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THEORY**  
A Very Short Introduction

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## Chapter 1

# What is theory?

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.

‘Theory’, we are told, has radically changed the nature of literary studies, but people who say this do not mean *literary theory*, the systematic account of the nature of literature and of the methods for analysing it. When people complain that there is too much theory in literary studies these days, they don’t mean too much systematic reflection on the nature of literature or debate about the distinctive qualities of literary language, for example. Far from it. They have something else in view.

What they have in mind may be precisely that there is too much discussion of non-literary matters, too much debate about general questions whose relation to literature is scarcely evident, too much reading of difficult psychoanalytical, political, and philosophical texts.

Theory is a bunch of (mostly foreign) names; it means Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler, Louis Althusser, Gayatri Spivak, for instance.

## The term *theory*

So what is theory? Part of the problem lies in the term *theory* itself, which gestures in two directions. On the one hand, we speak of 'the theory of relativity', for example, an established set of propositions. On the other hand, there is the most ordinary use of the word *theory*.

'Why did Laura and Michael split up?'

'Well, my theory is that . . .'

What does *theory* mean here? First, *theory* signals 'speculation'. But a theory is not the same as a guess. 'My guess is that . . .' would suggest that there is a right answer, which I don't happen to know: 'My guess is that Laura just got tired of Michael's carping, but we'll find out for sure when their friend Mary gets here.' A theory, by contrast, is speculation that might not be affected by what Mary says, an explanation whose truth or falsity might be hard to demonstrate.

'My theory is that . . .' also claims to offer an explanation that is not obvious. We don't expect the speaker to continue, 'My theory is that it's because Michael was having an affair with Samantha.' That wouldn't count as a theory. It hardly requires theoretical acumen to conclude that if Michael and Samantha were having an affair, that might have had some bearing on Laura's attitude toward Michael. Interestingly, if the speaker were to say, 'My theory is that Michael was having an affair with Samantha,' suddenly the existence of this affair becomes a matter of conjecture, no longer certain, and thus a possible theory. But generally, to count as a theory, not only must an explanation not be obvious; it should involve a certain complexity: 'My theory is that Laura was always secretly in love with her father and that Michael could never succeed in

becoming the right person.' A theory must be more than a hypothesis: it can't be obvious; it involves complex relations of a systematic kind among a number of factors; and it is not easily confirmed or disproved. If we bear these factors in mind, it becomes easier to understand what goes by the name of 'theory'.

## Theory as genre

Theory in literary studies is not an account of the nature of literature or methods for its study (though such matters are part of theory and will be treated here, primarily in Chapters 2, 5, and 6). It's a body of thinking and writing whose limits are exceedingly hard to define. The philosopher Richard Rorty speaks of a new, mixed genre that began in the nineteenth century: '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 history, nor moral philosophy, nor social prophecy, but all of these mingled together in a new genre.' The most convenient designation of this miscellaneous genre is simply the nickname *theory*, which has come to designate works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they apparently belong. This is the simplest explanation of what makes something count as theory. Works regarded as theory *have* effects beyond their original field.

This simple explanation is an unsatisfactory definition but it does seem to capture what has happened since the 1960s: writings from outside the field of literary studies have been taken up by people in literary studies because their analyses of language, or mind, or history, or culture, offer new and persuasive accounts of textual and cultural matters. Theory in this sense is not a set of methods for literary study but an unbounded group of writings about everything under the sun, from the most technical problems of academic philosophy to the changing ways in which people have talked about and thought about

the body. The genre of 'theory' includes works of anthropology, art history, film studies, gender studies, linguistics, philosophy, political theory, psychoanalysis, science studies, social and intellectual history, and sociology. The works in question are tied to arguments in these fields, but they become 'theory' because their visions or arguments have been suggestive or productive for people who are not studying those disciplines. Works that become 'theory' offer accounts others can use about meaning, nature and culture, the functioning of the psyche, the relations of public to private experience and of larger historical forces to individual experience.

## Theory's effects

If theory is defined by its practical effects, as what changes people's views, makes them think differently about their objects of study and their activities of studying them, what sort of effects are these?

The main effect of theory is the disputing of 'common sense': common-sense views about meaning, writing, literature, experience. For example, theory questions

- the conception that the meaning of an utterance or text is what the speaker 'had in mind',
- or the idea that writing is an expression whose truth lies elsewhere, in an experience or a state of affairs which it expresses,
- or the notion that reality is what is 'present' at a given moment.

Theory is often a pugnacious critique of common-sense notions, and further, an attempt to show that what we take for granted as 'common sense' is in fact a historical construction, a particular theory that has come to seem so natural to us that we don't even see it as a theory. As a critique of common sense and exploration of alternative conceptions, theory involves a questioning of the most basic premisses or assumptions of literary study, the unsettling of anything that might

have been taken for granted: What is meaning? What is an author? What is it to read? What is the 'I' or subject who writes, reads, or acts? How do texts relate to the circumstances in which they are produced?

