel these oppositions. Feminism undertakes a critique of supposedly natural gender and sexual relations, which define woman in relation to man, and an exposure of the sexual assignations that have played a role in organizing every domain of social and intellectual life; exposing nature as culture is the first step in attempting to change culture. The studies gathered under the rubric "new historicism" generally attempt both to demonstrate the historically contingent character of modern ways of thinking by
displaying, through striking historical documents and discourses, the otherness of other ages, and to show the frequently unexpected political valences of discursive practices of all sorts by analyzing the role of these discourses in processes of subversion and containment. A major task of ethnographic studies is to reconstruct different versions of history and culture, exposing the limitations of "white" concepts of the world, which take in natural the marginalization of other peoples—a conception of which the idea of ethnic studies itself, as the study of the cultures of only non-white or non-Indo-European peoples, is a primary example.

But if the critique of the natural is a common denominator of much recent theory, it can neither be its goal nor its achievement. In contexts where certain values or modes of thought or behavior are cited in natural, the exposure of their contingent, historical character can have a significant critical effect, but the scheme loses much of its power once it is accepted. What follows, after all, from the fact that the practices or concepts of a culture are cultural rather than natural? Nothing at all. Questions about their effects or implications, their desirability, the possibility of changing them, and the efficacy of particular ways of understanding or containing them remain open and are variously addressed by different theoretical enterprises. Thus, inimitable debate on the advisability, within various political and intellectual contexts, of putting anything like woman's nature and consider the weight to put on women's "experience." New historianist and cultural materialist studies explore the possibility of avoiding complicity with the hegemonic discourses of knowledge and power that they seek to analyze. Theoretical writings engaged with psychoanalysis, a discourse whose authority seems linked to its implicit concerns with the "nature" of "man" and possibly women, find themselves pressed to negotiate, for instance, the relation between the cultural construction of identity and the stubborn failure of those constructions (our failure to become, unhappily, unproblematically, "men" and "women"), without appealing to nature as if it were a solution. In general, critiques of the natural raise questions about the relation between deconstructing analyses of "false consciousness" and the appeal to the experience of individuals. Accounts of the connectedness of historical character of the social body, for instance, must be placed in some relation to invocations of bodily experience, such as those pervasive in literary works.

The diverse challenges to ideas of the natural are not literary theory, in the sense of a theory of literature, but are certainly pertinent to literature, which serves as a major site for constructing and contesting the natural, for appropriating the everyday world, for integrating that world into discourse, and for celebrating, criticizing, and, in principle, displaying it as a discursive construction. Since the most general subject of the novel, for instance, is how the world is given meaning and how these meanings are variously challenged and since the lyric, characteristically explores both the content of significance in personal experience and the power of language to suture experience, literature is a space that offers special opportunities for observing the construction of the natural and its exposure as a construction and thus for reflecting on the significance of both the processes of construction and the act of critical analysis.

The expansion of theory and especially of its role as the site of generality—to have general significance—to be a theoretical ground with the problem of universality. Theoretical writings characteristically address such questions as the nature of "the subject" and the relation of literature to power or to speech in writing or of gender, race, and class to modes of representation. Even though a critic or theorist may be working on an issue as it emerges in certain texts of a particular time and place, the theoretical imperative encourages a rhetoric of generality if not universality. This is nothing new in literary studies, of course. The very notion of the "human," and traditional conceptions of literature as investigations of the nature of "man" have steeped literary criticism in a rhetoric of universality, but as that sort of claim to universality has been questioned, especially by theoretical writings themselves, the discourse of theory has taken on much of the universalizing rhetoric, particularly as it has become the locus of generality for literary studies. As Barbara Johnson writes, "The problem with theory is that it is appropriated by dominant groups to undermine their own particularity as if it stood for universality." (350). Until recently, theory has been a discourse deployed largely by white males who characteristically take themselves as unmarked subjects, presuming the universality of the most comprehensive visions they can attain. The resistibly blatant combination, in Enlightenment thought, of the universalizing celebration of "man" and the denigration of blacks and other nonwhite races as fundamentally inferior, barely human, marks the provenance of even the most advanced and apparently self-critical members of a dominant group to take its own race, sex, class, culture, and experience as normative.

Arguments about the status and value of theory have been especially charged in the debates about African American literary studies. Some critics see the use of theory as an attempt to white, especially white males, to retain the power to adjudicate other enterprises in literary and cultural studies, so that African Americans and others must reject "white" theory to escape domination. Barbara T. Christian writes:

I see the language it creates as one which mystifies rather than clarifies our condition, making it possible for a few people who think that particular language to control the critical scene—that language, necessarily, sovereignly enough, just when the literatures of peoples of color, of Black women, of Latin Americans, of Africans began to move to the center.

(358)

Other critics assert the importance of the theoretical enterprise in developing the mode of black writing, defining it as distinctiveness, and articulating its relation to European traditions of writing, criticism, and thought generally. To the question, "From whence does a truly empowering and comprehensive criticism of Afro-American expressive cultural develop?" Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Patricia
Redmond respond that theory is "a ground on which Afro-Americans can meet. . . . It is an active site that gives birth to expanded notions of the nature and function of Afro-American expressive cultural criticism" (225, 227). Rather than reject theory as the white man's colonizing discourse, critics of black literature may find that theory helps them define their own differences—from one another as well as from the models and assumptions that have governed white criticism. In the process, they develop their own theoretical perspectives and initiatives, which also intervene in the world of white literary criticism.

Adapting theoretical discourses to illuminate black writing and criticism may complicate or modify the original theoretical frameworks by showing how the workings of this double-sided African American tradition bear on concepts used to discuss dominant European and American traditions and by thus contesting the hegemonic assumptions of Eurocentric conceptions of literature.

