



## Introduction

Theory is dead, we are told. In recent years newspapers and magazines seem to have delighted in announcing the death of theory, and academic publications have joined the chorus. Articles on “the end of high theory” and books with titles such as *After Theory*, *Life After Theory*, *What’s Left of Theory*, and *Reading After Theory* are endemic, with only the occasional optimistic title: *The Future of Theory* or *Theory Matters*. Declarations of the death of theory have long been attempts by opponents to bring about, performatively, the demise they purport to describe, but such titles do not come only from opponents of theory. Since the activities that have come to answer to the nickname *theory* are no longer the latest thing in the humanities, theorists themselves, not wanting to be left behind defending something thought to belong to the past, have been swift to write about theory after theory, post-theory, and so on. This American penchant—“Everything’s up to date in Kansas City”—marked even the heyday of so-called high theory, when no sooner had the arrival of structuralism been noted by American scholars than theorists who had been major representatives of structuralism—Barthes, Lacan, Foucault—were deemed *poststructuralists* so that they could represent something newer still.<sup>1</sup>

1. Of course, this renaming also had a good deal to do with the fact that the most visible early event in the introduction of these structuralist thinkers to the United States, the 1966 conference at Johns Hopkins, “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,” ended up featuring the critique of Lévi-Strauss’s conception of structure by the previously unknown Jacques Derrida. Lévi-Strauss, therefore, did not make it into poststructuralism, but Barthes and Lacan (both present at that conference) certainly did.

But anyone who has served on an appointments committee in a literature department recently has confronted all too palpable evidence that theory is not dead. In the very tight academic job market, where any opening can attract hundreds of applications, one can survey the state of literary studies simply by reading through the applications, and the conclusion is inescapable: theory is everywhere. Even fields previously immune or resistant, such as Chinese studies or medieval studies, today produce candidates with great theoretical sophistication—acquainted with a wide range of theoretical discourses and, more important, a penchant for posing questions that these theoretical discourses have helped them formulate, about relations between literature and popular culture, literature and politics, literature and forces of globalization, and so on. Texts are read intensively, with theoretical issues in mind, and symptomatically, in work in cultural studies that explores how they fit into various discursive practices of identity formation or the production of sexuality, the projection of imagined communities, the resistance to globalization, or the dialectics of subversion and containment.

So it is not, I would stress, just that references to figures recognized as theorists—Butler, Derrida, Foucault, Jameson, Lacan, Spivak, Žižek—pop up in dissertations and writing samples. The way questions in dissertation or postdissertation projects are framed is generated or inflected by theoretical investigations, speculations, argument. In that sense literary and cultural studies are very much *in theory* these days, even if theory itself is not seen as the cutting edge, as we used to say, of literary and cultural studies. If theory is not so prominent as a vanguard movement, a set of texts or discourses that challenge insiders and outsiders, it is perhaps because literary and cultural studies take place within a space articulated by theory, or theories, theoretical discourses, theoretical debates.

This is true not only of English, French, German, and literature but also of areas of literary study that had hitherto remained relatively untouched by theoretical discourses and of fields that have themselves frequently been most hostile to so-called high theory, such as cultural studies (as I discuss later in this volume) or the study of American literature, which now finds itself increasingly transformed into the study of the literatures of America, or the Americas, stimulated by theoretical discourses of hybridity, multiculturalism, and subalternity. And publishers display their

conviction that theory is a live market by preferring to publish introductions to theory or anthologies of theory rather than critical monographs. Despite its alleged demise, writes Jean-Michel Rabaté, “theory never stops coming back, which is confirmed by the huge numbers of anthologies, guides, companions, and new introductions. If Theory is reduced to the ghost of itself, then this is a very obtrusive ghost that keeps walking and shaking its chains in our old academic castles.”<sup>2</sup>

But rather than Theory as a persistent ghost in the castle, I prefer the less dramatic figure of theory as a discursive space within which literary and cultural studies now occur, even if we manage to forget it, as we forget the air we breathe. We are ineluctably in theory. And if things were to change radically in literary and cultural studies, it would not be because we had left theory behind but because theoretical arguments had persuaded us that literary and cultural studies should henceforth proceed, for instance, as a branch of cognitive psychology, or of historical studies in some new, more generous, configuration, or as a version of artistic practice itself.