What is an example of some 'theory'? Instead of talking about theory in general, let us plunge right into some difficult writing by two of the most celebrated theorists to see what we can make of it. I propose two related but contrasting cases, which involve critiques of common-sense ideas about 'sex', 'writing', and 'experience'.

## Foucault on sex

In his book *The History of Sexuality*, the French intellectual historian Michel Foucault considers what he calls 'the repressive hypothesis': the common idea that sex is something that earlier periods, particularly the nineteenth century, have repressed and that moderns have fought to liberate. Far from being something natural that was repressed, Foucault suggests, 'sex' is a complex idea produced by a range of social practices, investigations, talk, and writing – 'discourses' or 'discursive practices' for short – that come together in the nineteenth century. All the sorts of talk – by doctors, clergy, novelists, psychologists, moralists, social workers, politicians – that we link with the idea of the repression of sexuality were in fact ways of bringing into being the thing we call 'sex'. Foucault writes, 'The notion of "sex" made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, pleasures; and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere.' Foucault is not denying that there are physical acts of sexual intercourse, or that humans have a biological sex and sexual organs. He is claiming that the nineteenth century found new ways of grouping together under a single category ('sex') a range of things that are potentially quite different: certain acts, which we call sexual, biological distinctions, parts of bodies, psychological reactions, and, above all, social meanings. People's ways

of talking about and dealing with these conducts, sensations, and biological functions created something different, an artificial unity, called 'sex', which came to be treated as fundamental to the identity of the individual. Then, by a crucial reversal, this thing called 'sex' was seen as the *cause* of the variety of phenomena that had been grouped together to create the idea. This process gave sexuality a new importance and a new role, making sexuality the secret of the individual's nature. Speaking of the importance of the 'sexual urge' and our 'sexual nature', Foucault notes that we have reached the point

where we expect our intelligibility to come from what was for many centuries thought of as madness, . . . our identity from what was perceived as a nameless urge. Hence the importance we ascribe to it, the reverential fear with which we surround it, the care we take to know it. Hence the fact that over the centuries it has become more important to us than our soul.

One illustration of the way sex was made the secret of the individual's being, a key source of the individual's identity, is the creation in the nineteenth century of 'the homosexual' as a type, almost a 'species'. Earlier periods had stigmatized acts of sexual intercourse between individuals of the same sex (such as sodomy), but now it became a question not of acts but of identity, not of whether someone had performed forbidden actions but of whether he 'was' a homosexual. Sodomy was an act, Foucault writes, but 'the homosexual was now a species'. Previously there were homosexual acts in which people might engage; now it was a question, rather, of a sexual core or essence thought to determine the very being of the individual: Is he *a* homosexual?

In Foucault's account, 'sex' is constructed by the discourses linked with various social practices and institutions: the way in which doctors, clergy, public officials, social workers, and even novelists treat phenomena they identify as sexual. But these discourses represent sex

as something prior to the discourses themselves. Moderns have largely accepted this picture and accused these discourses and social practices of trying to control and repress the sex they are in fact constructing. Reversing this process, Foucault's analysis treats sex as an effect rather than a cause, the product of discourses which attempt to analyse, describe, and regulate the activities of human beings.

Foucault's analysis is an example of an argument from the field of history that has become 'theory' because it has inspired and been taken up by people in other fields. It is not a theory of sexuality in the sense of a set of axioms purported to be universal. It claims to be an analysis of a particular historical development, but it clearly has broader implications. It encourages you to be suspicious of what is identified as natural, as a given. Might it not, on the contrary, have been produced by the discourses of experts, by the practices linked with discourses of knowledge that claim to describe it? In Foucault's account, it is the attempt to know the truth about human beings that has produced 'sex' as the secret of human nature.

## Theory's moves

A characteristic of thinking that becomes theory is that it offers striking 'moves' that people can use in thinking about other topics. One such move is Foucault's suggestion that the supposed opposition between a natural sexuality and the social forces ('power') that repress it might be, rather, a relationship of complicity: social forces bring into being the thing ('sex') they apparently work to control. A further move – a bonus, if you will – is to ask what is achieved by the *concealment* of this complicity between power and the sex it is said to repress. What is achieved when this interdependency is seen as an opposition rather than interdependency? The answer Foucault gives is that this masks the pervasiveness of power: you think that you are resisting power by championing sex, when in fact you are working entirely in the terms that power has set. To put this another way, in so far as this thing called

'sex' appears to lie outside power – as something social forces try in vain to control – power looks limited, not very powerful at all (it can't tame sex). In fact, though, power is pervasive; it is everywhere.