In The Signifying Monkey, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., links the problem of signification—a central issue in American and European theory of the past century—to the trickster figure of African American folklore. Gates writes that he hopes to have "located within the African and Afro-American traditions a system of rhetoric and interpretation that could be drawn on both as figures for a genuinely 'Black' criticism and as frameworks through which [one] could interpret, or 'read,' theories of contemporary literary criticism" (ix). The way texts of African American literature "signify upon" one another provides a general model of topological relations among texts, of intertextuality, which can be tested on other literary traditions as well. The goal, as Gates explains, is both to analyze black writing as effectively as possible and "to create something that is validly 'African' as contemporary literary theory" ("Race" 405; see also Gates in this volume).

Analogous enterprises in Chicano studies, Ramón Saldivar's Chicano Narrative and the The Dialectics of Difference, explore both Chicano narratives express the world they represent as the product of fictive and ideological operations. Such analysis, Saldivar argues, does not describe a particular literary tradition but reveals what has been left unexamined in canonical American literature—what these canonical writers have taken for granted about the world they represent. Thus the dialectical strategies of Chicano narrative call for critics to reconceive and restructure the major theories of American literature and culture, which have been based on exclusions. Saldivour presents theory as a discourse that, through it comes from positions of dominance, can be a powerful arm against the unexamined conceptions of that dominant tradition. A more precise delineation of universalizing claims is a project of current work in theory.

In fact, some criticism of theory's capacity to universalizing claims might be more pertinently considered as a debate within theory about the particularity or generalness of certain problems: Is there such a thing as "language in general," or are there only particular languages? What is the relation between transhistorical psychoanalytical claims about the subject and historicist or Marxist claims about the construction of the subject in particular historical circumstances? Do not the historian or Marxist claims also rely on some theory of the constitution of subjects in general? When feminist theorists criticize Marxism's failure to take oppression of women seriously or to explain why that oppression persists through a series of supposedly different historical stages, critics of black literature may find that theory helps them define their own differences—from one another as well as from the models and assumptions that have governed white criticism. In the process, they develop their own theoretical perspectives and initiatives, which also intervene in the world of white literary criticism.

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false universalism of theory, a critique that exposes the fiction of universality as a fictional construction.

The complaint—heard more often outside the academy than within—that critiques of the presumed universality of the white male Western subject, along with other presumed universals such as absolute value and objective truth, leave us in a world of relativism where "anything goes" is frequently accompanied by calls for a return to notions of absolute value, objectivity, and the neutral philosophical subject, as though these were the alternatives to chaos. But, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith writes in a scrupulous study of these matters, the assumption that nonobjective thought or discourse is ineffective and leads to chaos is highly dubious:

"[T]he power, richness, subtlety, flexibility, and communicative effectiveness of a nonobjectivist idea—for example, formulative recommendations that do not cite intrinsic value, or justice, accorded in such that its contingent conditions and likely outcomes rather than fundamental rights and objective facts—are characteristic underevaluated by those who have never learned to speak it or tried to use it in interactions with, among others, real politicians, peasants, and philosophers." (Smith 158)

Moreover, it is not that there are new dangers to which critiques of universality supposedly make us vulnerable; what we are said to be threatened with are precisely the sorts of things that have occurred in a world that purportedly believes in transcendental values and objective truths (and that often have occurred, indeed, as a consequence of some single-minded vision of the true or the good). As Smith notes, "the theoretical dominance and widespread affliction of objectivist thought" have obviously not prevented the death camps, the Gulag, and all the other evils it is supposed to defend against (154). We do appear to live in a world where "anything goes," in the specific sense that no transcendental principles prevent it, and any attempt to persuade or dissuade others by analyzing or describing must offer reasons relevant to the particular circumstances in which participants find themselves. Even when argument and analysis do involve the invocation of fundamental rights or transcendental values, this can only work if the interlocution see its pertinence. Attacks on relativism, frequent in popular condemnation of theory, reveal the sort of imaginary argument used to "draw men," such as the supposed belief that all thoughts, ideas, and texts are equal value, missing the point that value is, specifically, relative to purposes and circumstances, which may be very general and widespread as well as local and particular. These attacks also fail to describe how justification, correction, and argumentation actually work in the world of discourse.

The success of theory has spawned, predictably, "anthropology theory," which has sometimes been called the "new pragmatism," an argument about the imposibility and irrelevance of theory. Theory, the argument goes in Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels's "Against Theory," is based on the mistaken belief in a distinction between theory and practice. Theory is impossible because one can never get outside of practice to produce a discourse that would be something other than practice. Theory is in itself a practical project. Of the rigorous distinction between theory and practice is scarcely a concession at odds with recent theory. One of the continuing contentions of the sorts of theory labeled "poststructuralism"—possibly the only claim by which poststructuralism can be identified and distinguished—has been that theories are caught up in and affected by the phenomena they claim to theorize. A theoretical account of political forces is itself also part of that field of forces, a political event or intervention; a philosophical theory of metaphor does not escape metaphoricity. According to Lacan, "there is no metalinguage," in that any metalinguistic statement is also language, structured by the very unconscious processes and operating mechanisms it seeks to describe. For Foucault, the transcription and reproduction at work in Freud's theories of transference and repression, far from invalidating the theoretical activity, are a confirmation that Freud is on the right track. In any event, the fact that theoretical reflection is a form of practice is merely an argument against it.

Although Knapp and Michaels maintain that their own theoretical argument against theory has no consequences, in fact it would substitute what they call "beliefs" for what is now considered theoretical argument. We have beliefs, they declare, that help us determine what is relevant, what to look for, how to proceed, and there is nothing "deeper" than belief. Beliefs, they insist, do not have grounds, do not have to be justified. It is just what we believe, and when we change our beliefs, it is just because we have come to believe something different. "Beliefs cannot be grounded in some deeper condition of knowledge" (738).