Although these days books about theory manage to avoid defining it, on the doubtless correct assumption that people interested in a book on theory already have an idea about what it is, it is worth briefly addressing the question, if only because a lack of definition has permitted attacks on theory to define the object for themselves. In “Against Theory” Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels treat theory as a set of axioms supposed to control interpretative practice through a general account of interpretation. This would exclude from the realm of theory almost every work, from Agamben to Žižek, usually taken to belong to it. But it is this definition that enables Knapp and Michaels to argue that theory should just cease because it has no useful work to do, no effects.<sup>3</sup>

One might argue that, on the contrary, theory consists precisely of those discourses that do have effects on literary and cultural studies. In the past I have defined *theory* as work that succeeds in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those in which it originates.<sup>4</sup> We use

2. Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Future of Theory* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002), 10.

3. For discussion see Chapter 3.

4. See Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 8–10. See also “What Is Theory?” in Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1–17.

the term *theory* to designate discourses that come to exercise influence outside their apparent disciplinary realm because they offer new and persuasive characterizations of problems or phenomena of general interest: language, consciousness, meaning, nature and culture, the functioning of the psyche, the relations of individual experience to larger structures, and so on. Theory in this sense is inescapably interdisciplinary: works of philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, political or social theory, history, psychoanalysis, gender studies, film theory, and so on are taken up by people in literary and cultural studies because their accounts of matters relevant to the functioning of texts have made strange the familiar and enabled people to conceive the matters with which they are dealing in new ways.<sup>5</sup> Works of theory characteristically function not as demonstration but as speculation—ideas whose range of applicability is not known in advance. Theory is analytical, speculative, reflexive, interdisciplinary, and a counter to commonsense views. And this interdisciplinary character of theory helps to explain why “literary theory”—in the sense of analyses of the nature of literature or the functioning of particular literary modes or genres—has played a less prominent role in “theory” in literary studies recently than one would have been led to expect. Insofar as the theory of literature functions resolutely within the discipline of literary studies, it has not seemed really to *be* theory and so has been relatively neglected by theorists. What we call *theory* for short is manifestly not theory of literature, despite the fact that *theory* has served as the nickname for “literary and cultural theory.”

One of the complaints against theory, in fact, has been that it takes students away from literature and literary values. Since time is always limited, and those reading Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and Butler have less time to read Ashbery and Zukovsky, not to mention Dickens and Thackeray, there is some justice to the complaint; but of course most schools of criticism have recommended immersion in various sorts of nonliterary materials, from philological language study to biographies and works of history. If Americanists are reading Foucault rather than Puritan sermons, it is not that they have less time to devote to literature—Americanists used to be compelled to read vast amounts of “background” material. The complaint

5. For a lively account of the interdisciplinarity of theory in the humanities see Mieke Bal, *Traveling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

derives, rather, from the sense that since theory consists primarily of works originating in other, nonliterary areas of endeavor, whether philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, or intellectual history, theory must therefore inculcate nonliterary values.

The essays collected here contest that view, arguing that the apparent eclipse of the literary is something of an illusion. Wherever the discourses of theory originate, they generally work to alert us to versions of literariness at work in discourses of all sorts and thus reaffirm, in their way, the centrality of the literary. It is true, however, that work on language, desire, power, the body, and so on has led to a neglect of theoretical issues that are particular to literature and the system of the literary. I myself contributed to the neglect of the literary in the article "Literary Theory," for the second edition of the MLA's *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures* in 1992.<sup>6</sup> Busy talking about race and gender, identity and agency, distracted by the notoriety of Knapp and Michaels's now largely forgotten antitheory theory, I inadvertently forgot the theory of literature. I think it is essential not to forget it: narrative theory, for example, is crucial for the analysis of texts of all sorts. These days, beginning graduate students often have little acquaintance with basic narratology (they have read Foucault but not Barthes or Genette, much less Wayne Booth). They may not know about identifying narrative point of view or the analysis of implied readers or narratees, despite the centrality of such matters to questions that *do* urgently concern them, such as the analysis of what is taken for granted by a text.<sup>7</sup>

Exploring the role of the literary in theory, I seek to rectify this neglect by bringing theory *to* literature and bringing out the literary in theory—not keeping literature and theory safe from each other.

The eclipse of literature in theory is a very recent phenomenon. In the early days of "theory" the term meant, above all, theory of literature.