Power, for Foucault, is not something someone wields but 'power/knowledge': power in the form of knowledge or knowledge as power. What we think we know about the world – the conceptual framework in which we are brought to think about the world – exercises great power. Power/knowledge has produced, for example, the situation where you are defined by your sex. It has produced the situation that defines a woman as someone whose fulfilment as a person is supposed to lie in a sexual relationship with a man. The idea that sex lies outside and in opposition to power conceals the reach of power/knowledge.

There are several important things to note about this example of theory. Theory here in Foucault is analytical – the analysis of a concept – but also inherently speculative in the sense that there is no evidence you could cite to show that this is the correct hypothesis about sexuality. (There is a lot of evidence that makes his account plausible but no decisive test.) Foucault calls this kind of enquiry a 'genealogical' critique: an exposure of how supposedly basic categories, such as 'sex', are produced by discursive practices. Such a critique does not try to tell us what sex 'really' is but seeks to show how the notion has been created. Note also that Foucault here does not speak of literature at all, though this theory has proved to be of great interest to people studying literature. For one thing, literature is about sex; literature is one of the places where this idea of sex is constructed, where we find promoted the idea that people's deepest identities are tied to the kind of desire they feel for another human being. Foucault's account has been important for people studying the novel as well as for those working in gay and lesbian studies and in gender studies in general. Foucault has been especially influential as the inventor of new historical objects: things such as 'sex', 'punishment', and 'madness', which we had not previously thought of as having a history. His works treat such things as

historical constructions and thus encourage us to look at how the discursive practices of a period, including literature, may have shaped things we take for granted.

## Derrida on writing

For a second example of 'theory' – as influential as Foucault's revision of the history of sexuality but with features that illustrate some differences within 'theory' – we might look at an analysis by the contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida of a discussion of writing and experience in the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau is a writer of the French eighteenth century often credited with helping to bring into being the modern notion of the individual self.

But first, a bit of background. Traditionally, Western philosophy has distinguished 'reality' from 'appearance', *things* themselves from *representations* of them, and *thought* from *signs* that express it. Signs or representations, in this view, are but a way to get at reality, truth, or ideas, and they should be as transparent as possible; they should not get in the way, should not affect or infect the thought or truth they represent. In this framework, speech has seemed the immediate manifestation or presence of thought, while writing, which operates in the absence of the speaker, has been treated as an artificial and derivative representation of speech, a potentially misleading sign of a sign.

Rousseau follows this tradition, which has passed into common sense, when he writes, 'Languages are made to be spoken; writing serves only as a supplement to speech.' Here Derrida intervenes, asking 'what is a supplement?' Webster's defines *supplement* as 'something that completes or makes an addition'. Does writing 'complete' speech by supplying something essential that was missing, or does it add something that speech could perfectly well do without? Rousseau repeatedly characterizes writing as a mere addition, an inessential extra,

even 'a disease of speech': writing consists of signs that introduce the possibility of misunderstanding since they are read in the absence of the speaker, who is not there to explain or correct. But though Rousseau calls writing an inessential extra, his works in fact treat it as what completes or makes up for something lacking in speech: writing is repeatedly brought in to compensate for the flaws in speech, such as the possibility of misunderstanding. For instance, Rousseau writes in his *Confessions*, which inaugurates the notion of the self as an 'inner' reality unknown to society, that he has chosen to write his *Confessions* and to hide himself from society because in society he would show himself 'not just at a disadvantage but as completely different from what I am. . . . If I were present people would never have known what I was worth.' For Rousseau, then, his 'true' inner self is different from the self that appears in conversations with others, and he needs writing to supplement the misleading signs of his speech. Writing turns out to be essential because speech has qualities previously attributed to writing: like writing, it consists of signs that are not transparent, do not automatically convey the meaning intended by the speaker, but are open to interpretation.

Writing is a supplement to speech but speech is already a supplement: children, Rousseau writes, quickly learn to use speech 'to supplement their own weakness . . . for it does not need much experience to realize how pleasant it is to act through the hands of others and to move the world simply by moving the tongue'. In a move characteristic of theory, Derrida treats this particular case as an instance of a common structure or a logic: a 'logic of supplementarity' that he discovers in Rousseau's works. This logic is a structure where the thing supplemented (speech) turns out to need supplementation because it proves to have the same qualities originally thought to characterize only the supplement (writing). I shall try to explain.

Rousseau needs writing because speech gets misinterpreted. More generally, he needs signs because things themselves don't satisfy. In the

*Confessions* Rousseau describes his love as an adolescent for Madame de Warens, in whose house he lived and whom he called 'Maman'.

I would never finish if I were to describe in detail all the follies that the recollection of my dear Maman made me commit when I was no longer in her presence. How often I kissed my bed, recalling that she had slept in it, my curtains and all the furniture in the room, since they belonged to her and her beautiful hand had touched them, even the floor, on which I prostrated myself, thinking that she had walked upon it.

