
The Rise of Literary Theory

The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it.

Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist"

The historical life of ideas is neither straightforward nor causal. Ideas from one era are revived and revised for a new generation of thinkers, while new ones emerge from both predictable and surprising sources. This is certainly the case with the history of literary theory. As the twentieth century unfolded, literary theory took on a momentum that might be called progressive, each movement or trend building on the blind spots and logical flaws in those that had come before. But there was also a fair amount of recursive movement – doubling back to pick up a forgotten or misunderstood idea – as well as lateral forays into new terrain. Throughout this history, we find instances of innovation, both new combinations of existing theoretical ideas (for example, Marxist deconstruction) or the emergence of new areas of study (for example, cognitive studies); we also find projects of renovation, in which prior theoretical models (for example, materialist criticism or psychoanalysis) were given a new lease on life. These various modes of historical change were often happening simultaneously, so that we find clusters of intense growth and activity in key periods, especially in the modernist period (1920s and 1930s), the era of "high theory" (the 1960s and 1970s), and the posthumanist revolution that began to gain ground in the 1990s.

From the era of formalism and critical theory to the mid-century flourishing of poststructuralism and feminism to the rise of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and myriad theories under the banner of posthumanism, we see a rich and complex historical development. One cannot help but notice that from mid-century, the variety of theories increases dramatically, which means that this development is difficult to chart chronologically. For that reason, this history will attempt to

illustrate the simultaneity as well as the progression of theoretical change and renewal. It will also draw attention to recursive tendencies, those moments when theoretical development appears to turn back on itself to reclaim earlier modes of thought and methodologies (as we see in the 1990s with a reinvigorated Marxist theory). Indeed, the game-changing ideas in the posthumanist movement frequently take us back to Friedrich Nietzsche and Charles Darwin, those nineteenth-century “prolegomenal thinkers,” as Margo Norris calls them (6), who were products of their time but also, paradoxically, way ahead of it. This temporal paradox defines a good deal of literary theory and serves as a reminder of the importance of *untimely* experience, which Nietzsche describes as “acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come” (“On the Uses” 60).

Early Developments in Literary Theory

Literary theory has its roots in Greek and Roman philosophy, principally Plato’s ideas on mimesis and Aristotle’s *Poetics*, though there were many competing Athenian thinkers until the time of the Romans. Of special note among the latter is Pseudo-Longinus, whose *On the Sublime* (first century CE) put forward the idea of an aesthetic experience that we might today call “the beautiful” and thereby marked the beginning of AESTHETIC theory. Ideas about art and literature changed little until the Renaissance era, though medieval refinements, like anagogical and allegorical modes of interpretation, were to prove important for hermeneutics and for various schools of formalist and archetypal criticism. The period from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries produced a number of important treatises on literary art. Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poesie* (1595) was instrumental in establishing the importance of the literary artist as an “inventor” or “maker,” while John Dryden, in his *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* (1668), followed the lead of Pierre Corneille, whose *Of the Three Unities of Action, Time, and Place* (1660) established the principles of a neoclassical theory of drama and thereby formalized modern dramatic art. English neoclassicism reached its height in Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* (1711), which articulates a view of the critic who aspires toward the perfection of “Unerring NATURE,” a “clear, unchang’d universal light.” For Pope, the task of the critic is to follow the guidelines of those who have come before, for “Those RULES of old, discover’d, not devis’d, / Are Nature still, but Nature Methodiz’d” (ll.70–1, 88–9). The balanced and measured harmony of Pope’s couplets give a pleasing aesthetic form to a general neoclassical view of art as an improvement upon nature, a view that in the eighteenth century conformed to the Enlightenment principle of human perfectibility.

