

LITERARY THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION

1) 'Theories' and 'Theory': Some Definitions

2) Theory in History

3) Why Theory?

1) 'Theories' and 'Theory': Some Definitions

1986: "The Triumph of Theory" (J. Hillis Miller) vs. *The Resistance to Theory*
(Paul de Man)

Against Theory (Mitchell, ed.)

The Limits of Theory (Kavanagh, ed.)

Against Deconstruction (Ellis)

Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory (Tallis)

What's Wrong with Postmodernism (Norris)

The 1980s probably saw the high-water mark of literary theory. That decade was the 'moment' of theory, when the topic was fashionable and controversial. [...]

[A]fter the moment of theory there comes, inevitably, the 'hour' of theory, when it ceases to be the exclusive concern of a dedicated minority and enters the intellectual bloodstream as a taken-for-granted aspect of the curriculum. At this stage the glamour fades, the charisma is routinized, and it becomes the day-to-day business of quite a large number of people to learn or teach (or both) this material.

(Barry 1995, 1)

After Theory (Docherty)

Re-Thinking Theory (Seamus Miller)

The State of Theory (Bradford, ed.)

The Point of Theory (Bal/Boer, eds.)

The Direction of Literary Theory (Earnshaw)

In literary and cultural studies these days there is a lot of talk about theory – not theory of literature, mind you; just plain ‘theory’. To anyone outside the field, this usage must seem very odd. ‘Theory of what?’ you want to ask. It’s surprisingly hard to say. It is not the theory of anything in particular, nor a comprehensive theory of things in general. Sometimes theory seems less an account of anything than an activity – something you do or don’t do. You can be involved with theory; you can teach or study theory; you can hate theory or be afraid of it. None of this, though, helps much to understand what theory is.

(Culler 1997, 1)

Unser Zeitalter ist das eigentliche Zeitalter der *Kritik*, der sich alles unterwerfen muß.
(Immanuel Kant, Vorwort zur *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1781)

↓
a new understanding of
science predicated on the
construction of
unquestionable truth
by means of questioning
the world (model/system/
‘schools’: ‘theories’)

↓
construction

↓
acknowledging the potential
inconclusiveness of the
persistent questioning that is
at the heart of the critical
method
(perspective/reflection:
‘theory’ as attitude)

↓
deconstruction

'Theory' (DCE):

[Greek: *theōria* 'a sight', from *theōrein* 'to gaze upon']

- 1 a statement or group of statements established by reasoned argument based on known facts [...]
[▶ inductive understanding of 'theory']
- 2 the part of a science or art that deals with general principles and methods as opposed to practice; set of ruled or principles for the study of a subject
[▶ deductive understanding of 'theory']
- 3 an opinion based on limited information or knowledge; something supposed
[▶ constructivist dimension of 'theory']

[generalization vs. perspectivity]

'Theories': of poetry/drama/the novel
of narrative (narratology)
of fictionality
of reader reception

...

vs.

'Theory':

(Culler 1997, 15)

1. Theory is interdisciplinary – discourse with effects outside an original discipline.
2. Theory is analytical and speculative – an attempt to work out what is involved in what we call sex or language or writing or meaning or the subject.
3. Theory is a critique of common sense, of concepts taken as natural.
4. Theory is reflexive, thinking about thinking, enquiry into the categories we use in making sense of things, in literature and in other discursive practices.

Additional Distinctions:

- hard-core theories (natural sciences) aimed at prediction/explanation
vs. soft theories (humanities/social sciences) aimed at mapping/understanding
- tentative/exploratory/heuristic theories
vs. descriptive theories
vs. prescriptive/normative/dogmatic theories
- theory (abstraction) vs. method (application)
- theory vs. discourse

(cf. Iser 2006, 5-13)

2) Theory in History

Die Umstellung des Wissenschaftssystems von einem ontologischen auf ein konstruktivistisches und von einem einheitstheoretischen [...] auf ein differenztheoretisches Selbstverständnis, wie sie in den zweihundert Jahren seit Kant zu beobachten ist, berührt in sehr tiefgreifender Weise das Verhältnis von Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft. Man könnte sehr summarisch von einem Autoritätsverlust, ja von einem Autoritätsverzicht der Wissenschaft sprechen. [...] [M]it einem konstruktivistischen Selbstverständnis paßt die Wissenschaft sich letztlich einer Lage an, die durch die Evolution der modernen Gesellschaft eingetreten ist [...].