These different objects function in her absence as supplements or substitutes for her presence. But it turns out that even in her presence the same structure, the same need for supplements, persists. Rousseau continues,

Sometimes even in her presence I committed extravagances that only the most violent love seemed capable of inspiring. One day at table, just as she had put a piece of food into her mouth, I exclaimed that I saw a hair on it. She put the morsel back on her plate; I eagerly seized and swallowed it.

Her absence, when he has to make do with substitutes or signs that recall her to him, is first contrasted with her presence. But it turns out that her presence is not a moment of fulfilment, of immediate access to the thing itself, without supplements or signs; in her presence too the structure, the need for supplements is the same. Hence the grotesque incident of swallowing the food she had put into her mouth. And the chain of substitutions can be continued. Even if Rousseau were to 'possess her', as we say, he would still feel that she escaped him and could only be anticipated and recalled. And 'Maman' herself is a substitute for the mother Rousseau never knew – a mother who would not have sufficed but who would, like all mothers, have failed to satisfy and have required supplements.

'Through this series of supplements', Derrida writes, 'there emerges a law: that of an endless linked series, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing that they defer: the impression of the thing itself, of immediate presence, or originary perception. Immediacy is derived. Everything begins with the intermediary.' The more these texts want to tell us of the importance of the presence of the thing itself, the more they show the necessity of intermediaries. These signs or supplements are in fact responsible for the sense that there is something there (like Maman) to grasp. What we learn from these texts is that the idea of the original is created by the copies, and that the original is always deferred – never to be grasped. The conclusion is that our common-sense notion of reality as something present, and of the original as something that was once present, proves untenable: experience is always mediated by signs and the 'original' is produced as an effect of signs, of supplements.

For Derrida, Rousseau's texts, like many others, propose that instead of thinking of life as something to which signs and texts are added to represent it, we should conceive of life itself as suffused with signs, made what it is by processes of signification. Writings may claim that reality is prior to signification, but in fact they show that, in a famous phrase of Derrida's, 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte' – 'There is no outside-of-text': when you think you are getting outside signs and text, to 'reality itself', what you find is more text, more signs, chains of supplements. Derrida writes,

What we have tried to show in following the connecting thread of the 'dangerous supplement' is that in what we call the real life of these 'flesh and blood' creatures, . . . there has never been anything but writing, there have never been anything but supplements and substitutional significations which could only arise in a chain of differential relations. . . . And so on indefinitely, for we have read *in the text* that the absolute present, Nature, what is named by words like 'real mother,' etc. have always already escaped, have never existed; that what inaugurates

meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.

This does not mean that there is no difference between the presence of 'Maman' or her absence or between a 'real' event and a fictional one. It's that her presence turns out to be a particular kind of absence, still requiring mediations and supplements.

## What the examples show

Foucault and Derrida are often grouped together as 'post-structuralists' (see Appendix), but these two examples of 'theory' present striking differences. Derrida's offers a reading or interpretation of texts, identifying a logic at work in a text. Foucault's claim is not based on texts – in fact he cites amazingly few actual documents or discourses – but offers a general framework for thinking about texts and discourses in general. Derrida's interpretation shows the extent to which literary works themselves, such as Rousseau's *Confessions*, are theoretical: they offer explicit speculative arguments about writing, desire, and substitution or supplementation, and they guide thinking about these topics in ways that they leave implicit. Foucault, on the other hand, proposes to show us not how insightful or wise texts are but how far the discourses of doctors, scientists, novelists, and others create the things they claim only to analyse. Derrida shows how theoretical the literary works are, Foucault how creatively productive the discourses of knowledge are.

There also seems to be a difference in what they are claiming and what questions arise. Derrida is claiming to tell us what Rousseau's texts say or show, so the question that arises is whether what Rousseau's texts say is true. Foucault claims to analyse a particular historical moment, so the question that arises is whether his large generalizations hold for other times and places. Raising follow-up questions like these is, in turn, our way of stepping into 'theory' and practising it.

Both examples of theory illustrate that theory involves speculative practice: accounts of desire, language, and so on, that challenge received ideas (that there is something natural, called 'sex'; that signs represent prior realities). So doing, they incite you to rethink the categories with which you may be reflecting on literature. These examples display the main thrust of recent theory, which has been the critique of whatever is taken as natural, the demonstration that what has been thought or declared natural is in fact a historical, cultural product. What happens can be grasped through a different example: when Aretha Franklin sings 'You make me feel like a natural woman', she seems happy to be confirmed in a 'natural' sexual identity, prior to culture, by a man's treatment of her. But her formulation, 'you make me feel *like* a natural woman', suggests that the supposedly natural or given identity is a cultural role, an effect that has been produced within culture: she *isn't* a 'natural woman' but has to be made to feel *like* one. The natural woman is a cultural product.