This might be true for such beliefs as religious beliefs, but the various beliefs that function as principles, criteria, and premises in people's work on literature most probably belong to a structure of knowledge and argumentation. The "beliefs," for instance, that unity in principal criteria for excellence in a work of art, that the history of the work's reception is a key to its significance, and that we should attend to the representation or nonrepresentation of knowledge in any discourse are not being studied or grounded in demonstrable truths, but they are not groundless either; they are connected with a history of knowledge and reflection, which is the realm we have come to call theory.

Anthropology theory starts from the recognition, promoted by recent theoretical argument, that in reflecting on our assumptions, interests or purposes, language, mental operations, or subject position, we cannot render these things transparent or get outside them: but that is no reason to abandon attempts at theoretical reflection and argument, since the world of theoretical discussion is above all one in which the writings and arguments of others enable us to perceive...
and to modify aspects of our own position and procedures that we could not grasp through self-reflection. The necessary incompleteness of self-reflection does not mean that theoretical reflection and discussion should cease. If theory is the domain of questions about how people study texts and why they proceed as they do, of reflections on the assumptions, categories, methodological frameworks, and procedures employed in analyses of discourse of various sorts, then it is difficult to oppose it, except by gaining that there is in some places a disproportion between theoretical reflection and analysis of a particular text or discourse. But, in fact, what makes criticism seem so theoretical these days is precisely the difficulty of separating theory from practice so as to expand one and reduce the other. Theoretical categories are not simply tools which serve the culture of a period and as a semiotic system that must be reconstructed in anthropological fashion; Foucaultian "archaeology of discursive practices," which studies the way discourses of knowledge and the institutional practices associated with them create the objects they describe and restructure the network of power relations in a society; the study of the discourses of colonialism and decolonization or postcoloniality, which takes up issues familiar to students of Western literature and criticism but in new contexts that cast a different light on the construction of subjects, their relations to languages—local and metropolitan—and the effects of those relations on possibilities of thought and action, on the complexities of any discourse with the power that supports it, and on problems of the incommensurability of languages and cultures.

A list of this sort should not be taken to suggest that there are delimited and defined "schools" here or that a piece of criticism or theory could be assigned to one category rather than another. Such a list is best seen as a way of naming positions that are constructed or adopted in argument and of indicating some of the influences that produce the questions and disagreements that animate the field. What these contextualizing discourses share is an investment in references to concrete, "particular," "specific," "historical" circumstances, configurations, and practices—a theoretic of particularity that they deploy in arguments about various texts, whether one can or should attempt to grasp the historical processes of a society as a whole, in a "totalizing" vision, from a single analytical standpoint; whether works of art can exercise subversive force or whether they are always co-opted by systems of power and perspectives of order; whether sites of marginality are exemplary and strategic or whether the celebration of those positions by authors engaged in critical and theoretical discourse is an imperialistic power play in the game of criticism; and whether it is appropriate to distinguish cultural and institutional superstructures from economic base and set them in a relation of causation or reflection.

 Anything worthy of being called a school will no doubt prove, on inspection, to be, rather, a contested interaction of converging projects and practices. Moreover, people engaged in literary studies generally do not want to "do" Marxist or deconstructive or psychoanalytic criticism to the exclusion of other years, discussed in Annabel Patterson's essay in this volume, is a particularly lively area of debate because of the clash and interaction of aggressive forms of contextualism: British "cultural materialism," defined by Raymond Williams as "the analysis of all forms of signification, including--quite centrally writing, within the actual means and conditions of their production" (120); other versions of Marxism, which insist on a distinction between culture as superstructure on the one hand and the social and economic forces of the material base on the other; American new historicism, which is less inclined, as a Catherine Clough Geoc Kirby explains, to posit a "fixed hierarchy of cause and effect" as it traces "connections among texts, discourses, power, and the constitution of subjectivity" (Veeser 37); "thick description," in the phrase of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, that, when established, can be put to practical use. On the contrary, those who study literature and the other discourses with which it is engaged find the categories put into question or modified by the operation of the discourses they are being used to criticize. In a word, the discussion of literary theory takes place in and by means of the very discourses it seeks to understand and illuminate. Theoretical categories are not simply tools which serve the culture of a period and as a semiotic system that must be reconstructed in anthropological fashion; Foucaultian "archaeology of discursive practices," which studies the way discourses of knowledge and the institutional practices associated with them create the objects they describe and restructure the network of power relations in a society; the study of the discourses of colonialism and decolonization or postcoloniality, which takes up issues familiar to students of Western literature and criticism but in new contexts that cast a different light on the construction of subjects, their relations to languages—local and metropolitan—and the effects of those relations on possibilities of thought and action, on the complexities of any discourse with the power that supports it, and on problems of the incommensurability of languages and cultures.
modes but characteristically attempt to find ways of synthesizing, negotiating relations, drawing on diverse insights. Considering the "state of the field," Derrida notes that "each species...constitutes its own identity only by incorporating other identities—by contamination, parasitism, grafts, organ transplants, incorporation, etc." ("Statements" 66). Seeking to deal with aspects or elements of texts (such as figure, rhetoric, gender, race, class, history, the unconscious) emphasized by other theoretical orientations, critics are led to take on and transform concepts from apparently competing discourses. Since the general theoretical imperative seems to be, Do not leave some aspect of the problem unthinked or your flank unguarded, critics have a powerful incentive to find ways to deal with or at least to integrate the questions that psychoanalysis or feminism or denunciation or deconstruction or historicalization raises. Thus, the best way to describe the confounding of these contemporaries may not be as a set of competing schools or methods but as discussions of problems or issues that people are striving to cope with or resolve. This has the disadvantage of making criticism seem less quarrrelsome than it is, but we too easily assume that theorists disagree because one is a "Marxist" and the other a "psychoanalytic critic." By bypassing these labels forces us to look more closely at the extent to which critics are saying similar things in different vocabularies and the extent to which they genuinely disagree. I take up six issues that seem particularly important.

