ANNABEL PATTERTON
Historical Scholarship

In a powerful essay on the "three cultures" in Germany, defined as Old, New, and Popular, Karl Heinz Bohrer entered a salutary reprimand to those who regard themselves as heralds or even observers of the "new":

The category of the "new," advanced primarily by way of formal innovation, has constituted, ever since the emergence of an aesthetic concept of modernism, the criterion by which contemporary art is to be comprehended. As a consequence it may well suffer the fate experienced by the hare in the fairy tale who impatiently entered into a race with the huddling only to discover that the latter was always at the finish line ahead of him. This, to be sure, was a deceptive maneuver: the cunning huddling had placed his wife there, who looked exactly like him. Yet the hare failed to notice this before he died in exhaustion. (133)

Although in its tragic form Bohrer's ancient fable applies only to those driven continuously to seek the cutting edge, to be members or discoverers of yet another avant-garde, it must also more gently inure any project such as this collection of essays, which assumes that our disciplines (the academic approach to modern languages and literatures) change so much every decade that a new description is warranted of the shape of the profession, its necessary skills and dominant assumptions.

It is my task, therefore, to consider what has happened since Barbara K. Lewalski wrote the 1981 account of historical scholarship. I define this assignment neither as replacing her broad-ranging survey (an invaluable foundation that readers of this volume should also be sure to consult) nor precisely as following in her footsteps. Lewalski herself began by suggesting what had changed since her predecessor, Robert E. Spiller, wrote his account of literary-historical scholarship: "the high walls thrown up in the 1930s to safeguard the purity of literary criticism . . . from the supposed encroachments of literary history" had "been largely demolished," and it was no longer possible simply to do one or the other (Lewalski 53). This relatively modest statement now sounds inadequate to describe the extraordinary explosion of literary criticism and scholarship that either is, or claims to be, "historical"; my essay focuses primarily on this phenomenon and explores developments that were only in the air or peripheral to Lewalski but that can now be seen as dominant paradigms (at least until they, too, succumb to the built-in obsolescence of intellectual movements). Lewalski's categories of historical inquiry were still predominantly "literary." They included literary biography; sources and influences; "contexts," subverted into scientific thought, intellectual history, theology, contemporary
politics, the social milieu, the other arts; the history of literary elements, forms, genres; literary history proper, by which she meant the great summative works from Hippolyte Taine's nineteenth-century Histoire de la littérature anglaise to Robert Spiller's Literary History of the United States, produced in the middle of our own century; and, in a final category, social and cultural history. It is fair to say that the new historical criticism of the 1990s will likely be situated mostly within the territory of social and cultural history, which will have expanded to include some of the subjects Lewalka listed under "context," especially the role of contemporary politics and the social milieu; although the latter term, with its connotations of circles and salons, already seems misleading in relation to work on economic status, literacy and readership, women's education, gynecology, the role of the police, incarceration and hospitalization, the relation between forms of recreation and class consciousness, dress as a social code, suicide, insomnia, war memorials—to name just a few of the topics that have altered the face of literary journals. The long silence between Lewalka's categories that we can now read an essay entitled "The Biography of a Memorial Icon." In this powerful account of Natan Rapoport's monument to the Warsaw ghetto, a story that subsumes the biography of Rapoport himself, along with the chronicle of the Warsaw ghetto uprising and its afterlife in the archives of the Solidarity trade union with the Polish government, James E. Young demonstrates what happens when both the humanist instinct of biography and the belief that the art has make shared principles are reigned by a more recently historical hermeneutics and an international politics. Indeed, Young's declaration of his biographical aims might well serve as this essay's thematics:

In its fusion of public art and popular culture, historical memory and political consequences, this monument demands a critique that goes beyond questions of high and low art, tastelessness and vulgarity. We might ask not only how the monument reflects past history but, most important, what role it now plays in current history. . . . For there is a difference between awkward public art—embodied in public monuments like this—and art produced almost exclusively for the art world—its critics, other artists, and gallery—that has yet to be properly recognized. People do not come to a monument like Rapoport's because it is new, cutting edge, or fashionable, but because it is a monument of survival, a memorial to a tragic event, or because it serves as a reminder of a specific historical event, or because it is a symbol of a place and a time. In this sense, it is a permanent part of the public landscape, a public statement, a public record of the past.
boundaries and emphasizing disjuncture and dispersion, rather than unity and coherence, as the new historical ideals, Foucault also disposed of the speaking subject "who, in speaking, exercises his sovereign freedom, or who, without realizing it, subjects himself to constraints of which he is but dimly aware" and replaced both the Enlightenment and the Modernist writer, in effect, by the "it is said," "the totality of things said" at any historical juncture (122). One of Foucault's favorite metaphors was of discourse as a web of which individual writers are not the masters, implying that history is the invisible spider and ourselves the flies. This theory (still bearing, in its notion of rules, strong traces of linguistic structuralism) has, in the end, less liberating consequences than Foucault imagined, from many sides scrutiny are now being raised that Foucaultian impersonal desirousness and even destroys the crucial category of human agency required for any theory of social change (A. Patterson 23-24; Lezard, ch. 9, "Foucault's Legacy" 36-37; Lo 723-30); but for a decade or more after The Foucault Reader, Foucault's thought has been largely translated into English, it served to undermine a free-ranging historicals that encouraged intellectual transgression and degeneration. All texts were peer equal.

In particular, Foucault's thought inspired numerous changes in English Renaissance studies, generating what is now widely (and ironically) known as the new historicism. Initiated by Stephen Greenblatt's Renaissance Self-Fashioning but more thoroughly characterized, perhaps, by Jonathan Goldberg's James I and the Policies of Discontent, this work stresses the construction of identity as a social function within the power system of the Renaissance court (Greenblatt) or within the discursive field of the monarch's own discourse (Goldberg). Its distinctive emphases have been Renaissance theater and spectacle, and, in obvious deference to Foucault's Discipline and Punish, the more theoretical and positive aspects of the legal system. Some genres were made toward breaking down the boundary between "text" and "context"; documents relating to colonial entrepreneurship have been read like plays and vice versa; royal portraits have their own stories to tell. But, as Edward Pechter comments, the larger social implications of Foucault's egalitarianism in the archives has not affected a corresponding shift in the new-historicist account of Renaissance literary history, despite their protests about being open, new historicists tend persistently to fix and close their attention on the dominant institutions of Renaissance society, especially the monarchy... the titled or monied classes, institutions of religious authority, or male power" (296).

An important part of new-historicist polemic has consisted too, in casual attacks on what they call the "old" historicism; the latter term, however, is really a shorthand for one or both of the following: first, a particularly idealized view of Elizabethan society and literature promoted by, among others, E. M. W. Tillyard; second, a particularly naive view of "history" as an unproblematic category of the factual that can be brought to bear, with positivistic force, on literary interpretation. Actually, a crude positivism (this historical "fact" produces this aspect of a text) was less common among "old" historicists than was a laborious and sometimes contentious focus on detail, but without the historical scholarship that preceded New Criticism and, for that matter, continued underlaying during its reign, none of us could proceed very far. We rely, continuously if not completely, on the work of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scholars, who patiently deciphered manuscripts and edited them; wrote the history of the early drama; and derived from state papers and county records the biographical, legal, and political data that permitted the writers in whose work, in whose fiction, for reasons of the kind, now interest; in fact, the influence of Foucault and the cachet of new historicism were themselves probably only signs, rather than causes, of a more widespread dissatisfaction with formalism in either its New Critical or deconstructive phase and of some still larger shift in the episteme itself, caused by social and political factors inside and outside the academy. Where the impetus to a new historically inflected criticism has spread, according to Foucault, it appears that the object of study has been affected by the democratization of the American university, by the impact of feminism, and, in American literature, by the United States' history of race relations. In literary studies, as Lee Patterson argues in Negotiating the Past, there has been an unbroken professional tradition of historical scholarship, exemplified by such monumental figures as R. F. Furniss (editor of the Early English Text Society) and W. W. Skeat (editor of Chaucer and Langland), whose careers would themselves repay a biography; and for several decades the field was dominated by that brand of intellectual history established by D. W. Robertson (L. Patterson 9-39). But the appearance of a volume entitled Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1580-1530 (ed. L. Patterson) initiates the turn to political and economic history as an interpretive tool, while Gail McMurry Gibson's scrupulous documentation of the social conditions in which medieval drama was created and performed in Suffolk and Norfolk sets new standards for the critical application of guild records, wills, stained-glass windows, and carvings. Such work not only definitively bridges the old divide between historical scholarship and criticism-interpretation but requires the development of new research skills and courageous access to previously neglected archives. For example, as Susan Staves discovered, Restoration drama, a field that had been of relatively secondary importance in university curricula, acquired a whole new range of interest when approached by way of legal history and the economics of marriage (Meyers' Scipios). To master the legal history, however, required several years of retraining. Staves's book is exemplary, too, for solving the theoretical problem of what constitutes validity in the selection of a context by the bracing application of common sense.