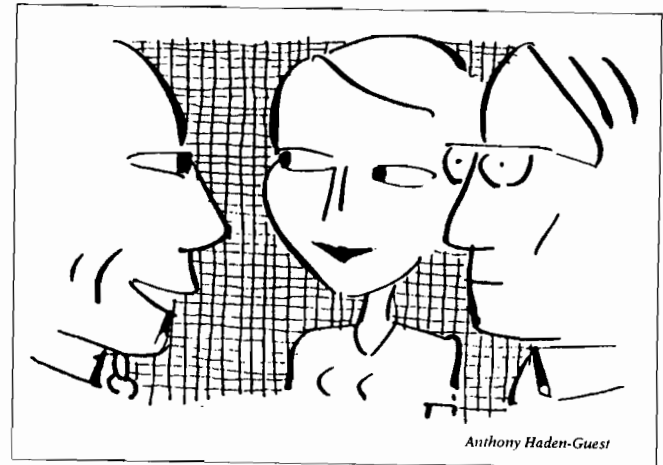
Theory makes other arguments analogous to this one, whether maintaining that apparently natural social arrangements and institutions, and also the habits of thought of a society, are the product of underlying economic relations and ongoing power struggles, or that the phenomena of conscious life may be produced by unconscious forces, or that what we call the self or subject is produced in and through the systems of language and culture, or that what we call 'presence', 'origin', or the 'original' is created by copies, an effect of repetition.

So what is theory? Four main points have emerged.

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.

As a result, theory is intimidating. One of the most dismaying features of theory today is that it is endless. It is not something that you could ever master, not a particular group of texts you could learn so as to 'know theory'. It is an unbounded corpus of writings which is always being augmented as the young and the restless, in critiques of the guiding conceptions of their elders, promote the contributions to theory of new thinkers and rediscover the work of older, neglected ones. Theory is thus a source of intimidation, a resource for constant upstagings: 'What? you haven't 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 hysterialization



'You're a terrorist? Thank God. I understood Meg to say you were a theorist.'

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 condemning you to hard reading in unfamiliar fields, where even the completion of one task will bring not respite but further difficult assignments. ('Spivak? Yes, but have you read Benita Parry's critique of Spivak and her response?')

The unmasterability of theory is a major cause of resistance to it. No matter how well versed you may think yourself, you can never be sure whether you 'have to read' Jean Baudrillard, Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, Hélène Cixous, C. L. R. James, Melanie Klein, or Julia Kristeva, or whether you can 'safely' forget them. (It will, of course, depend on who 'you' are and who you want to be.) A good deal of the hostility to theory no doubt comes from the fact that to admit the importance of theory is to make an open-ended commitment, to leave yourself in a position where there are always important things you don't know. But this is the condition of life itself.

Theory makes you desire mastery: you hope that theoretical reading will give you the concepts to organize and understand the phenomena that concern you. But theory makes mastery impossible, not only because there is always more to know, but, more specifically and more painfully, because theory is itself the questioning of presumed results and the assumptions on which they are based. The nature of theory is to undo, through a contesting of premisses and postulates, what you thought you knew, so the effects of theory are not predictable. You have not become master, but neither are you where you were before. You reflect on your reading in new ways. You have different questions to ask and a better sense of the implications of the questions you put to works you read.

This very short introduction will not make you a master of theory, and not just because it is very short, but it outlines significant lines of

thought and areas of debate, especially those pertaining to literature. It presents examples of theoretical investigation in the hope that readers will find theory valuable and engaging and take occasion to sample the pleasures of thought.

or lines of argument and concluding that you have to pursue each, shifting between alternatives that cannot be avoided but that give rise to no synthesis. Theory, then, offers not a set of solutions but the prospect of further thought. It calls for commitment to the work of reading, of challenging presuppositions, of questioning the assumptions on which you proceed. I began by saying that theory was endless – an unbounded corpus of challenging and fascinating writings – but not just more writings: it is also an ongoing project of thinking which does not end when a very short introduction ends.

## Appendix:

# Theoretical Schools and Movements

I have chosen to introduce theory by presenting issues and debates rather than 'schools', but readers have a right to expect an explanation of terms like *structuralism* and *deconstruction* that appear in discussions of criticism. I provide that here, in a brief description of modern theoretical movements.

Literary theory is not a disembodied set of ideas but a force in institutions. Theory exists in communities of readers and writers, as a discursive practice, inextricably entangled with educational and cultural institutions. Three theoretical modes whose impact, since the 1960s, has been greatest are the wide-ranging reflection on language, representation, and the categories of critical thought undertaken by deconstruction and psychoanalysis (sometimes in concert, sometimes in opposition); the analyses of the role of gender and sexuality in every aspect of literature and criticism by feminism and then gender studies and Queer theory; and the development of historically oriented cultural criticisms (new historicism, post-colonial theory) studying a wide range of discursive practices, involving many objects (the body, the family, race) not previously thought of as having a history.