6. Jonathan Culler, "Literary Theory," in *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*, ed. Joseph Gibaldi, 2nd ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 1992), 201–35.

7. Trying to make good my omission of the theory of literature from my MLA account of literary theory, I wrote *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, which leaves out Knapp and Michaels and puts in not just "what is literature?" but also discussion of narrative and of poetry and poetics. I am eager to help keep the literary in theory.

For the Russian Formalists and some of their successors, the French structuralists, the “literariness” of literature was the object of analysis: what makes discourses literary? how do they function? As one who came to theory in the 1960s, when I undertook a doctoral dissertation on the use of linguistic models in literary studies, I took for granted the centrality of literary theory, even as I followed the exploration of literariness in many other sorts of discourses, from history writing and psychoanalytic case histories to myths and advertising. In *Structuralist Poetics* (which grew out of that doctoral dissertation) I focus on work by French structuralists, particularly Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, and Tzvetan Todorov, but also draw on articles by Russian Formalists, especially Roman Jakobson and Victor Shklovsky, as well as other members of the Leningrad Opojaz school, Boris Eichenbaum, and Juri Tynianov. Although in retrospect it seems odd to have mingled Russian Formalists with French structuralists, clearly I was treating them as participating in the same enterprise. The immediate impetus came from the fact that although French structuralists had produced a certain number of literary analyses, they had not, with the exceptions of the very systematic work in narratology by Genette and the somewhat fragmentary and self-undermining analyses and indications of Barthes, offered efficient and accessible analyses of aspects of the system of literature, and if one wanted a salient illustration of the functioning of literary devices and techniques, one might find it more easily in the works of Shklovsky or even in suggestive remarks by Jakobson.

What was the common enterprise to which I took the structuralists and Formalists to be contributing? Or, what is the form of the formalism that I took to be at work here, animating two historically diverse intellectual conjunctures? Put simply, it was the development of a systematic poetics. In opposition to the “life and works” approach, which sought to situate literary or cultural objects in the biographically defined experience of a historical author, the formalism of poetics presumed the primacy of a system of conventions that made possible literary production. While literary study might take as its goal the elucidation of individual literary works, or the interpretation of works as products of a historical or biographical situation, the claim of formalism was that forms are neither ornaments to be admired for their embellishment of a thematic content nor the expression of a content that is the burden of the work and whose elucidation is the

goal of critical activity but that, on the contrary, the forms are themselves the central elements of the work, and the understanding of form is a condition of other possible critical and historical projects. The work of art is above all a combination of devices or formal structures that defamiliarize and deploy a logic of artistic convention against that of empirical experience or historiography.

This orientation comes out nicely in the slogans of the Russian Formalists' more pugnacious moments: that the device is the true hero of the work, for instance; that theme exists in order to allow the work to come into being; or that form creates for itself its own content. One could also say that at the level of the biographical experience of literary production the formalist orientation is eminently defensible: the poet characteristically is seeking not to represent something but to write a sonnet or an ode or an epic, or to experiment with diction, or to give free rein to a certain rhythm that has been haunting him or her. Very often, it is, shall we say, the form that inspires literary desire. In this sense the Formalists did not cut themselves off from the practice of poets and novelists but, as Jakobson insisted, pursued a line of inquiry that is often consonant with reflections of poets themselves.

The Russian Formalists had special importance in this general project of developing a poetics that would provide the conditions of possibility for literary works because they were more attuned to the idea of a literary system. French structuralists, taking structural linguistics as a model for their enterprise, were often less alert to what I took to be the logic of their enterprise; they often inclined, for instance, to treat the individual work itself, or the corpus of an author's works, as the system to be elucidated. This is frequently the case with Barthes, for example, whose *Sur Racine* undertakes a structural analysis of what he calls the Racinian universe. His *Sade*, *Fourier*, *Loyola* also takes each of these writers as the producer of a system, which can be analyzed as a language: they are logothètes, inventors of languages, combinatory systems.