The selection of cultural evidence is to some extent arbitrary... If we want to know what a culture thought about authority, then politics, philosophy, drama,
explore the reading audience in the revolutionary and postrevolutionary period and relates reading practices generally to socio-economic status; Michael Rogin's biography of Melville shows what happens when a canonized writer's story is reinserted into the political history of the author's time; Larry J. Reynolds place the literature of the American renaissance in the context of the European revolutions of 1848, showing, for instance, that the image of the gallows in Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter derives directly from contemporary newspaper accounts; Eric Sundquist attributes Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson in the "climate of Reconstruction and against the legal backdrop of Homer Plessy v. Ferguson; Amy Kaplan's Social Construction of American Realism establishes a discursive formation for the fiction of Howells, Wharton, and Dreiser; and Michael Denne's Mechanical Accents investigates dime fiction and working-class novels in terms of the theory of culture developed by the Birmingham school out of the work of Raymond Williams.

The same feminism is evident in American literary history proper; especially the projected Cambridge History of American Literature, a five-volume joint product of twenty-two authors under the general editorship of Sacvan Bercoviç; and the two collections of revisionist essays that have appeared under his aegis, Reconstructing American Literary History and Ideology and Classic American Literature (ed. Bercoviç and Lehen). The Cambridge History has been marked by controversy but before its appearance and has generated in the process some useful definitions of its precursors, as well as of the theoretical issues. In a review of Lawrence Buell's New England Literary Culture: From Revolution through Renaissance, James Trottletl explains how, in effect, the procedural decisions literary historians make are themselves historically determined. The first Cambridge History has a more ambitious, more self-consciously historical structure; the second is more self-consciously intellectual, and the third more self-consciously political. The Cambridge History focuses on the two great movements in literary history—the era of Emerson, Melville, and Whitman in the early modern period of 1845 and, in order to "follow our writers into the actualities of American life" and to explain the national experience, it puts the literature firmly in context with accounts of "politics, theology, publishing history, oratory, immigration, folklore, bibliography, business practices, etc." (Trottletl 3).
The Annalen paradigm has continuously shifted, sometimes in direct response to those short-term events devalued by the longer duree. In May 1969 Fernand Braudel cut short a visit to Chicago to return to Paris and redefine the project on a still more interdisciplinary basis, to include linguistics, semiotics, and comparative mythology (Stoissovich 59–60).

Which is not to say that French cultural history of the past decade has been solely in the Annalen tradition; the monopolistic focus of new historicism as practiced by Greenblatt and Goldberg also has certain parallels in studies of French culture under Louis XIV. Nicole Ferrier-Cavensier's L'image de Louis XIV dans la littérature française de 1660 à 1715 deserves comparison with Goldberg's book on James I, although in this instance the monument's image, a concentrated cultural icon, is seen as constructed by his writers instead of constructing them; Emerico Hauth's Ideologie und Kultur in Seventeenth-Century France, which uses Foucault in its bibliography, considers as aspects of a single cultural formation painted and literary "portraits" of the aristocracy, the tax structure, the evolution of fictional forms (pastoral, romance, novelles, histories, voyage narratives), Descartes's Discourse on Method, and the economic and colonialist implications of Colbert's Académie des sciences.