There are several important theoretical movements prior to the 1960s.

### Russian Formalism

The Russian Formalists of the early years of the twentieth century stressed that critics should concern themselves with the literariness of literature: the verbal strategies that make it literary, the foregrounding of language itself, and the 'making strange' of experience that they accomplish. Redirecting attention from authors to verbal 'devices', they claimed that 'the device is the only hero of literature'. Instead of asking 'what does the author say here?' we should ask something like 'what happens to the sonnet here?' or 'what adventures befell the novel in this book by Dickens?' Roman Jakobson, Boris Eichenbaum, and Victor Shklovsky are three key figures in this group which reoriented literary study towards questions of form and technique.

### New Criticism

What is called the 'New Criticism' arose in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s (with related work in England by I. A. Richards and William Empson). It focused attention on the unity or integration of literary works. Opposed to the historical scholarship practised in universities, the New Criticism treated poems as aesthetic objects rather than historical documents and examined the interactions of their verbal features and the ensuing complications of meaning rather than the historical intentions and circumstances of their authors. For new critics (Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, W. K. Wimsatt), the task of criticism was to elucidate individual works of art. Focusing on ambiguity, paradox, irony, and the effects of connotation and poetic imagery, the New Criticism sought to show the contribution of each element of poetic form to a unified structure.

The New Criticism left as enduring legacies techniques of close reading and the assumption that the test of any critical activity is whether it helps us to produce richer, more insightful interpretations of individual works. But beginning in the 1960s, a number of theoretical perspectives and discourses – phenomenology, linguistics, psychoanalysis, Marxism, structuralism, feminism, deconstruction – offered richer conceptual

frameworks than did the New Criticism for reflecting on literature and other cultural products.

### Phenomenology

Phenomenology emerges from the work of the early twentieth-century philosopher Edmund Husserl. It seeks to bypass the problem of the separation between subject and object, consciousness and the world, by focusing on the phenomenal reality of objects as they appear to consciousness. We can suspend questions about the ultimate reality or knowability of the world and describe the world as it is given to consciousness. Phenomenology underwrote criticism devoted to describing the 'world' of an author's consciousness, as manifested in the entire range of his or her works (Georges Poulet, J. Hillis Miller). But more important has been 'reader-response criticism' (Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser). For the reader, the work is what is given to consciousness; one can argue that the work is not something objective, existing independently of any experience of it, but is the experience of the reader. Criticism can thus take the form of a description of the reader's progressive movement through a text, analysing how readers produce meaning by making connections, filling in things left unsaid, anticipating and conjecturing and then having their expectations disappointed or confirmed.

Another reader-oriented version of phenomenology is called 'aesthetics of reception' (Hans Robert Jauss). A work is an answer to questions posed by a 'horizon of expectations'. The interpretation of works should, therefore, focus not on the experience of an individual reader but on the history of a work's reception and its relation to the changing aesthetic norms and sets of expectations that allow it to be read in different eras.

### Structuralism

Reader-oriented theory has something in common with structuralism, which also focuses on how meaning is produced. But structuralism

originated in *opposition* to phenomenology: instead of describing experience, the goal was to identify the underlying structures that make it possible. In place of the phenomenological description of consciousness, structuralism sought to analyse structures that operate unconsciously (structures of language, of the psyche, of society). Because of its interest in how meaning is produced, structuralism often (as in Roland Barthes's *S/Z*) treated the reader as the site of underlying codes that make meaning possible and as the agent of meaning.

*Structuralism* usually designates a group of primarily French thinkers who, in the 1950s and 1960s, influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language, applied concepts from structural linguistics to the study of social and cultural phenomena. Structuralism developed first in anthropology (Claude Lévi-Strauss), then in literary and cultural studies (Roman Jakobson, Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette), psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan), intellectual history (Michel Foucault), and Marxist theory (Louis Althusser). Although these thinkers never formed a school as such, it was under the label 'structuralism' that their work was imported and read in England, the United States, and elsewhere in the late 1960s and 1970s.

In literary studies structuralism promotes a poetics interested in the conventions that make literary works possible; it seeks not to produce new interpretations of works but to understand how they can have the meanings and effects that they do. But it did not succeed in imposing this project – a systematic account of literary discourse – in Britain and America. Its main effect there was to offer new ideas about literature and to make it one signifying practice among others. It thus opened the way to symptomatic readings of literary works and encouraged cultural studies to try to spell out the signifying procedures of different cultural practices.