In *Structuralist Poetics* I distinguish between the direct application of linguistic categories to the language of literary works, as in Jakobson's poetics analyses or in A. J. Greimas's attempts at describing the semantic structure of literary works or literary universes, and the indirect application of linguistic terminology, but within this second mode there is a range of pos-

sibilities: in addition to poetics, for instance, there is the attempt to treat the author's oeuvre as a system to be elucidated through the deployment of categories or methodological steps derived from linguistics. This orientation—which, strangely, often rejoins thematic criticism of various sorts, including the phenomenological criticism of the Geneva School (what are the elements of the author's fictional world? how do they combine?)—seems to me often to miss the fundamental insight of the Russian Formalists, which I take to be also at work in the most perspicacious moments of French structuralism: that the literary work is dependent for its meaning and effects on a system of possibilities, which need to be described. There are, to be sure, moments when Russian Formalists describe the work of art itself as a system (I take this to be above all the result of the focus on the device, the desire to conceive of the work as mechanism rather than as mimesis or means of expression), but Tynianov, for instance, declares, “Before embarking on any study of literature it is necessary to establish that the literary work constitutes one system and literature itself another, unrelated one. This convention is the only foundation upon which we can build a literary science which is capable of going beyond unsatisfactory collection of heterogeneous material and submitting them to proper study.”<sup>8</sup> This splendid, paradoxical insight insists that we have two levels of systematicity: on the one hand, the individual work can be treated as a system and the function of various elements within this system analyzed; but this is not sufficient, for unrelated to the work of art as autotelic whole there is, on the other hand, the system of literary possibilities, which is quite a different matter. Proper literary study involves this second level of systematicity, poetics.

In this powerful essay on literary evolution Tynianov appeals to a linguistic example (the way the function of an element changes) and articulates principles that resemble those of the linguistic model that would later come into prominence: the point of view adopted determines the nature of the object; the function of an element depends on the system to which it belongs; it is wrong to imagine that an element in one system is the same as an element in another. Thus, a rhythm that is new and startling in the literary system of one era will be banal, even nonpoetic, in another.<sup>9</sup>

8. Juri Tynianov, “De l'évolution littéraire,” in *Théorie de la littérature*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 1965), 122–23.

9. *Ibid.*, 125–26.



The linguistic model offers great methodological clarity here. It teaches that where there is meaning there is system and that just as the utterances of a speaker are made possible by the rules of a language (grammatical, phonological, semantic, and pragmatic), which enable listeners in turn to make sense of them, so literary works are made possible by a system of conventions and expectations, the analysis of which is crucial to an understanding of their functioning. The task of the linguist is to make explicit the grammar that makes possible the production and comprehension of utterances, and the task of the formalist critic or poetician is to try to make explicit the conventions of the literary system that make possible the production and interpretation of literary works. But, ironically, the French structuralists, who were much given to proclaiming the crucial role of linguistics as the pilot discipline for the human sciences, may have been misled by the hope that linguistics, with its terms and categories, would provide a discovery procedure for literary structure; and they often missed the true relevance of the linguistic model (linguistics is to language as poetics is to literature). The Russian Formalists, however, precisely because they were not thinking about taking the linguistics of their day as a methodological model but only hoped to use some of its insights in advancing their own goals, were able to keep in view a clearer sense of the goal of the kind of formal analysis that they were practicing: analyzing the system that makes possible literary events, the “grammar” that governs the production of literary works.<sup>10</sup>

The term *formalism* has become something of a pejorative epithet in our era of historicisms, but formalism does not involve a denial of history, as is sometimes claimed. What it rejects is historical interpretation that makes the work a symptom, whose causes are to be found in historical reality. The Saussurean model can clarify this issue: it is precisely because lan-

10. No doubt I am reading the Russian Formalists selectively and attributing a centrality to the project that I find best expressed, for example, in works such as Tynianov's "De l'évolution littéraire" and Victor Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose* (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990). It is also the logic of this project, I would claim, that has determined the historical legacy of Russian Formalism, for instance, in its most important modern incarnation, the Tel Aviv School of Poetics, founded by Benjamin Hrushovski, which has formed several generations of students in the projects of poetics, which persists actively in the journal *Poetics Today*.

guage is historical through and through, always changing, that the distinction between synchronic and diachronic analysis is necessary, that we must relate any linguistic event to the synchronic system from which it emerges. If language were not so radically historical, we would have less need of the distinction. But what might appear to be a particular form or even sign is not the same in two different stages of the language, because what it is depends on what surrounds it.