RELATIONS BETWEEN ANALYTICAL CATEGORIES

The first general problem is the relation between psychic (or psychoanalytical), linguistic, and sociocultural categories. Can one set of terms be mapped onto another, and if so, how? Is one set reducible to another? Which is "more basic?" Or is the language of depth and foundation part of the problem? Much of the appeal of psychoanalysis may lie in the presupposition that it goes "deeper" than other theories, uncovering the most fundamental, hidden structures, relations constitutive of sexual identity. Historicizing and contextualizing theories frequently stake a good deal on their appeal to history as the ultimate reality. "History is what hurts," writes Fredric Jameson (Political Unconscious 102), although it is only fair to point out that history is also what does not hurt; what hurts (like those who have power) just has a better chance of making it into a historical narrative than what doesn't hurt. The most self-reflexive contextualizing approaches demonstrate, however, that context is more text, which requires interpretation in the same way as the text one hopes to interpret by contextualizing it, so that reference to history does not escape or get "below" signifying mechanisms. Moreover, the historicizing concentration on the "local," the "particular," or the "concrete" or on "specific" practices or logics relies on a figurative operation, a logic of synecdoche, by which the particular in its most concrete particularity is changed with the greatest significance. The result of the arguments so far, it seems, has been to confirm the difficulty of sustaining the priority of one or another set of terms. On the one hand, language, gender, class, race, and the subject seem to be historical entities, susceptible to historical analysis. On the other, the faculties of the mind are the transhistorical conditions of possibility of any history we could conceive, and any particular history that analysis might appeal to or treat as basic proves to be a narrative and rhetorical construction. Of course, one might say that language, "mind, gender, race, and history are not alternatives; we are ineluctably both in language and in history. But, it appears, can we escape being identified as gendered subjects or placed in some race, however defined. These are not alternatives among which one can choose, even if a process of analysis must seem to assign priority in configurations that are historically and socially possible.

Hopes for synthesis, or at least for the discovery of meeting ground, do frequently arise here, and recently theorists have been the terrain of choice, since it is both the analysis of language and discursive resources and the study of social uses and effects of language, contextually embedded possibilities of persuasion. Theories of history, from Giambrutti Vico to W. B. Gallie, Hayden White, and H. Kellner, have found in rhetorical and narrative structures the resources for understanding what history is; and psychoanalysis, in Freud, Lacan, and their successors, uses a rhetorical vocabulary to characterize the operation of the psyche, to rhetorical seems a possible medium of encounter. When two theorists such as Paul de Man and Terry Eagleton place literary studies within a general rhetoric, this may be a sign of a possible convergence or else of possibilities for gross misunderstanding.

"PROGRESSIVE" CRITICISM

A second major focus has been the desire of many critics and theorists to make literary and cultural criticism politically progressive. This desire has stimulated work on noncanonical writings, especially those by members of groups that have been oppressed by or within Western cultures, but it does not stop with discussion of writings whose elaboration might contribute to more visible liberation. Since the wish to make criticism politically progressive accompaniments a growing sophistication about the ways in which any supposedly oppositional practice becomes part of the system it purports to oppose and may thus work to reinforce that system, the task of finding a way to be politically radical in criticism is not easy. By far the most popular way to make one's critical activity politically "correct" is by attacking other critics for failing to be politically progressive. Evaluating the progressives of critical and theoretical projects is, of course, a matter of considerable difficulty, even with the most celebrated works of the past where we seem to have to the 1c-ord of hindsight. Was Kant or Freud progressive or regressive? One can frequently identify certain disciplinary or conceptual levels at which innovative writings challenge received ideas and transform discursive practices, but just as surely, one can find other levels at which the
transformation of a discursive practice might amount to an evasion of radical political activity.

One virtue of Ernesto Laclau and Charitak Mouffe's Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, which has energized this region of theoretical debate, is that it addresses the issue of a radical politics in terms that avoid the assumptions of what is or is not radical. No set of concepts has a fixed political valency, but each is open to appropriation and reinterpretation in the process of constructing linkages and alliances that constitute political life. Politics is the realm where there are no guarantees. And the freedom and responsibility of the subject as agent lie in the possibilities of construction created by the indeterminacy of institutional and signifying structures. It is precisely because polemical values and political consequences are not predictable in advance, that practice is a space of action.

The desire for a theory that guarantees political radicalism and, ideally, political effectiveness has been strong in recent years—it is among the most powerful forces driving theoretical argument. The pursuit of this goal creates a danger that criteria of political correctness—which are the point to emphasize—are often only tenuously linked to the actual political effects of different ways of writing and thinking about literature and culture may sometimes play a dominant role in debate, as the standard by which any analysis is to be judged. Whatever directions the radical new criticism and theory of the 1990s take, it is likely that their political effects will be characteristically unpredictable, not determined by their relation to some standard of political correctness.