(Luhmann 1990, 627)

- Stichworte: Modernisierung, funktionale Differenzierung, Polykontextualität/Pluralismus, Kontingenz, Reflexivität

Overall development:

objectivity → → → → → → → → → → → → → → → →
*subjectivity → → → → → → → → → → → → → → → →
reflexivity → → → → → → → → → → → → → → → →

ontology → constructivism
essentialism → difference

*Hermeneutics
Positivism/Marxism
Formalism into Functionalism

Foundations
The Linguistic Turn
The Cultural Turn

Liberal Humanism vs. Critical Theory

Traditional Ideas about Art and Literature: (the ideology of liberal humanism)

(cf. Barry 1995, 16-21)

- Literature is of timeless significance.
- The literary text contains its own meaning within itself, it can (and must) be studied in isolation from contexts of any kind.
- Human nature is essentially unchanging.
- Individuality is something securely possessed within each of us as our unique 'essence'. The subject is antecedent to and thus transcends the forces of society, experience, and language.
- The purpose of literature is essentially the enhancement of life and the propagation of humane values.
- Criteria of excellence: organic fusion of form and content, 'sincerity', showing/'enactment' rather than explanation.

Recurrent Ideas in Critical Theory:

(cf. Barry 1995, 34-36)

- What we usually regard as the basic 'givens' of our existence (including our gender identity, our individual selfhood, and the notion of literature itself) are actually fluid and unstable (i.e. 'socially constructed' and thus contingent) categories rather than fixed and reliable essences (> anti-essentialism, relativism, linguistic or cultural constructivism).
 - In literature, as in all writing, there is never the possibility of establishing fixed or definite meanings.
 - 'Human nature' (and 'greatness' predicated on this idea) is not universal, but in practice Eurocentric and androcentric.
- Politics is pervasive,
Language is constitutive,
Truth is provisional,
Meaning is contingent,
Human nature is a myth.

3) Why Theory?

Survey of Orientations of Critical Theories

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • biographical approach (Positivism) • psychological/psychoanalytical approach • oeuvre studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hermeneutics • history of reception / aesthetics of reception • empirical reception studies
<div style="text-align: center;"> <p>author ↗</p> <p>reader ↘</p> <p>Text</p> <p>text-centred approaches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • new criticism / intrinsic approach (close reading) • rhetorics, stylistics, formalist/structuralist approaches • poststructuralism / deconstruction <p>Textuality</p> <p>↙ historical reality ↘ other texts</p> </div>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'background' studies (Positivism) • sociological approaches • Marxist approaches/ Cultural Materialism • New Historicism/historical discourse analysis • feminist approaches • postcolonial theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'sources and influence studies' • history of topics and themes • genre studies • intertextuality

What Does the Multiplicity of Theories Tell Us?

Art, so it seems, does not carry its own determination within itself. Yet it provokes determinations of the kind outlined by the theories presented. At the same time, it appears to make allowances for different conceptualizations, all of which – insofar as they are theories – require closure, thus making the work of art seem open-ended, because the theory is unable to encompass it in its entirety. However, our experiences suggest that the work of art is not open-ended but only gives this impression when theories try to capture it. [...]

[T]heory confronts us with the paradoxical urge to capture in cognitive terms something which by nature eludes cognition.

(Iser 2006, 170f.)

Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion to one's own.

(Eagleton 1983, viii)

It seems to have become the received opinion in literary studies that no reading of a text and therefore no criticism – and, for that matter, no teaching of literature either – can ever be untheoretical [However,] [o]ne cannot help feeling that theory has won in theory only, that the received opinion is far from being a genuinely appropriated one, and that what is common knowledge is by no means common practice as well.

'untheoretical readings': self-affirmative and self-confirmatory poverty

vs.

'theoretical readings': "the awareness of these limitations"
"the self-reflexive assessment of the performance of my approach"
"*the awareness of the contingency of your own practice*"
[opposite the text and opposite other possible approaches]
(cf. Bode 1996, 91/92)



paradoxical situation:

the evolution of modern culture of modern culture provides a cultural opening for this kind of self-consciousness, for better or worse, while at the same time one of the few ideas generally accepted these days is the conviction that a consciousness cannot see through the historical conditions that have formed it

What Is Literary Theory and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?

So after all theory is indeed neither a fixed body of work and achievement nor a pluralistic conglomerate of schools and approaches. It is, instead, a complex cultural practice which is first and foremost predicated on questioning, while the *provisional* answers provided within or by a particular theoretical approach should perhaps be considered as side-effects, and, for that matter, as side effects which can, to stick to the medical metaphor, cancel or at least diminish the positive effect of the therapy. This, of course, is bound to happen once theories become canonized and potentially as self-confirmatory as any 'untheoretical' reading. There is a fine balance here which will have to be negotiated carefully. But as we cannot do without theories, we do not have much of a choice.