In the poetics promoted by the Russian Formalists the historical character of the literary system is emphasized, for that is the basis of the dialectic of defamiliarization and automatization: what has become automatic or familiar is defamiliarized by art. Shklovsky writes,

As a general rule I would like to add: a work of art is perceived against a background of, and by means of association with, other works of art. The form of a work of art is determined by the relation to other forms existing before it. The material of a work of art is definitely played with a pedal, i.e. is separated out, voiced. Not only a parody, but also in general any work of art is created as a parallel and a contradiction to some kind of model. A new form appears not in order to express a new content, but in order to replace an old form, which has already lost its artistic value.<sup>11</sup>

Formalism posits a study of literature that focuses on an underlying system always in evolution, since the mechanism of evolution is the functioning of literary works themselves. Today, when we are surrounded by historicisms of all kinds, we could do worse than to insist on the necessity of formalism for understanding the historicity of semiotic systems.

This version of literary theory, poetics, is considerably more difficult than theoretically inflected interpretation, and it therefore is continually being evaded or avoided, especially since poetics is always vulnerable to accusations of trying to systematize an object or practice, literature, that is valued for escaping or evading system. One could say that literary studies in the American academy, precisely because of its commitment to the priority of interpretation as the goal of literary study, was swift to posit a "poststructuralism" based on the impossibility or inappropriateness of the

11. Victor Shklovsky, "The Connection Between Devices of *Sjuzet* Construction and General Stylistic Devices," *Twentieth Century Studies* 7-8 (1972): 53.

systematic projects of structuralism, so that interpretation, albeit of different kinds, might remain the task of literary studies. Not only has the excitement of theory seemed to lie in its interdisciplinarity, which has led to the neglect of, say, theories of genres, of the novel, of the lyric, or of rhythm, but a belief that the systematizing ambitions of structuralism are *passé* has encouraged theory to focus on broad but unsystematizable issues of language, identity, the body, hybridity, desire, and power rather than on specific literary modes. We are rich in theories about language, discourse, hybridity, identity, sexuality but not in theories of the rules and conventions of particular genres, though such theories are necessary for understanding the ways individual works subvert these conventions—which, after all, is a major point of interest for interpretation. One problem of postcolonial studies, for instance, which otherwise is thriving, is the absence of good accounts of the literary norms against which postcolonial authors are said to be writing. Lacking descriptions of such norms, the discourse of critics either swiftly becomes thematic, focusing on questions of identity and resistance to authority, rather than on artistic innovation; or else it takes theoretical arguments themselves as the norms, so that the literary works are used to challenge Homi Bhabha's account of hybridity or colonial mimicry or the appropriateness of Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" for the case under discussion. These are interesting and productive uses of literature, but one wonders whether a more robust poetics would enable different approaches to the literary works, which might, for instance, explore how the conventions or formal conditions of literary works, rather than their themes, make possible certain kinds of critical engagements with institutions of power.

But if the formalism of the Russian Formalists and French structuralists leads logically to a poetics, this project is not without its difficulties. One of the critics and theorists most likely today to be accused of formalism, Paul de Man, writes,

Literary theory comes into being when the approach to literary texts is no longer based on non-linguistic, that is to say historical and aesthetic considerations, or, to put it somewhat less crudely, when the object of discussion is no longer the meaning or the value but the modalities of production and reception of meaning and value prior to their establishment, the implication being that this establishment is

problematic enough to require an autonomous discipline of critical investigation to consider its possibility and its status.<sup>12</sup>

But de Man identifies theory not with the projects of a systematic poetics but with what he calls reading, a hermeneutics attentive to the ways in which the rhetorical structures of the text resist proposed interpretations, and he can be aligned with a resistance to poetics, albeit in a particularly sophisticated mode. In “The Resistance to Theory” and “Semiology and Rhetoric” de Man is critical of the attempt to extend grammatical models beyond the sentence, as in projects that take linguistics as a model for poetics. To attempt to formulate rules and conventions on which literary meaning depends involves for him an obscuring of the rhetorical dimensions of texts, which require interpretation, not decoding by grammarlike models. “The extension of grammar to include para-figural dimensions is in fact the most debatable strategy of contemporary semiology, especially in the study of syntagmatic and narrative structures” (*RT*, 15). The attempt to translate often undecidable rhetorical structures into rules and conventions modeled on grammars is, in de Man’s account, a resistance to reading.