IDENTITY AND THE SUBJECT

The fourth topic of debate, noted above in the discussion of universality, involves a number of questions: What is the relation between critiques of essentialist conceptions of identity (of a person or group) and the psychic and political demands for identity? How do the urgencies of emancipatory politics conflict with or engender psychoanalytic and poststructuralist critiques of the subject's identity? In what terms should critics and theorists seek to define women's writing or Chicano literature, for example? The question of identity of the subject becomes a major theoretical as well as practical issue because the problems encountered seem rather similar, whether the groups involved are defined by nationality, race, gender, sexual preference, language, class, or religion. On the one hand, critical investigations of issues of identity demonstrate the illegitimacy of taking certain traits, such as sexual orientation, gender, or visible morphological characteristics, as essentially defining features of group identity, and these investigations refute the imputation of essential identity to all members of a group characterized by gender, class, race, religion, or nationality. On the other hand, identities imposed on marginalized groups may, in turn, become resources for that group. Foucault notes that the development of medical and psychiatric discourses defining homosexuality as an essentially deviant class in the
nineteenth century, while facilitating the imposition of social controls, also made possible "the formation of a 'reverse' discourse. Homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified." (History 101)

These two questions—the critique of essentializing definitions and the celebration of the distinctiveness and identity of the group—frequently coexist, though not without considerable tension. The strategic and theoretical situation becomes complicated, however, when the ascription of identity that is supposed to energize a group seems, to some who are supposed to be included, to neglect or deny many of their own characteristics or most urgent problems. Black feminists have noted that feminist discussions of women may bear little relation to the concerns of black women, and Third World women have objected to conceptions of women constructed by middle-class white Western intellectuals. Christian maintains that the Black Arts movement, in asserting a black identity, in effect legislated one way to be black. "Writers were told," for instance, "that writing love poems was not being Black." (58)

But it is a coincidence that just when women, blacks, Chicanos, gays, lesbians, and members of other groups marginalized in American and Western European societies began to assert an identity, to present themselves as subjects, white male theory argues that there is no subject, or rather that the subject is a discursive effect and product of a metacreation? Having designated other races for years, whites really—just when other races are developing racial identity and racial pride—that race is a delusive trope, a dangerous fiction. Baker observes, "Hence race, as a recently emergent, unifying, and forceful sign of difference in the sense of the 'Other,' is held up to scientific ridicule as, ironically, 'ethnocentric.' A broadly emergent sense of ethnic diversity in the service of new world arrangements is disparaged by whitemale science as the most foolish sort of anachronism" (385). It may be true, however, that reflection on the imperfect constructiveness of identity does not so much counter the claim to identity by historically oppressed groups as encourage the postulation of identities by emphasizing that the identities hitherto foisted on groups were not natural and inevitable. If so, then the critique of identity may be less a play of domination than a contribution to the politicization of identity and a contribution also to possibilities of resistance to the identities leaders construct for those they would lead. Certainly the continuing argument about the power and dangers of essentializing conceptions of racial, sexual, gender, and national identity promises to influence the various shapes theory takes in the foreseeable future.

It seems increasingly unlikely that any single solution to this problem will emerge, for work in a number of different fields—Marxism, psychoanalysis, film theory, cultural studies, feminisms, and lesbian studies, the study of colonial and postcolonial discourse, for instance—has revealed difficulties that seem structurally similar. We find something like a common mechanism whether, with Louis Althusser, we say that a person is "culturally interpellated" or hailed as a subject, made a subject by being addressed as the occupant of a certain position or role; whether, we stress, with psychoanalysis, the role of a "mirror stage" in which subjects acquire identity by misrecognizing themselves in an image; whether, with Stuart Hall, we define identities as "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (70); whether, we follow film theory in analyzing the way in which a subject position—that of the viewer—is produced by the "dramaturgy" of gaps between what is represented so as to enable us to imagine a position and condition that can never be shown by the camera; or whether we stress, as in studies of colonial and postcolonial subjectivity, the construction of a divided subject through the clash of contradictory discourses and demands. The process of identity formation involves not only foregrounding some differences and neglecting others but taking an interest in difference or division and projecting it as a difference between individuals or groups, as when the construction of "male" identity treats some traits shared by men and women as constitutive differences between men and women. Work in a range of fields seems to be converging in its investigation of the ways in which subjects are produced by unwarrented, though perhaps inevitable, posturing of unity and identity—posturings that may be strategically empowering but that also create gaps between the identity or role attributed to individuals and the varied positions and positions of their lives.

One source of confusion here is an assumption that often seems to structure debate: that challenges to the identity of the subject somehow foreclose the possibility of agency, of responsible action. A simple answer might be that critics who demand more stress on agency want theories to work that deliberate actions will change the world, and these critics are frustrated by the very conditions that theories are attempting to describe—a world where acts are more likely to have unintended than intended consequences and where intentions themselves are products to be analyzed. But this simple answer should be supplemented by two others. First, as Judith Butler explains, "the reconceptualization of identity as a process, that is, as produced or generated, opens up possibilities of 'agency' that are misjudged for roles that take identity categories as foundational and fixed" (147). If identity is an effect, of subject positions and of actions, then to act is to take on a role, not to correspond to it. Butler, writing of gender identities that are constructed and of gender as a performance or an act, locates agency in the variations of action, the possibilities of variation in repetition that carry meaning and create identity.

Moreover, various traditional constructions of the subject work to limit responsibility and thus agency, to make it possible to abdicate responsibility. For example, equating the subject with consciousness (and excluding from the realm of the subject both the unconscious and the partial/social subject occupied) would make it possible for agents to claim innocence, to deny responsibility whenever they had not consciously chosen or intended the consequences of actions they had committed—a dubious and self-interested limitation of respon-
sibility. Emphasis on the structures of the unconscious or on positions ("subject positions") one occupies without choosing them or being aware of them (emphasis produced by the critique of notions of a self-possessed or self-identical subject) calls one to responsibility for events and structures—of racism, sexism, and oppression, for instance—that one did not explicitly intend. The critique of the subject thus combats the restriction of agency and responsibility derived from particular conceptions of the subject.