In the history of the press, always a subtle thread together, there has been a considerable expansion in the field of eighteenth-century publishing, especially the periodical press, some of it sparked by the bicentenary of the French Revolution. A volume of essays entitled Press and Politics in Pre-revolutionary France (ed. Curtis and Popkin) suggests that this motivation has retroactive effect. The interest in readership is exemplified by Claude Lefebvre's work on La Nouvelle Héloïse, and the interest in the literary marketplace by Robert Darnton's work on the publishing history of the Encyclopédie, which would previously have been conceived primarily as a document in the history of ideas, not as the "business" of Enlightenment. A highly eclectic consortium of historians in various fields is working on a grand Histoire du livre; the same impulse appears in Pierre Ricq's critical bibliography of the 1789 periodicals. A particularly vigorous example of the new culturalism appears in the work of Roger Chartier, The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France, which follows the development of a print culture from its beginning through the French Revolution and includes chapters on the arts of dying; the history of civilité; the cabarets de délices; or lists of grievances drawn up for the convocation of the Estates General in 1789; literacy; the bibliothèque mais; and the literature of rogery. In the Annalen tradition, Chartier insists that "culture" does not exist in some domain "over and above economic and social relations" but a, rather, the sum of all social practices, which in turn are articulated according to the representations by which individuals make sense of their existence. This stress on representation is, in effect, the meeting place between literary-historical and "real" historical scholarship (11).

An unintended long-term consequence of the move to social history has been the erosion of the political as a category of analysis. Chartier's highly quantified essay on the cabarets de délices of 1789 constantly confirms Tocevi's

Such history often no more total cultural history than the history of great men and their ideas, which Fevre sought to displace. But it did take a step toward unravelling what Fevre in Le problème de l'innocence called "the most important problem" for the historian, the relation of individuality ... to what is socially, collectively composed. ... More epochal, however, is what inspired the achievement: a vision of culture as composed of interactions between ideas and emotions, rituals and innovations, instruments and their applications, rather than of either the mobile insights of some speculations or the automatic inventiveness of materialistically stimulated masses. (964–65)
opinion that the estates were not divided against one another. The others "show proof that the bourgeoisie of talent and service and an urbanized nobility met on common cultural grounds; and... give expression to a determination that the peasantry had already attained, translated into a style that was not yet its own (144). In this context, the binomial struggle for interpretive control over the French Revolution should also be relevant, even if primarily conducted by historians. The three-volume project entitled The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture (ed. Michel Bakker) is an example of this approach. In the Afterword (p. 367), the author states that the events of 1789 and afterward significantly redirected the cultural history not only of France but of the rest of Europe. At stake is the fate, the importance, among other factors, cultural treasures, the works of Voltaire and Rousseau, the second of whom has, of course, been the subject of a strong appropriation by deconstructive critics. According to Antonino Maravall, the key figure in cultural history in the Americas tradition, published no less than three studies of exceptional importance for European literature of the early modern period, one of which, on the culture of the baroque, has been translated into English (and, of course, Maravall's work on monarchical absolutism; on the baroque pelagism of violence) and on the reception of freedom, a perspective that "abandoned the soul's interiority to project itself into the world of external action" (Cañizares 133, 171) and on the picassism as the voice "de resignación, de resistentes, de venganza sin claras posibilidades" (La literatura picarona 12 may be seen, as analogous to Walter Benjamin's work on the German Triumphant). An allegory of Spanish fascism.