In an essay for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1982 entitled “The Return to Philology,” responding to Harvard professor Walter Jackson Bate’s call for university administrators and trustees everywhere to stop the destruction of literary studies by denying tenure to dangerous theorists, de Man wrote, “In practice, the turn to theory occurred as a return to philology, to an examination of the structure of language prior to the meaning it produces” (*RT*, 24). De Man traced his own exposure to the subversive force of literary instruction to a course in close reading taught by Bate’s Harvard colleague and rival, Reuben Brower. This course, Hum 6, “The Interpretation of Literature,” was based not on French theory but on the principle that what counts are “the words on the page”: in writing about literature “students were not to make any statements that they could not support by a specific use of language that actually occurred in the text” (*RT*, 23). They were asked to attend to the bafflement that singular turns of phrase and figure produce and to worry their puzzlement rather than, as de Man puts it, “hide their non-understanding behind a screen of received

12. Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 7; hereafter abbreviated *RT* and cited parenthetically in the text.

ideas” by moving from the language of the text into the realm of history and human experience. “Mere reading,” he concludes, “prior to any theory, is able to transform critical discourse in a manner that would appear deeply subversive to those who think of the teaching of literature as a substitute for the teaching of theology, ethics, psychology, or intellectual history” (*RT*, 24).

The impact of this pedagogical practice, de Man argues, was not so different from the impact of recent theory, since both involve the “examination of the structure of language prior to the meaning it produces” (*RT*, 24). At the time, in 1982, this idea of a return to philology seemed a joke. Philologists, after all, were the enemy, the ones who sneered not just at theory but even at interpretation of texts and who wanted students to abandon such matters for required courses in Anglo-Saxon and Old French. De Man’s move seemed above all a clever way of turning the tables on Bate: insinuating that the enemy on whom Bate had declared all-out war would prove to be not Jacques Derrida and hordes of Yale deconstructionists spouting foreign theory but a sober Harvard professor, his longtime departmental rival, Reuben Brower.

De Man’s late writings, which characterize theory as a resistance to reading and thus a resistance to theory, make such talk of a return to philology something to take more seriously, but de Man’s formulation, “mere reading, prior to any theory,” should put us on the alert. Insofar as it appears to suggest that there is critical reading unformed by theory, it is belied both by the history of modern reading and by the experience of de Man’s own students, who struggled mightily to learn to do something that would indeed qualify as “reading” in his eyes and their own. It did not come naturally, as they could unanimously attest. Reading, in de Man’s sense, is not something simple or natural but a strategy informed by considerable knowledge—knowledge about, among other things, the structure and functioning of rhetorical tropes and figures, the intertextual nature of literary discourse, the autonomy of language and its relations to the speaking subject, and the dangers that aesthetic, ethical, and historical views of literature can pose for reading. I discuss de Man’s account of reading and of the resistance to theory in Chapter 3.

This book is not a survey or history of theory, though some chapters do contain discussions of the historical vicissitudes of particular concepts

or problems. It aims, above all, to articulate the role of the literary in theory and to advance our understanding of the literary through some work in theory, on a range of theoretical concepts. The opening chapters engage the issues I have been discussing: the place of the literary in theory and various forms of resistance to theory, including the resistance of theory itself. Chapter 2, seeking to foreground the role of the literary in theory, takes up Benedict Anderson's celebrated discussion of the nation as an imagined community made possible by novelistic narration and print capitalism, generally, and explores what claims, precisely, are being made for the novel here and how these claims relate to the narrative techniques of novels. Details of narrative technique turn out to be quite important for the postulation of the imagined communities, which are related to the narratees, or narrative audiences implied by novels.

In the past two decades theory has involved the importation and the development within literary and cultural studies of theoretical discourses that do not take literature as their object, but there is evidence of a new centrality of the literary, both in a return to questions of aesthetics, which for a time were regarded as retrograde and elitist, and in the use of literary works to advance and to question theoretical assumptions, as in the work of Derrida on writers such as Celan and the work on poetry of philosophers in whom a new generation is taking an interest, such as Giorgio Agamben. There are also signs of a new theoretical interest in the lyric, but that is the topic of another book.<sup>13</sup> Whether this intensification of interest in the literary will lead to a revival of literary theories of what one might call the middle range—the poetics of particular genres or accounts of concepts of special literary import—it is too early to say, but the second and third sections of this book attempt some steps in that direction, seeking to elucidate a series of theoretical concepts of considerable literary significance and then focusing on philosophy and criticism as writing practices whose conventions we ought to seek to understand.