Kwanne Anthony Appiah notes that "the whole debate over structure and agency has tended to suppress an opposition between them" but that they represent different levels of theory, which compete not for causal but for narrative space (74). A discourse of agency flows from our concern to live intelligible lives among other people, to whom we ascribe beliefs and intentions. A discourse of structure, of subject positions, comes from our interest in understanding social and historical processes, in which individuals figure as socially determined. Some of the fiercest conflicts in contemporary theory are when narratives about individuals as agents and narratives about the power of social and discursive structures are seen as competing causal explanations. In studies of colonial discourse there has been heated debate about the agency of the "subaltern" or native (Spivak, "Subalterns"). Some critics, seeking the voice or agency of the native, have stressed acts of resistance to, or compliance with, colonialism, but they are accused of ignoring the most inidious effect of colonialism, its definition of the field of thought and action, which constitutes the native as "native." Others, describing the power of colonial discourse, are accused of denying agency to the subaltern subject. According to Appiah's argument, these different accounts are not in conflict: the natives are still agents, and a language of agency is still appropriate, no matter how much the possibilities of action are defined by the discourse of colonialism, no matter how convincing this narrative of structure and subject positions may be. The accounts belong to different registers, just as do an account of the decisions that led a consumer to buy a new Mazda, on the one hand, and a description of the marketing of Japanese cars in America, and of the workings of international capitalism, on the other. Appiah's point that "there is much to be gained by disconnecting these concepts [subject-position and agency] from each other analytically" (83), by recognizing that they belong to different sorts of narratives, could do much to redirect the energy from these theoretical disputes to questions about how identities are constructed and about the oppressive as well as energizing effects of essentializing tropes of identity.

THE LITERARY AND THE NONLITERARY

Fifth, a good deal of the most interesting work in theory has focused on structures common to literary and nonliterary discourses. Theoretical writings that may be associated with different movements, such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, femin

LITERATURE AND THE AESTHETIC

Finally, an aspect in recent theory is the nature and function of the aesthetic: aesthetic objects, aesthetic experience, aesthetic value. Whereas previously the value of literature had been linked to its embodiment of aesthetic values, which themselves were generally taken for granted, now not only the values themselves but literature's relation to them are subjects of debate. The first argument questions whether the aesthetic is, as both hostile and sympathetic twentieth-century discussions often assume, a realm of special objects and experiences divorced from the rest of the world or whether, as in the conceptions established by Kant, the aesthetic is not, on the contrary, precisely the name of the attempt to find a bridge between the phenomenal and the intelligible, the sensuous and the conceptual (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy). Aesthetic objects, with their union of sensuous form and spiritual content, serve, in this perspective, as potential guarantors of the general possibility of articulating the material and the spiritual.
a world of forces and magnitudes with a world of value. The study of literature has frequently been enlisted in this project, as the interpretation and celebration of these special objects that will make us whole again, restore an organic society, overcome alienation of the material from the spiritual, or give us, in direct concrete experience, a special kind of knowledge.

The second argument, articulated in de Man's Aesthetic Ideology, concerns the extent to which literature promotes or puts in question the aesthetic values attributed to it when it is treated as a major embodiment of the aesthetic. De Man argues that literature, in the sense of the rhetorical character of language revealed by close reading, "involves the writing rather than the affirmation of aesthetic categories" (Resistance 10). For example, the convergence of sound and meaning in literature—a fusion of form and content taken to exemplify aesthetic value—is an effect that language can achieve "but which bears no relationship by analogy or by ontologically grounded imitation, to anything beyond that particular effect. It is...an identifiable trope that operates on the level of the signifier and contains no responsible preoccupation on the nature of the world—despite its powerful potential to create the opposite illusion" (Resistance 10).

Literature itself raises the question of its relation to aesthetic value in various ways: on the one hand, it articulates aesthetic themes and foregrounds relations of form and content; on the other, it offers evidence of the autonomous, mechanical functioning of language, of the uncontrollable figural basis of forms, suggesting that formal structures cannot serve as the basis of reliable cognition and, in some texts, allegorically exposing the violence that lies hidden behind the aesthetic as condition of its realization.

The stakes of this discussion of the aesthetic and its relation to literature are considerable, because, as Eagleton notes, the aesthetic has figured in a varied scheme of precautions: freedom and legibility, spontaneity and necessity, self-determination, autonomy, particularity and universality. The aesthetic is at once...the very secret protean of human subjectivity in early capitalist society, and a vision of human energies as radical ends to themselves which is the implacable enemy of all dominant or instrumentalized thought. (Ideology 3, 9)

Benjamin writes of fascism's effort "to render politics aesthetic" (241), and indeed, the leader's attempt to shape human society to a vision as the artist shapes clay, violently imposing form on matter or the intelligible on the material, takes the aesthetic as its model. Exploring the relations between the aesthetic as the model of unity and the aesthetic as disarticulation of presumed unity—and of the relation of literary works to both conceptions—is a continuing project for various sorts of theory.

But what can we say about the monstrous theoretical enterprise to a student who seeks to become seriously engaged in literary and cultural studies today?

The description of "schools" in the "marketplace of ideas" that is the American university may seem to leave the student in the position of a shopper confronted with shelves of demented and hyperbolic claims about the superior power of each (Cave! Deeper! Handles the toughest jobs! Non-toxic! Perhaps, thus, one chooses randomly and develops brand loyalty, or perhaps, playing the knowing consumer, buys several and tries to pick the right one for the task at hand.

The view that competing discourses are methods of interpretation or ways of approaching literary works takes each as a partial vision, more appropriate to some books than to others. To simplify: Marxist novels about the impact of social and economic organization on personal experience; psychoanalytic novels whose protagonists or authors or authors behave strangely; deconstruction, those concerned with the intricacies and instabilities of language and representation; feminism, those about relations between the sexes or about the condition of women. Such a conception of theory is more widespread than might be imagined from theoretical debates, where it is seldom mentioned. But, in fact, each theoretical discourse claims to have things to say about those works that do not thematically address its explicit preoccupations. One might even maintain that feminist criticism, for example, is especially important for works that ignore feminist issues and that the value of the theoretical orientation is its bringing to light of what is usually misconceived in a particular work.