Italian studies in North America have been since the nineteenth century largely preoccupied with the great canonical writers of the medieval and Renaissance periods: Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio. After World War II certain obvious historical factors—the presence of Italian Americans in the exodus from Europe of Italian scholars, the growing prestige of Italy in postwar culture—contributed to a great increase in the number of Italian departments and a corresponding broadening of the field. The influence of Italian theories—Umberto Eco in semantics, Antonio Gramsci on the social construction of the intellectual—probably helped to decrees the earlier tradition of philosophy and aesthetic appreciation; yet the first signs of such destabilization have pointed, as with Spanish literature, to "theory" rather than history. The work of E. H. Peterson on Petrarch's obsession with chronology has no faults; the Carenini has become an exhibit of deconstruction; and "history" in Dante studies refers primarily to problems of citation and literary genealogy (Barolini; Schnapp). It seems symbolic that the Darmouth Dance Project brings a new technology to a "traditional" task, providing an online database giving access to centuries of earlier commentary. Aristotle studies point (though somewhat equivalently) to a different direction. Albert Acosta's book on the Orlando Furioso intends to promote in its readers "a troubled awareness of the interrelated crises of faith, of politics, and of culture which cry out in the principal documents and events of Italy in the early Caesars," while at the same time alerting readers to the history of Italian studies and its effects on knowledge. It was Benedetto Croce, whose enduring influence on the course of Aristotelian criticism is coexistent...
sive with his dominance of much of Italian literary study for the last fifty years," who was responsible for the construction of an Ariosto "not anguished by doubts, not worried about human destiny"; while Francesco De Sanctis assumed "that the poem refers, amid the litter, to an eighteenth-century theory of aesthetics, perhaps to Kant's definition of the work of art as a "purposive object without purpose."" (Ascoli 3, 4, 22). Yet for all its commitment to the "poetry of crime," Ascoli's book remains an extended exercise in textual exegesis, with a modernist or perhaps postmodernist twist—all history and history deconstruct each other: "Reference "takes place," but its own place is soon taken by forgetfulness and deadly repetition" (229).

Elsewhere, in studies of late-nineteenth-century or early-twentieth-century authors, the fear of forgetfulness can itself generate new historical scholarship, revisionist in a way that affects the canon. The revaluation of figures rendered problematic by their politics, like D'Annunzio, has been urgent in Italianma, in what Renzo Di Felice calls "una svolta della storiografia culturale" (viii). Its echoes in France are parallel studies of intellectuals of fascist leanings, as in Alice Kaplan's work on Céline, and of resistance literature. Work on the period of the great modern wars can scarcely be anything other than historical; yet the powerful motives for pursuing it are as theoretically troublesome for the idea of literature, aesthetics, and the history of ideas as any postmodern "theory." In a collection of intensely documentary essays, Viole France and the Resistance (ed. Kedward and Austin)—executed by scholars from the United Kingdom and Ireland, conceived in the Archives départementales at Mende in the Lozère, and assisted by French archivists—we can see how collaboration between histori- ans and scholars in the modern humanities can pivot close behind the word culture, but we can also see the limitations of that collaboration. In a critique of Zvee Sternhell's Ni droit ni gauche: L'idéologie fasciste en France, Brian Darling writes:

Stenhell works at another level, in which books count for more than actions in politics. It is for that reason that so much of his book is taken up with literary analysis, seeking the political message where a Lewis may_dll the moral ele- ment... The history of ideas, as with the analysis of discourse, becomes a very Ariosto "purposive object without purpose." It may give some satisfaction, that the inhumanities, the tragedies, the betrayals of the twentieth century can be explained by the writings of a handful of not excessively gifted writers. But what really is the importance of a dozen books in shaping the political life of a society? How many factions did they make, and were they really made by reading books? (Kedward and Austin 155-36)

One would think that a postwar consciousness would have similar conse- quences for Germanistik, which is where, with Boher's essay "The Three Culti- sures," we began. For Boher, writing as a disenchanted heir of the "Frankfurt school, everything has gone downhill since 1968, and the question is: be answered in "whether Europe now finds itself in its posthistory." (131). A more optimistic stance is taken by Anton Kien, in an essay on the potential of American new historicism for extension into German literature: "we have few such studies in German or American Germanistik." Kaes concludes, "although they are not hard to imagine." ("New Historicism" 213). Citing only Friedrich A. Kittler's Aufzeichnungen 1802/1902 and his work on representations of the Third Reich in the New German cinema, both of them unsure Foucauldian principles, Kaes nevertheless looks forward to, or calls for, much more of the same, especially for the postwar period. Yet one of the most commanding figures of the German intellectual scene, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, also a theorist of the postwar mentality in Europe ("Posthistoire"), has himself focused on the Middle Ages, on French drama in the Enlightenment ("Französische Theater"), and, most recently, on Social and literary history. But if we attribute continental drift in the academic world to real historical events, a form of causality this essay assumes to be self-evident, the possibility for significant changes will surely be in Slavic studies in the coming decade, when a glimmer culture in the former Soviet Union not only makes possible the migration of peoples but offers up to the new cultural historian a body of texts and facts of which we have all been too long deprived.