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, English and German Romantic literature challenged the neoclassical vision of art by giving voice to human striving for what lay beyond measure and balance, beyond formal perfection. At the same time, German idealist philosophy developed new theories of aesthetics. Most commentators today regard Alexander Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (1750) as the starting point of modern aesthetic theories. Baumgarten’s task was to find a way to bridge the gap between sensation and reason, a bridge he found in *aesthetics*, which is

derived from the Greek αἰσθητός, “sensible, perceptible” [OED]). The first major work in this new field was Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), which sought to establish the general outlines of a theory of *taste* and aesthetic judgment. Burke uses the term “taste” to mean “that faculty, or those faculties of the mind which are affected with, or which form a judgment of the works of imagination and the elegant arts” (6). Like Baumgarten, Burke proceeds from the assumption that taste is bound up with sensation; but he is not content with establishing aesthetics as an inferior kind of cognition. The faculty of imagination becomes an important feature of aesthetic judgment, for “the mind of man possesses a sort of creative power of its own” separate from sensation, “either in representing at pleasure the images of things in the order and manner in which they were received by the sense, or in combining those images in a new manner, according to a different order” (15–16). Burke was able to link empiricism and aesthetics in a systematic way, and his theories of art, particularly of the sublime, which emphasized affective states like terror and pain, were to prove immensely influential. Some years later, Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790) moved away from the English empirical tradition and Burkean aesthetic sensibility and established the importance of cognition in aesthetic judgments. For Kant, aesthetic judgments, though a “freer” form of ordinary cognition, are grounded in an *a priori* concept of taste that is analogous to the concepts that govern understanding and moral judgment. For Kant, aesthetic judgment *resembles* moral judgment, in that both have to take place outside the determinate CONCEPT, which is essential to reason. We know things because we have concepts for them, categories of understanding, but art, Kant says, does not become known in this conceptual way. All aesthetic judgments are reflective, not cognitive, and are deeply grounded in subjectivity; they are also singular because they cannot be defined under a general concept. An aesthetic idea “cannot become cognition because it is an *intuition* (of the imagination) for which an adequate concept can never be found” (215). But Kant required a universal ground or common sense (*sensus communis*) for artistic judgment. He found it in the idea of an *indeterminate* concept of Beauty (one that has the quality of a concept without being determined by reason), which allowed him to posit a “supersensible substrate of humanity” that grants aesthetic judgment universal validity. It is a necessary illusion, Kant admits, “the best we can do” (213). Kant’s theory of the sublime attempted to move past the emphasis on feeling in Burke’s philosophy. For both thinkers, the sublime defies the imagination’s power to conceive of an object or experience, but Kant tried to show how this failure of the imagination can be overcome by reason. The aesthetic judgment of the sublime, he argued, involves the judgment not of an object but of the relationship between an object’s overwhelming presence or force and the ability of the imagination to invoke a concept of “absolute freedom” or “absolute totality” that could assimilate it. When imagination is overwhelmed by perceptions (typically, natural and of the sort Burke describes as terrifying or awesome), reason steps in and “cognizes” what imagination has failed to grasp and thus shows its power over nature. This triumph of reason generates the sublime effect.

The concept of the beautiful is central to Kantian and neo-Kantian aesthetics, according to which judgments of the beautiful are disinterested, universal, and necessary; they