We might ask, though, whether choice is not something at illusion here, since wherever you start, if you work seriously in the field of theory, you will have to encounter thequestions raised by supposedly different models and reflect on their premises as well as your own. What does this imply for students who might have hoped to choose a theory? And if you do not choose a theory, how do you enter the field, then, since it is vast and impossible to master? Not being to "cover" it—though such a remark may appear daunting in an essay purporting to present the field, in a volume that seeks, precisely, to cover the major activities in the study of language and literature. First of all, there is no "one" here, no universal, unmarked student or reader or subject, confronting an array of theories from a position of neutrality and exteriority. Anyone likely to be reading this essay already has some relation to the discourse of literature and theory, with particular interests and investments—whether as an undergraduate in Asian studies who is thinking about graduate school and wants to find out about the "professional" study of literature as an art or as a small liberal arts college who has come to a university French department with "theory" and who feels a need to understand it; or as a graduate student in English who knows about some "approaches" but not about others. Anyone who asks how to enter the field has most probably already entered it in some way—has already been engaged by some kind of thinking about literature and culture. There are innumerable entries, and you always begin where you are. Either of two general strategies may help you discover where you are. The first is to plunge into a theoretical discourse that seems exceedingly foreign to
your prior concerns, a technique of estrangement that may both raise a host of questions not previously entertained and delimit, from a position of exteriority, your previous assumptions and concerns. The second strategy, by contrast, is to attempt to learn more about those aspects of literature and criticism that attracted you in the first place and to investigate the premises of the studies in which you have some experience. Since theory is initially a reflection on whatever is taken as natural, a questioning of the assumptions on which one proceeds, the way further into theory is a more critical otterization of those conceptions of literature and discourse with which you are already involved. This may come, in particular, from a practice of reading attentive to ways in which texts fail to do what they are said to do, ways in which they resist the imposition of meanings they have been previously given. Close reading that resists repetition of meaning and observes the ways language generates thought will bring encounters with the act of questions that are debated to theoretical texts.

With its open hermeneutics, questioning theory can lead you anywhere, so it is perhaps the most important to ask where you are and what theoretical questions organise the particular region of discourse you are principally engaged with. Useful advice, no doubt, if you ask, "What is happening in my area of literary or cultural studies today?" the answer in this age of theory may well be a contrasting of divisions, the posing of new boundaries, the unearthing of new questions, and the investigation of new configurations of texts. 10

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

For general reading in literary theory, William R. Tyt's fine Literary Meaning: From Phenomenology to Deconstruction focuses on major theorists' treatment of meaning, producing a coherent story of the shifting relations between meaning conceived in an intentional act (of author or reader) and meaning as a textual fact, or property, of the language of the work. Kaja Silverman's The Subject of Semiotics, an impressive synthesis of semiotics, psychoanalytic theory, and film theory that describes the mechanisms of signification and the production of the subject (with special emphasis on sexual difference); it also contains many brief and vivid literary and cinematic examples and can serve as an excellent advanced introduction to poststructuralist theory. Barbara Johnson's succinct, lucid essays in The Critical Difference and A World of Difference, which draw on linguistic, philosophical, and psychoanalytical theory to explore relations among literature, criticism, sexual difference, and race, provide exemplary encounters with many issues in contemporary theory. Terry Eagleton's Literary Theory: An Introduction is a lively overview that, interestingly, omits discussion of the Marxian theory it espouses.

Among the many anthologies of modern theory now available, two of the most judicious and comprehensive selections are Dan Lauring's Contemporary Literary Theory and Eddy Adams and Leroy Scarf's Critical Theory since 1965, which despite its title contains eighteen essays from earlier in the century. Other important collections with more particular focus are Eman Showell et al., The New Feminist Criticism; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Race," Writing, and Difference; Houston Baker and Patricia Redmond, Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s; Gloria N. Hall et al., All the Women Are White . . . ? Black Women's Studies; Shohadera Fawaz, Literature and Psychoanalysis, Andrew Parker et al., Nationalisms and Sexualities; Philip Rosen, Narration, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader; Tony Bennett et al., Culture, Ideology, and Social Process, a reader in cultural studies; Jonathan Dollimore and Allan Stedfall, Postcolonial Shakespeare, which includes a range of examples from British cultural materialism as well as American new historicists; A. Aran Vree, The New Historicism, and Cory Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, the most wide-ranging collection of contemporary Marxist work.

Valuable books on particular theoretical issues include Judith Butler's Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, the most sustained investigation of the problem of identity in contemporary culture, surmounted in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosociality; a study of the varieties of male bonding and their bearing on women that has stimulated work in gay studies and extended the bounds of feminist theory (see also her subsequent Epistemology of the Closet); Gotten's Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism; Barbara Herrnstein Smith's Consequences of Value, the most thorough study of the production of value, evaluation, and relativism; Gerald Graff's Professing Literature, an enthralling history of the organization of and race-mixes for the teaching of English literature in universities in the United States; and Vincent B. Leitch's American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties.