It is not easy to distinguish structuralism from *semiotics*, the general science of signs, which traces its lineage to Saussure and the American

philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Semiotics, though, is an international movement that has sought to incorporate the scientific study of behaviour and communication, while mostly avoiding the philosophical speculation and cultural critique that has marked structuralism in its French and related versions.

### Post-Structuralism

Once structuralism came to be defined as a movement or school, theorists distanced themselves from it. It became clear that works by alleged structuralists did not fit the idea of structuralism as an attempt to master and codify structures. Barthes, Lacan, and Foucault, for example, were identified as *post-structuralists*, who had gone beyond structuralism narrowly conceived. But many positions associated with post-structuralism are evident even in the early work of these thinkers when they were seen as structuralists. They had described ways in which theories get entangled in the phenomena they attempt to describe; how texts create meaning by violating any conventions that structural analysis locates. They recognized the impossibility of describing a complete or coherent signifying system, since systems are always changing. In fact, post-structuralism does not demonstrate the inadequacies or errors of structuralism so much as turn away from the project of working out what makes cultural phenomena intelligible and emphasize instead a critique of knowledge, totality, and the subject. It treats each of these as a problematical effect. The structures of the systems of signification do not exist independently of the subject, as objects of knowledge, but are structures for subjects, who are entangled with the forces that produce them.

### Deconstruction

The term *post-structuralism* is used for a broad range of theoretical discourses in which there is a critique of notions of objective knowledge and of a subject able to know him or herself. Thus, contemporary feminisms, psychoanalytic theories, Marxisms, and historicisms, all partake in post-structuralism. But *post-structuralism* also designates

above all *deconstruction* and the work of Jacques Derrida, who first came to prominence in America with a critique of the structuralist notion of structure in the very collection of essays that brought structuralism to American attention (*The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, 1970).

Deconstruction is most simply defined as a critique of the hierarchical oppositions that have structured Western thought: inside/outside, mind/body, literal/metaphorical, speech/writing, presence/absence, nature/culture, form/meaning. To deconstruct an opposition is to show that it is not natural and inevitable but a construction, produced by discourses that rely on it, and to show that it is a construction in a work of *deconstruction* that seeks to dismantle it and reinscribe it - that is, not destroy it but give it a different structure and functioning. But as a mode of reading, deconstruction is, in Barbara Johnson's phrase, a 'teasing out of warring forces of signification within a text', an investigation of the tension between modes of signification, as between the performative and constative dimensions of language.

Literary Theory

### Feminist Theory

In so far as feminism undertakes to deconstruct the opposition man/woman and the oppositions associated with it in the history of Western culture, it is a version of post-structuralism, but that is only one strand of feminism, which is less a unified school than a social and intellectual movement and a space of debate. On the one hand, feminist theorists champion the identity of women, demand rights for women, and promote women's writings as representations of the experience of women. On the other hand, feminists undertake a theoretical critique of the heterosexual matrix that organizes identities and cultures in terms of the opposition between man and woman. Elaine Showalter distinguishes 'the feminist critique' of male assumptions and procedures from 'gynocriticism', a feminist criticism concerned with women authors and the representation of women's experience. Both of these modes have been opposed to what is sometimes called, in Britain



and America, 'French feminism', where 'woman' comes to stand for any radical force that subverts the concepts, assumptions, and structures of patriarchal discourse. Similarly, feminist theory includes both strands that reject psychoanalysis for its incontrovertibly sexist foundations and the brilliant rearticulation of psychoanalysis by such feminist scholars as Jacqueline Rose, Mary Jacobus, and Kaja Silverman, for whom it is only through psychoanalysis, with its understanding of the complications of internalizing norms, that one can hope to comprehend and reconceive the predicament of women. In its multiple projects, feminism has effected a substantial transformation of literary education in the United States and Britain, through its expansion of the literary canon and the introduction of a range of new issues.

### Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalytic theory had an impact on literary studies both as a mode of interpretation and as a theory about language, identity, and the subject. On the one hand, along with Marxism it is the most powerful modern hermeneutic: an authoritative meta-language or technical vocabulary that can be applied to literary works, as to other situations, to understand what is 'really' going on. This leads to a criticism alert to psychoanalytic themes and relations. But on the other hand, the greatest impact of psychoanalysis has come through the work of Jacques Lacan, a renegade French psychoanalyst who set up his own school outside the analytic establishment and led what he presented as a return to Freud. Lacan describes the subject as an effect of language and emphasizes the crucial role in analysis of what Freud called transference, in which the analysand casts the analyst in the role of authority figure from the past ('falling in love with your analyst'). The truth of the patient's condition, in this account, emerges not from the analyst's interpretation of the patient's discourse but from the way analyst and patient are caught up in replaying a crucial scenario from the patient's past. This reorientation makes psychoanalysis a post-structuralist discipline in which interpretation is a replaying of a text it does not master.