present the beautiful object as possessing “purposiveness without purpose” – that is, it appears to have a purpose, it is driven by *seeming to possess* the quality of purposiveness, but it has no *determinate* purpose, no *telos* or goal, and it corresponds to no determinate concept. Friedrich Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) departs from Kant’s aesthetics by sidestepping the problem of the concept and concentrating on the DIALECTICAL interplay of reason and imagination. He thus develops the Kantian idea of “play” well beyond where Kant himself wished to take it. In fine art, Kant notes, “the purposiveness in its form must seem as free from all constraint of chosen rules as if it were a product of mere nature” – a free *play* that is also purposive – and it must not “seem intentional; i.e., fine art must have the *look* of nature even though we are conscious of it as art: it must not appear painstaking” (16). Schiller develops the idea of a “play impulse,” a state in which artistic play, rather than serving the function of a paradoxical purposiveness without purpose, mediates between sense and reason. By reconciling “becoming with absolute being, of variation with identity,” the play-drive mediates the sense-drive and form-drive, by enabling both to “act in concert” and thereby “introduce form into matter and reality into form” (97–9). Schiller’s thought was influential among German and English Romantic writers and artists who sought to bring together the material realm of the sensible and the spiritual realm of pure thought. Indeed, the concept of play enabled a new way of “distributing the sensible,” as Jacques Rancière puts it. “Minimally defined,” he writes, “play is any activity that has no end other than itself, that does not intend to gain any effective power over things or persons.” The “inactive activity” of the “player” (as opposed to, say, the worker) is a suspension of both the “cognitive power of understanding” and the “sensibility that requires an object of desire” (30). Kant and Schiller remain important among post-Marxist theorists, especially Rancière who argues that their work articulates “the new and paradoxical regime for identifying what is recognizable as art ... the aesthetic regime” (*Aesthetics* 8), one which persists in framing our contemporary discussions of art and aesthetics. (On the aesthetic regime, see *Post-Marxist Theory* 114–15.)

G. W. F. Hegel answers what he considers to be the key questions confronting Kant and Schiller: Can we speak of universal assent to any aesthetic judgment without a concept of the beautiful or of the artwork? Can art be its own concept? Hegel thought that it could and developed a concept of art that is both true and necessary but that emerges in the same temporal and dialectical process as thought itself. Art aspires to the highest form of Spirit, for “the loftiness and excellence of art in attaining a reality adequate to its Concept will depend on the degree of inwardness and unity in which Idea and shape appear fused in one” (1: 72). Romantic art best exemplifies this notion of the artistic concept as part of the general process of Spirit (or Reason): rather than the “undivided unity of classical art” (a “unity of divine and human nature,” which is realized in a “sensuous immediate existence”), we find in Romantic art the “*inwardness of self-consciousness*” that “celebrates its triumph over the external and manifests its victory in and on the external itself, whereby what is apparent to the senses alone sinks into worthlessness” (1: 80–1).

The German idealist tradition exerted a powerful influence on English Romanticism, which in its turn inaugurated a tradition of critical reflection on literature and culture that influenced much of twentieth-century literary theory. One of the chief “conductors” of German aesthetic theory was Samuel Taylor Coleridge,

whose *Biographia Literaria* (1817) successfully translated German aesthetics into English terms. The division of imagination into primary and secondary modes and the distinction between imagination and fancy are two of the most famous propositions in that volume, and both are grounded in the aesthetics of Kant, Schiller, and Friedrich Schelling. For Coleridge, the primary imagination is “the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (295–6). The secondary imagination is an “echo” of this primary form, differing only in degree “and in the *mode* of its operation.” *Fancy* differs by virtue of its “play” within “fixities and definites,” a “mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space” (296). William Wordsworth was also influenced by Schiller, particularly his theory of aesthetic “play,” and in the distinction he drew between naïve and sentimental poetry, the latter characterized by reflective and skeptical self-consciousness, the former by “natural genius” and spontaneous, *unselfconsciousness*. The preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (co-authored by Wordsworth and Coleridge, 1800) expounds on the nature and function of literary art and the role of the artist in society; it also rejects neoclassical theories of poetic practice and turns to the “natural genius” of the “rustic” man as a model for the poet’s aesthetic sensibility. For Wordsworth, the poet is a hypersensitive individual, one “who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him” and who is “affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present” (xxviii). The poet finds in the “the native and naked dignity of man” and in divine Nature the “grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves” (xxxiii–xxxiv). The poem written by such a sensitive individual is the product of “emotion recollected in tranquility.” Percy Shelley’s *Defense of Poetry* puts forward a similar view of the poet as a sensitive participant in an “unremitting interchange” (“Mont Blanc”) with the natural world. For Shelley, poets “are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” for they produce an aesthetic object that “is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” (46, 10). A more radical statement of poetic sensitivity at the time was John Keats’ “negative capability,” which refers to the imaginative absorption in the world outside of oneself, a capacity for surrendering one’s personality in the contemplation of an object.