Recommended readings and bibliographies for some topics are provided by other essays in this volume: for feminist theory, see Naomi Schor; for ethnic studies, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., for the intersection of ethnic and women's studies, see Paula Gunn Allen's introductory essay in multicultural studies, see Giles Gunn, for film and cultural studies, see David Bradby for canonicity, see Robert Scholes, for historical criticism, see Annabel Patterson. Reflections on language have been central to contemporary theory. Roy Harris, The Language Makers, while not concerned with literary theory, is a smart, highly original account of the history of thinking about language. Jonathan Culler's Ferdinand de Saussure offers an introductory account of the work of de Saussure, the founder of modern structuralism, and its relation to modern literature, and his Structuralist Poetics gives an overview of the structuralist movement. Roland Barthes's S/Z contains wide-ranging speculations on literature, especially its dependency on codes. Shoshon Rawson-Kenah's Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics is a synthesis of modernist accounts; Wallace Martin's Recent Theories of Narrative surveys particular theories. Stanley Fish's 's There a Text in This Class? is a collection of literary essays that, taken together, 'waste the rise of
reader-response criticism and its fall into the new pragmatism. Robert Holmes's Reception Theory focuses on Jannis Robert Jahn's aesthetics of reception and Wolfgang Iser's work on imaginative reading. In addition to Silvanus Tomm's, The Subject of Semiotics, which describes the relevance of Freud's and Lacan's theories to the analysis of discourse and the subject, Jean Laplanche, Life and Death in Psychoanalysis, is arguably the best incursion into Lacanian thought, perhaps because it is written as a discussion of Freud rather than of Lacan. Malcolm Bowie's Lacan is a fine introduction. Despite its misleading title, Samuel Weber, The Legend of Freud, is an acute investigation of Freud's writings in insightful examples of the mechanisms they analyze. Ned Herne, The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime, which combines psychoanalytic and deconstructive insights with the attention to tears and anxiety of the New Criticism, shows that a critic can achieve great theoretical power with only modest references to theory. Jane Gallo's, The Daughter's Seduction, energetically exploits the feminist attraction to and use of Lacan.

Derrida's essay, a series of interviews, is the easiest of his works. Limited acts focuses on problems of narrating and speech-act theory and concerns a very useful "afterword" that answers common questions. Derrida on Literature is a collection of his writings that examine literature's potential resistance to the aesthetic and social considerations by which it is usually defined. De Man's "Semiology and Rhetoric" and "Return to Philosophy" are useful approaches to his work. Gregory Ulmer's Appliance Grammar treats poststructuralism as a form of postmodern writing. Callier's On Deconstruction. Theory and Criticism after Structuralism takes deconstruction, rather, as a critical and philosophical orientation and seeks to elaborate it as such. The study of Third World literature and colonial and postcolonial discourse has become a major arena of theoretical debate. A useful, with an extensive bibliography, is The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures, edited by Bill Ashcroft. Edward Said's Orientalism, on the construction of the "East" by Western "Orientalists" and its impact on the thinking of Eastern and Near Eastern peoples themselves, has energized this field and translated further studies, such as Gurri Wissam's The Mask of Conspicuous, which argues that the career of English literature was, to a considerable extent, devised for the education and "civilization" of colonial peoples. See, in addition, the works listed in no.

William J. Deagle's Jameson, Althusser, Marx Situates and Explicates Frédéric Jameson's influential Political Unconscious but not Jameson's important later work, Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. The other Marxian theorists who has been crucial to contemporary theory is Louis Althusser, whose "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus" is collected in Lenin and Philosophy. Two studies of special interest are John Frawo's Marxism and Literary History, which goes forward a sophisticated program, and Michael Sprinker's Imaginary Relations, which develops an Althusserian perspective on aesthetic activity.

For new historicisms, in addition to the works of Stephen J. Greenblatt (Renaissance Self-Fashioning, Shakespearean Negotiations, and Learning to Curse) and the anthologies edited by Veyser and by Dolimore and Avison, see Marjorie Levinson's contributions to Refashioning Historicism, which are among the most penetrating reflections on the mode. Michel Foucault's L'ordre du discours, an excellent introduction to his mode, has been incompetently translated as "The Discourse on Language"; it should be read in the version by Ian McLeod ("The Order of Discourse") in Robert Young's Unruly Text. The History of Sexuality has been the most influential of Foucault's few works.

Among the important journals in literary theory are Cressida, Dialysis, Feminist Review, Literary History, Relations, and Textual Practice.

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NOTES

1 For the attempt to define historicisms in linguistic terms, see Jakobson 62–94 and Callier, Semenea Europene 55–74, 80–90, 113–12, 181–88. For advantages and disadvantages of this approach and the approach through fictionality, see Angliss 21–45, France and Smith, Margin.

2 See Lacan's "Seminaire," which has been republished with many supplementary discussions in Miller and Richardson. In addition to Derrida's commentary, see his "To Spoeselien—On Freud" and Felbed's "Classifying the Speech of Interpretation." See, for example, Derrida, "White Mythology," and, for discussion of some philosophical attempts at purification, de Man, "Foucaultianism."

3 Deconstructing "theoretical egotism of the pure text, deriving from a reflection on... concepts" from a posteriori explorations of how concepts function in inclusive, psychical, and institutional situations, Appiah notes that, patastically, "it is the anti-theory Michaelis who is, along with Stanley Fish, most closely connected to the most theoretical line of argument" (72).

4 For work in this growing field, see Anderson, Bhabha, Brautinger, Chowning, Fernandez-Reyes, Judd, Mohammed, Miller, Mozunke, Nasi, Saved, Spivak, Wasserthal, and the guide by Ashcroft et al.

5 Important works and collections in this area include Derrida and Sinfield. Foucault (History), Gaza, Greenhill, and Derrida are the authors of the essays mentioned, see, for example, Cohen, Taillefer, Levinson et al., Potter, and the essays in Veyser. For further references, consult Pater's essay in this volume.

6 There is a certain historical limit to the face that conceptualizing theories have been popular just at the moment when the globalisation of electronic media has made it normal and predictable that many cultural producers, both and television programs specialise, are being consumed outside of their original content.

7 For reflections on the problem of the particular or the detail, see Liu and Sebba. Sebba writes, "The truth value of the detail is an accident as the amount of meaning, the detail is for that very reason constantly threatened by "the gap of meaning." (7). For the developing-investigation of the problem of the exemplarity of the "example," see: Carrier, Derrida, Paragon, Lloyd and Warrams 95–111, 150–62, 174–79.