*Text, sign, interpretation, performativity, and omniscience* are the topics of the following section—a diverse set of concepts with a rich history in theory. The rise of theory itself is associated with the expansion of the concept of text. If for theory everything is a text, what advantages does the concept offer, and what are the variations that it undergoes in mod-

13. See my "Theorizing Lyric," a work in progress.

ern theoretical discourses? *Text* is a notion that arises in literary studies but has proven to be an instrument of considerable power in interdisciplinary studies (anthropology and film theory are two fields where its success was far from obvious), and it has been crucial for cultural studies, linking it to the literary in ways that have often been obscured by an anticanonical rhetoric.

The concept of the arbitrary nature of the sign is another fundamental element of the discursive space of theory. The first principle of Saussurean linguistics, it is foundational for theory, if anything is, linked to the linguistic turn of disciplines of the so-called human sciences, *les sciences humaines*. Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* calls the arbitrary nature of the sign a principle with "innumerable" consequences, even though all of them are not immediately evident. Among these consequences, fundamental for theory is the idea that language is not a nomenclature: it articulates the world rather than simply representing what is already given; discursive systems and practices produce what they purport to regulate or represent. Another consequence is the conception of theory as demystification, exposure of the arbitrariness or cultural constructedness of forms and structures taken as natural—an idea that does indeed seem to follow from the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign. Fundamental also to the theoretical enterprise of recent years has been Derrida's critique of Saussure, the analysis of Saussure and his theory of the sign as complicitous with logocentrism. This analysis is frequently regarded as one of the pivots that separates structuralism from poststructuralism, separates a Saussurean program of systematic allure from the critique of its possibility. Revisiting this encounter, and drawing on the students' notes used in constructing the *Course*, I find that there is not such a radical difference between Derrida and Saussure, after all. Above all, though, I argue that Saussure's account of the arbitrary nature of the sign needs to be linked to his claim—never previously given its due—that the linguistic system should be analyzed as a *limitation* of arbitrariness. If this claim were taken seriously, what sorts of consequences would it have for the semiology or cultural studies that derives from a determination to explore the arbitrariness of cultural signs?

The performative is a concept that has been extremely important in recent theory, beginning in Austin's speech act theory, articulated anew by Derrida, migrating to literary studies but linking the literary and the po-

litical in Derrida and de Man, and providing the basis for rethinking sexuality and identity categories in Judith Butler. Discussion of the fortunes of the performative explores not just the major differences between Austin's and Butler's versions and uses of the concept but also the impact of the implicit reference to theatrical performance. The performative, partly because of the complexity its history gives it, poses important questions for theory and to theory today. Further elaboration of aspects of performativity is likely to be a very active strain of the literary in theory.

The topic of the next chapter, on the other hand, seems wholly traditional—not the cutting edge of theory at all. Chapter 7 takes up in a new context the question of interpretation, which so far in this book has been opposed to poetics. Invited to respond to three lectures by Umberto Eco on the topic of interpretation and overinterpretation, I accepted the task that was obviously expected of me as an expounder of deconstruction: to defend what Eco called “overinterpretation.”

Now Eco's is a very interesting case, for this early champion of semiotics, holder of “the first chair of semiotics,” as we used to say, not knowing that it might also be one of the last, was strongly committed, as a semiotician, to the elaboration of models of sign systems and to the theorization of the functioning of literature—thus to poetics rather than hermeneutics. His early *L'Opera aperta*, articulating a distinction between open works (which solicit the collaboration of the reader) and closed works (which are more univocal), contributed to such a poetics, and one would expect him to be interested in the structure of interpretive systems rather than in correct interpretation. What should one make, then, of Eco's lectures, which develop a contrast between good and bad interpretation? In fact, he seems more engaged by interpretive practices of “overinterpretation” than by sound, moderate interpretation. And his own celebrated novels, especially *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*, show great fascination in chronicling the aberrant, obsessional, passion-driven interpretation of his characters and compel readers to take such an interest. This discrepancy between what Eco preaches and what he practices may carry a lesson about interpretation in general.