If I return, at last, to the field I know most about, I can perhaps formulate, empirically, a few propositions for the aspiring historical-literary scholar. When I was a graduate student writing my dissertation on Thomas Wyatt in the British Library, I was told that the way to proceed was to identify everything that had been written on Wyatt in the past and from the bibliographical notes in those books to reconstruct (and read) what those authors had read, and so on. The result was that I was always going backwards into what had been known and said before, so that any possible contribution had to take the form of disagreement. All the transactions were between literary or critical texts, and so on. I did make some discoveries about Wyatt's Italian sources, I spent far more time than was useful on the history of English poetry as conceived by George Saintsbury and his followers and virtually none on the history of the Reformation in England or on the reform policies of Thomas Cromwell. I knew that Wyatt had adapted Petrarch's sonnet on the death of Giovanni Colonna for his own sonnet on the fall of Cromwell but not what that choice meant in terms of political history. And although Wyatt's social milieu could indeed be understood through John Stevens's Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court and commonplace books provided a very strong surviving manuscript record of how poetry was circulated, nobody suggested to me that public records had anything to do with my subject of inquiry. If I were now supervising a dissertation on Wyatt, I would advise a student to read only as much of the criticism as would serve to indicate the state of the art, to begin with G. R. Elton's Tudor Revolution in Government: Administrative Changes in the Reign of Henry VIII and Policy and Power, to include among the basic research tools for the early modern period in England (which is Lewkowitz's list in the New Cambridge Bibliographies of English Literature, British Library Catalogue, National Union Catalog, Short-Title Catalogue, Oxford English Dictionary, and Dictionary of National Biography) the appropriate calendars of
state papers and the reports of the Historical Manuscripts Commission; to read some up-to-date social and economic history of the early Tudor period; and, for a model, to consider Greg Walker’s John Skelton and the Politics of the 1520s. I would urge the student to believe that new knowledge really can be found in the interstices between conventional disciplines and subfields and not to consider the task merely as describing in a more fashionable vocabulary the already known. For early British literature and history, the chronological catalogs of the Folger Institute or the Huntington Library are invaluable as tools for slicing history against the grain of a vertical chronology; they permit one to investigate what Foucault might have called a discursive formation for a decade or a year at a time; something similar can be done for the 1640s by using the Thompson Tracts in the British Library, now also available (like the STC) on microfilm.

Such advice must be capable of translation for students in other fields, whose most valuable archives will also be in process of discovery and redeﬁnition. I would encourage students who are, like many more advanced scholars, intimidated by the task of historical research to understand that one need not necessarily learn to do from scratch the basic archival research in original documents done by historians themselves, that for a ﬁrst stage it is probably sufﬁcient to rely on the historians or to use records that are printed and readily accessible. But I would also stress that, as one’s knowledge and curiosity grow, someone whose primary training is in literature can certainly do, rather than merely to call, on historical research and even occasionally challenge the historians themselves, precisely in that area of interpretation that literary professionals are trained to manage.

Finally, it is important to stress that the old taboos against historical work must not now be replaced by a new tyranny, in which it becomes impossible to ﬁnd an audience for intellectual history, say, or the history of literary forms and genres. For if the new, lower-case humanism described above is driven, internationally, by an up-to-date humanism whose natural enemies are constraints and intolerance, then it behoves its practitioners to rephrase Sartre’s question yet again: not What is historical scholarship? but, rather, What is not?

It remains only to say that this essay could not have been written without the assistance of colleagues in many places, who generously passed on their knowledge about ﬁelds regrettably beyond mine. It is, therefore, truly a collaborative project, although I would not want them held responsible for the way I have pieced it together.

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WORKS CITED AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING


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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, René Wellek and Austin Warren were 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 literary and other discourses. Once spurned as 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 was 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 is not due 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 then gender studies; and the development of generically oriented cultural criticisms that study a variety of discursive practices involving many objects (the body, the family, 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 scholar writing usually focuses on individual authors and particular works—is the breakdown of an older framework that supported one notion of "generality"