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Literary Theory

**Introduction to Literary Theory**

When we are asked to discuss literary theory, a bunch of (mostly foreign) names crosses our mind, names like Michel Foucault, Helene Cixous, Edward Said, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Luce Iragaray. Their works are not a reflection on the nature of literature or a discussion of the forms and techniques of writing. These writers’ relation to literature is barely evident; they are more interested in non-literary matters as psychoanalysis, politics, and philosophy.

Before delving into the mind of these writers, we need first to define the terms of our course: **literary theory**.

**Theory:**

Jonathan Culler wonders what theory is and gives us the following example:

‘Why did Laura and Michael split up?’

‘Well, my theory is that . . .’

For Jonathan Culler *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. It cannot be obvious; it involves complex relations of a systematic kind among a number of factors; and it is not easily confirmed or disproved.

Theory is the capacity to generalize about phenomena and to develop concepts that form the basis for interpretation and analysis. The mode of thought suggested by this working definition involves the ability first to think generally about a given set of phenomena (language, social relations, women’s experience, the novel as a form); second to develop theoretical concepts (or models) based on assumptions and principles governing the inclusion of elements within the set and the relations between those elements; and, finally, to use these concepts as the starting point from which to interpret and analyze specific instances within a set (the function of metaphor, capitalism, female gender roles, the *Bildungsroman*).

**Theory as genre**

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. 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. 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’: commonsense 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.

Theory is 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?

**Literature:**

If we look for the word literature in any current encyclopedia, we will be struck by the vagueness of its usage as well as an inevitable lack of substance in the attempts to define it. In most cases, literature is referred to as the entirety of written expression, with the restriction that not every written document can be categorized as literature in the more exact sense of the word. The definitions, therefore, usually include additional adjectives such as “aesthetic” or “artistic” to distinguish literary works from texts of everyday use such as telephone books, newspapers, legal documents and scholarly writings.

For **Jonathan Culler** literature’s definition is related to the community or the culture’s view. He says: ‘It is tempting to give it up and conclude that literature is whatever a given society treats as literature – a set of texts that cultural arbiters recognize as belonging to literature.

Works that today are studied as literature in English or Latin classes in schools and universities were once treated not as a special kind of writing but as fine examples of the use of language and rhetoric. Students were not asked to interpret them, as we now interpret literary works, seeking to explain what they are ‘really about’. On the contrary, students memorized them, studied their grammar, identified their rhetorical figures and their structures or procedures of argument. A work such as Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which today is studied as literature, was treated very differently in schools prior to 1850. Would works which today count as literature – say poems that seem snippets of ordinary conversation, without rhyme or discernible meter – have qualified as literature for 1800 students?

**The nature of literature**

**1. Literature as fiction**

One reason why readers attend to literature differently is that its utterances have a special relation to the world – a relation we call ‘fictional’. In fiction, the relation of what speakers say to what authors think is always a matter of interpretation. Non-fictional discourse is usually embedded in a context that tells you how to take it: an instruction manual, a newspaper report, a letter from a charity. The context of fiction, though, explicitly leaves open the question of what the fiction is really about.

**2. Literature as aesthetic object**

Aesthetic objects, for Kant and other theorists, have a ‘purposiveness without purpose’. There is a purposiveness to their construction: they are made so that their parts will work together towards some end. But the end is the work of art itself, pleasure in the work or pleasure occasioned by the work, not some external purpose.

**3. Literature as intertextual or self-reflexive construct**

Recent theorists have argued that works are made out of other works: made possible by prior works which they take up, repeat, challenge, transform. This notion sometimes goes by the fancy name of ‘intertextuality’.

Novels are at some level about novels, about the problems and possibilities of representing and giving shape or meaning to experience. So *Madame Bovary* can be read as an exploration of relations between Emma Bovary’s ‘real life’ and the way which both the romantic novels she reads and Flaubert’s own novel make sense of experience. This characteristic gives literature a self-reflexive nature.

The application of a more general theory (of art, culture, language and linguistics, aesthetics, politics, history, psychology, economics, gender, and so on) to literary works in the interests of a specific critical aim gives birth to what we call **literary theory.**

Literary theory is the body of ideas and methods we use in the practical reading of literature. It offers varying approaches for understanding the role of historical context in interpretation as well as the relevance of linguistic and unconscious elements of the text. It is a description of the underlying principles, one might say the tools, by which we attempt to understand literature.

Instead of talking about literary theory in general way, let us have a close examination to the writing of the celebrator theorist, Jacques Derrida.

**Derrida on writing**

We might look at an analysis by the contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida of a discussion of writing 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, 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.

 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. 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.

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.

**‘logic of supplementarity’**

Derrida believes that 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).

This example offers a reading or interpretation of texts, identifying a logic at work in a text. 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. Raising follow-up questions like this is, in turn, our way of stepping into ‘theory’ and practicing it. Theory illustrates that theory involves speculative practice: accounts of writing, language, and so on, that challenge received ideas. 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.

On one hand, theory seems very 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. On the other hand, theory’s importance lies in its ability to examine the literary work from different angles in order to fully appreciate a piece of literature.