Chapter 8 is no doubt the purest venture into literary theory and poetics proper in this book: returning to narratology, once a very active structuralist enterprise, I take up a prenarratological category that has general-



ly escaped scrutiny by narratologists and other analysts of fiction, that of “omniscient” narration. The notion comes, of course, from a comparison of the novelist with God: the novelist stands to his or her work as God does to his creation. It is odd that such a blatantly theological notion should persist in discussions of fiction, despite the so-called hermeneutics of suspicion and critique of ideology that supposedly reigns in literary and cultural studies; odder still that it has scarcely been subjected to critical scrutiny. I argue that “omniscience” is not a useful notion, that it lumps together a number of different effects or strategies, which ought to be discriminated for the better analysis of narrative techniques, and that to make progress here we need to dispense with a concept of omniscience that has in fact misled critics and made certain sorts of novels seem ideologically suspect.

The next section continues the work of poetics but in a different mode. Though theory has contested the presumed priority of speech over writing and argued for the pertinence of writing as a model for signification in general, and though it has been resolutely self-reflexive, interrogating the status of theory, its history, its interests, still, theory has not often explicitly posed the question of its own nature as a practice of writing with its own conventions. Chapter 9 looks at philosophy as a kind of writing, addressing the charge of bad writing often leveled at theorists. Examining the case of Stanley Cavell, a notoriously difficult writer, I attempt to understand the purposes, the strategies, of difficult writing of this kind. Does its provocation of the reader work to philosophical ends, and, if so, how? Seeking to avoid the facile answer that difficult problems require difficult writing, I attempt to understand its functioning.

Chapter 10 takes up this sort of issue in broader terms, sketching the history of criticism over the last fifty years or so as a history of writing practices or discursive strategies, looking at some of the varying assumptions on which critical writing relies and the way in which its goals are manifested in writing techniques.

The last two chapters discuss more institutional questions in the realm of theory. First, there is the issue, inseparable from the contemporary fate of theory, of the nature of cultural studies. Might cultural studies be, in principle, the practice of which what we call “theory” is the theory? I argue that the opposition between cultural studies and literary studies, which has been a major cause of the sense that the literary has been aban-

doned or neglected by theory and theorists, is based on a dubious though understandable polemic that neglects the literary dimensions of many of cultural studies' most potent concepts. Although some practitioners have sought to introduce the term *cultural analysis* for a cultural studies that would not set itself against literary studies or against analysis of texts and culture of the past, I believe that it is better to retain the name and to recall cultural studies to its underlying literariness, as a space where such concepts as text, sign, and performativity, for instance, can be intensively and productively pursued.

Finally, I turn to the situation of comparative literature, which in the 1960s and 1970s took on an important identity as the home of theory (the conduit for the importation of foreign theory) but which—with the broad dissemination of theory and national literature departments' abandonment of the commitment to the historical study of a national literature—has lost much of its distinctiveness and some of its rationale. At a time when, with the spread of theory, English, French, and even German departments pursue postcolonial theory and cultural studies, teach courses on psychoanalysis and philosophy, when the high and the low, the verbal and the visual, the fictional and the nonfictional are everywhere compared, is this the triumph of comparative literature or its eclipse?

In fact, the chapters in this book seem to identify a common structure in the fate of theory, of literature, and of comparative literature. In each case we find a dissemination that leads to the loss of much of the distinctiveness and salience of the original object. Theory is no longer something distinct and alien that some scholars promote or practice and others combat: it is everywhere, but, no longer seen as new and distinctive, it can be denounced as dead or passé. Literature, as I argue in "The Literary in Theory," has become less a distinct object, fixed in a canon, than a property of discourse of diverse sorts, whose literariness—its narrative, rhetorical, performative qualities—can be studied by what were hitherto methods of literary analysis. And the values that are often taken for granted in literary reading of nonliterary materials are frequently literary values: concreteness, vividness, immediacy, paradoxical complexities. Finally, comparative literature would seem to have won its battles, in that other literature departments now agree that the historical study of the evolution of a national literature is not the only legitimate way to study literature but that there are

many sorts of approaches, based on methods and categories that need to be defended theoretically. If such views are widely accepted, this ought to be the triumph of comparative literature, but why does it seem like a crisis? In none of these cases is there pleasure or optimism about the condition of theory, of comparative literature, or of literature "itself." Is the uncertainty about whether to claim victory or a crisis a necessary feature of our cultural condition, or are there other ways in which we might conceive these situations? That is a question to which I hope readers will find some answers.