(Reinfandt 2005, 407)

Bibliography:

[*recommended titles]

- Bal, Mieke, Inge E. Boers, eds., *The Point of Theory: Practices of Cultural Analysis*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1994.
- *Barry, Peter, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester/New York: Manchester UP, 1995.
- *Bode, Christoph, "Why Theory Matters." In: Rüdiger Ahrens, Laurenz Volkmann, eds., *Why Literature Matters: Theories and Functions of Literature*. Heidelberg: Winter, 1996: 87-100.
- Bradford, Richard, ed., *The State of Theory*. London/New York: Routledge, 1993.
- *Culler, Jonathan, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford/New York: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Docherty, Thomas, *After Theory: Postmodernism/Postmarxism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1990.
- Earnshaw, Steven, *The Direction of Literary Theory*. London/Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996.
- Ellis, John M., *Against Deconstruction*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989.
- Freadman, Richard, Seumas Miller, *Re-Thinking Theory: A Critique of Contemporary Literary Theory and an Alternative Account*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992.
- Iser, Wolfgang, *How to Do Theory*. Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.
- Kant, Immanuel, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [1781/1787]. Ed. Wilhelm Weischedel. Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges., 1956.
- Kavanagh, Thomas D., ed., *The Limits of Theory*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989.

- Luhmann, Niklas, *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1990.
- de Man, Paul, *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1986.
- Miller, J. Hillis, "Presidential Address 1986: The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base." *PMLA* 102.3 (1987): 281-291.
- Mitchell, W.J.T., ed., *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1985.
- Norris, Christopher, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990.
- Reinfandt, Christoph, "Did It Matter, Does It Now? Literary Theory and English Studies in Germany, 1970-2003." In: Stephan Kohl, ed., *Anglistik: Research Paradigms and Institutional Policies 1930-2000*. Trier: WVT, 2005: 389-407.
- Tallis, Raymond, *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory*. London/Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988.

Useful Handbooks/Encyclopedias:

- Grodenand, M., M. Kreiswirth, eds., *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994.
- Hawthorn, Jeremy, *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*. London: Edward Arnold, 1992.
- *Lentricchia, Frank, Thomas McLaughlin, eds., *Critical Terms in Literary Studies* [1990]. Chicago/London: U of Chicago P, 2nd ed. 1995.
- Makaryk, Irena R., ed., *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*. Toronto/Buffalo/London: U of Toronto P, 1993.
- *Mitchell, W.J.T, Mark B.N. Hansen, eds., *Critical Terms for Media Studies*. Chicago/London: U of Chicago P, 2010.
- *Nünning, Ansgar, ed., *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie. Ansätze – Personen – Grundbegriffe* [1998]. Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 3rd ed. 2004.

Useful Introductions/Surveys:

- Buchbinder, David, *Contemporary Literary Theory and the Reading of Poetry*. South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1991.
- Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983.
- *Geisenhanslüke, Achim, *Einführung in die Literaturtheorie*. Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges., 2003.
- *Hörisch, Jochen, *Theorie-Apotheke. Eine Handreichung zu den humanwissenschaftlichen Theorien der letzten fünfzig Jahre, einschließlich ihrer Risiken und Nebenwirkungen*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Tb., 2010.
- Newton, K.M., *Interpreting the Text: A Critical Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Literary Interpretation*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990.
- *Nünning, Ansgar, ed., *Literaturwissenschaftliche Theorien, Modelle und Methoden* [1995]. Trier: WVT, 3rd ed. 1998.
- *Nünning, Vera, Ansgar Nünning, Hrsg., *Methoden der literatur- und kulturwissenschaftlichen Textanalyse*. Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 2010.

Reinfandt, Christoph, "Reading Texts After the Linguistic Turn: Approaches from Literary Studies and Their Implications." In: Miriam Dobson, Benjamin Ziemann, eds., *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History*. London/New York: Routledge, 2009: 37-54.

*Schneider, Ralf, ed., *Literaturwissenschaft in Theorie und Praxis. Eine anglistisch-amerikanistische Einführung*. Tübingen: Narr, 2004.

Selden, Raman, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Brighton: Harvester Press, 1985.

Selden, Raman, *Practising Theory and Reading Literature. An Introduction*. New York/London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989.

*Zapf, Hubert, *Kurze Geschichte der anglo-amerikanischen Literaturtheorie* [1991]. München: Fink/UTB, 2nd ed. 1996.