### Marxism

In Britain, unlike the United States, post-structuralism arrived not through Derrida and then Lacan and Foucault but through the work of the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser. Read within the Marxist culture of the British left, Althusser led his readers to Lacanian theory and provoked a gradual transformation by which, as Antony Easthope puts it, 'post-structuralism came to occupy much the same space as that of its host culture, Marxism'. For Marxism, texts belong to a superstructure determined by the economic base (the 'real relations of production'). To interpret cultural products is to relate them back to the base. Althusser argued that the social formation is not a unified totality with the mode of production at its centre but a looser structure in which different levels or types of practice develop on different time-scales. Social and ideological superstructures have a 'relative autonomy'. Drawing on a Lacanian account of the determination of consciousness by the unconscious for an explanation of how ideology functions to determine the subject, Althusser maps a Marxist account of the determination of the individual by the social onto psychoanalysis. The subject is an effect constituted in the processes of the unconscious, of discourse, and of the relatively autonomous practices that organize society.

This conjunction is the basis of much theoretical debate in Britain, in political theory as well as literary and cultural studies. Crucial investigations of relations between culture and signification took place in the 1970s in the film studies magazine *Screen*, which, deploying Althusser and Lacan, sought to understand how the subject is positioned or constructed by the structures of cinematic representation.

### New Historicism/Cultural Materialism

The 1980s and 1990s in Britain and the United States have been marked by the emergence of vigorous, theoretically engaged historical criticism. On the one hand, there is 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'. Renaissance specialists influenced by Foucault (Catherine Belsey, Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield, and Peter Stallybrass) have been particularly concerned with the historical constitution of the subject and with the contestatory role of literature in the Renaissance. In the United States, *new historicism*, which is less inclined to posit a hierarchy of cause and effect as it traces connections among texts, discourses, power, and the constitution of subjectivity, has also been centred on the Renaissance. Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, and others focus on how Renaissance literary texts are situated amid the discursive practices and the institutions of the period, treating literature not as a reflection or product of a social reality but as one of several sometimes antagonistic practices. A key question for the new historicists has been the dialectic of 'subversion and containment': how far do Renaissance texts offer a genuinely radical critique of the religious and political ideologies of their day and how far is the discursive practice of literature, in its apparent subversiveness, a way of containing subversive energies?

### Post-Colonial Theory

A related set of theoretical questions emerge in *post-colonial* theory: the attempt to understand the problems posed by the European colonization and its aftermath. In this legacy, post-colonial institutions and experiences, from the idea of the independent nation to the idea of culture itself, are entangled with the discursive practices of the West. Since the 1980s a growing corpus of writings has debated questions about the relation between the hegemony of Western discourses and the possibilities of resistance, and about the formation of colonial and post-colonial subjects: hybrid subjects, emerging from the superimposition of conflicting languages and cultures. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which examined the construction of the oriental 'other' by European discourses of knowledge, helped to establish the field. Since then post-colonial theory and writing has become an

attempt to intervene in the construction of culture and knowledge, and, for intellectuals who come from post-colonial societies, to write their way back into a history others have written.

### Minority Discourse

One political change that has been achieved within academic institutions in the United States has been the growth of study of literatures of ethnic minorities. The main effort has been to revive and promote the study of black, Latino, Asian-American, and Native American writing. Debates bear on the relation between the strengthening of cultural identity of particular groups by linking it to a tradition of writing and the liberal goal of celebrating cultural diversity and 'multiculturalism'. Theoretical questions swiftly become entangled with questions about the status of theory, which is sometimes said to impose 'white' questions or philosophical issues on projects struggling to establish their own terms and contexts. But Latino, African-American, and Asian-American critics pursue the theoretical enterprise in developing the study of minority discourses, defining their distinctiveness, and articulating their relations to dominant traditions of writing and thought. Attempts to generate theories of 'minority discourse' both develop concepts for the analysis of specific cultural traditions and use a position of marginality to expose the assumptions of 'majority' discourse and to intervene in its theoretical debates.

### Queer Theory

Like deconstruction and other contemporary theoretical movements, Queer theory (discussed in Chapter 7) uses the marginal – what has been set aside as perverse, beyond the pale, radically other – to analyse the cultural construction of the centre: heterosexual normativity. In the work of Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and others, Queer theory has become the site of a productive questioning not just of the cultural construction of sexuality but of culture itself, as based on the denial of homoerotic relations. As with feminism and versions of ethnic studies before it, it gains intellectual energy from its link with social movements

of liberation and from the debates within these movements about appropriate strategies and concepts. Should one celebrate and accentuate difference or challenge distinctions that stigmatize? How to do both? Possibilities of both action and understanding are at stake in theory.

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