Romantic notions of art and the beautiful persisted throughout the nineteenth century and constituted a kind of secular spiritualism in the arts that reached a high point in the poetry of Alfred Lord Tennyson, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. However, not all writers of the era appreciated the Romantic emphasis on feeling and striving for the infinite. The critic and poet Matthew Arnold was ambivalent about Wordsworth, for example, though he admired him as he did the other major Romantics. As Michael O’Neill notes, Arnold “democratizes Romantic longing, presenting it as an all-pervasive emotion [in which] the special fate of the artist merges into [a] depiction of a general lot” (111). In fact, one of the problems for the Romantics was that they “did not know enough”: they “lacked “materials and a basis; a thorough interpretation of the world was necessarily denied to it” (Arnold 262–3). He believed that poetry, indeed all of literature, could serve an important function as a stabilizing influence in a society that was becoming increasingly less reliant on the church as the source of moral and ethical principles. His

“post-Romanticism” may have as much to do with the turmoil of mid-century Europe – marked by the wave of revolutions of 1848 – as with aesthetic concerns. Though much maligned for his cultural conservatism, Arnold may well have been the first literary theorist to recognize the deep connections between aesthetics and culture and, more important, between the critic and society. However, Arnold’s privileged position in nineteenth-century English society (his father was headmaster at Rugby School) gave him a somewhat restricted view of how literature could improve social conditions. His influential *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) considers the threat to society in class terms and offers what had become, by the late nineteenth century, a quintessentially liberal humanist solution to the problem. On the one hand, education, redesigned along humanist lines, should provide the kind of cultural knowledge necessary for a rapidly evolving industrial society; on the other hand, criticism should perform the function of recognizing and preserving “the best that is known and thought in the world” (268). Arnold held that “the critical power is of lower rank than the creative,” but he also held that criticism (along with philosophy) created “an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself” (260–1). Criticism should be free of Romantic emotionalism, for its chief endeavor is “to see the object as in itself it really is” (258). In order to do this, it must be informed by the “disinterested love of a free play of the mind on all subjects, for its own sake” (268). In a sense, Arnold rewrites Schiller’s idea of “play” in a way that resolves the paradox at its heart by making it a function of critical clear-sightedness.

According to Linda Dowling, Arnold and his contemporaries in the mid-nineteenth century, especially writers like John Ruskin and William Morris, embraced a form of artistic democracy, that she calls “Whig aesthetics,” rooted in the moral philosophy of the Earl of Shaftesbury and the aesthetics of Schiller. Whig aesthetics promoted the social and ethical utility of art but it also led to its putative opposite, the AESTHETICISM of the *fin de siècle*. For Dowling, Whig aestheticism encompasses such late nineteenth-century figures as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. Pater, an Oxford professor who made his reputation as an art historian and critic, had a powerful effect on young artists and writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His *Studies in the Renaissance* calls our attention to the “passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations” and argues for a perspective toward experience that is immediate and vital. But the aestheticism he advocates is not entirely a withdrawal from the world into the rarified realm of art – the usual meaning attached to the infamous “Conclusion,” in which Pater argues that art proposes to give us nothing “but the highest quality to [our] moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake” (190). In fact, Dowling argues that some Victorian readers would not have seen a break in continuity between Pater and his contemporaries, for they saw “an identical impulse toward restored community” rather than an “Aestheticist withdrawal into art.” In short, Pater too was motivated by “the liberal spirit of Victorian culture” (xi).

Far more radical were Wilde, Pater’s student at Oxford, and Friedrich Nietzsche, who in very similar ways point decisively toward the main concerns of twentieth-century literary theory. Nietzsche and Wilde were great shatterers of tradition; they warned us to go beyond the mere reversal of conventional values

(“the last shall be first,” Matt. 19:30) and even beyond a critique of those values themselves. For them, as for the modernists who followed, the goal was to interrogate the *value of value itself*, to learn its genealogy, its historical provenance, and to put forward entirely new modes of valuation. In Nietzsche’s thought, this *transvaluation* revealed, among other things, a recognition that aesthetics is a fundamental element of our value-making capacity, up to and including the value of truth. The concept *truth* is nothing more than the life-preserving consequence of our *drive toward truth*, not a transcendental, absolute, or universal idea; and we articulate this consequence, whether in the realm of science or morality, in the aesthetic dimension of language. Because language, in conceiving concepts for the things and ideas in the world, is not able adequately to convey the meaning of the multiplicitous and polymorphous nature of the world, truth becomes “a moveable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms ... illusions that we have forgotten are illusions” (“Truth” 84). What is required is to break through the illusion and embrace our status as creative beings – that is, in Wilde’s sense of the word, *liars*. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, his most sustained meditation on art, Nietzsche avers that “the aesthetically sensitive man stands in the same relation to the reality of dreams as the philosopher does to the reality of existence; he is a close and willing observer, for these images afford him an interpretation of life, and by reflecting on these processes he trains himself for life” (34). Because we are “aesthetically creating subjects,” we are able to correspond to our experience and intuitions, but only “by shattering and mocking the old conceptual barriers” (“Truth” 86, 90). Nietzsche’s understanding of the *Übermensch* and the tragic hero confirms the aesthetic nature of human being, for the “one thing needful” is “to give style to one’s character,” to maintain the “artist’s faith.” In the “experiments with himself” performed by the “free spirit,” “all nature ceases and becomes art” (*Gay Science* 232, 303).

Wilde understood this element of Nietzsche’s thought instinctively. While writing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, both a defense of aestheticism and a cautionary tale of its excesses, he noted that “to become a work of art is the object of living” (Ellmann 311). Like Nietzsche, Wilde believed that life is in many ways a form of aestheticized will or desire. He claimed that the “spirit of transcendentalism is alien to the spirit of art. For the artist can accept no sphere of life in exchange for life itself. For him there is no escape from the bondage of the earth: there is not even the desire of escape” (“English” 248). But this bondage is merely that, a kind of imprisonment, if it is not trumped by art, for one does not go to life for “our fulfillment or our experience,” one goes to art, because “Art does not hurt us” (*Intentions* 174). Wilde’s approach to art not only sustained the idealist tradition of aesthetics but also broadened its reach: “all the arts are fine arts,” he claimed, “and all the arts decorative arts” (“Arts” 301). In *Intentions* (1891), he makes the essentially Nietzschean point that “Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style” (30), that the artist’s lie (or “untruth”) gets us closer to what is “true” about life. In the dialogue “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde makes the provocative claim that criticism is a creative act, not a set of principles that guarantee the truth about art. When Ernest conveys the conventional Arnoldian belief that “the creative faculty is higher than the critical,” Gilbert delivers the *coup de grace*: “Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all” (125). Taking his cue from Pater, Wilde believed that the critic’s own impressions were the foundation of

criticism. Against Arnold's claim that the critic's responsibility is to see the object as it really is, Wilde counters that the "primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is *not*" (150). Whereas Arnold constructs a theory in which criticism serves an important, if secondary, role with respect to artistic creation, Wilde insists on the fundamentally *creative* nature of criticism: the critic is not only capable of creation but in fact completes the project of the artist, a radical idea that anticipates the phenomenological aesthetics of Jean-Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas who argue that philosophical criticism can relieve art of its "estrangement" from the world of lived experience.

The revolutionary thought of Wilde and Nietzsche is echoed in the work of Sigmund Freud, whose theories of the mind and its engagement with the world introduced the possibility of an internal estrangement. The idea of the unconscious, the logic of dreams, and the work of transference so central to psychoanalytic therapy, not only reshaped our conceptions of human identity and sexuality, but influenced our understanding of how literary language, indeed language *as such*, worked. If Nietzsche and Wilde transformed the classical aesthetic tradition by redefining the relation of art to life, Freud, like Marx and Darwin before him, redefined the relation of the individual to life. Marx's ONTOLOGY of "species-being," like Freud's theory of the mind, uprooted the notion that the individual was somehow able to transcend her environment by taking a transcendentalist position rooted in philosophy or religion or by assuming an irreducible core of selfhood that remained untouched by social and historical forces. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution further eroded the foundations of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism. All of these developments would come to have profound implications for literary theory in the twentieth century in large part because they helped to answer the questions posed by artists and writers beginning with the modernists and their most pressing query: what constitutes authentic human experience and how does art faithfully represent it? If the modernists hoped to recover or recreate such an experience, the postmodernists, beginning in the 1950s, threw into radical doubt not only the possibility of representing authentic human experience but also the authenticity of the human, indeed the very criterion of authenticity itself.

Modernism and Formalism, 1890s–1940s

Modernism was a dynamic project that influenced nearly every facet of artistic and cultural life in Europe, England, Ireland, and the United States, and thrived to varying degrees throughout the rest of the world. It unfolded at a time (ca. 1890–1950) of profound social and political turbulence, and took the form of unparalleled aesthetic innovation. In classic dialectical fashion, this innovative trend was paralleled by a fierce but dynamic cultural conservatism that sought not the preservation of tradition, unsullied by modernity, but a new orientation toward both. This is what Ezra Pound meant when he proclaimed the motto of modernism – *make it new* – which captures the creative and recursive temporality at work in modernist aesthetics. If modernist innovation differs from the innovation of past artistic movements, the difference is due primarily to the fact of a *break* with tradition that inaugurates it on a new

foundation. We see this double movement of break and refounding – building continuities out of discontinuities – at every stage of the modernist epoch, in which innovation is always a kind of renovation.

This double movement is evident in the work of early modernists like T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, T. E. Hulme, and Wyndham Lewis, who announced a decisive break with the aesthetic and literary conventions of the nineteenth century, particularly realism in fiction and romanticism in poetry, while retaining the Arnoldian criterion of “high seriousness” and the idea of a literary tradition marked by canonical “touchstones.” Some of them were skeptical, if not dismissive, of mass culture and democracy and mourned the passing of integrated, organic societies in which fine art and artistic vision had a high social value and conferred prestige upon artist and patron alike. Hulme, Eliot, and Pound called for a new classicism in poetry, which Hulme described as “a holding back, a reservation. The classical poet never forgets this finiteness, this limit of man.” Hulme’s main concern was to avoid the “spilt religion” of Romanticism, with its longing for the infinite, and the political philosophy associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the French Revolution (71). Pound and Lewis founded and promoted the Imagist and Vorticist movements, which provided the aesthetic foundation for this new classical standpoint. In *BLAST*, a short-lived literary journal edited by Lewis, the sculptor Henri Gaudier Brzeska described “vortex” as a transhistoric “driving power ... life in the absolute”: “VORTEX IS POINT ONE AND INDIVISIBLE” (Lewis 155–6). In the same issue, Pound defines it as an anti-historical form of temporality: all experience rushes into the vortex. “All the energized past, all the past that is living and worthy to live ... All the past that is vital, all the past that is capable of living into the future, is pregnant in the vortex, NOW” (Lewis 153). Pound’s *Cantos* and Eliot’s *The Waste Land* – through strategies of citation, quotation, allusion, pastiche, and other techniques – exemplify the temporal layering of Vorticism: “Ply over ply of life still wraps the earth here” (*Personae*, “Canto II,” l. 72). The recursive sense of the past so evident in these works is theorized in Yeats’s *A Vision* and novelized in Joyce’s *Ulysses*. It is one of the dominant strands of literary theory as it was consolidated in the modernist epoch.

After World War I, aesthetic innovations, in linguistic style, narrative form, and subject matter, increased sharply, peaking in the 1920s and 1930s, the era of high modernism. High modernist aesthetics were complex and at times contradictory. Many writers privileged SUBJECTIVE states and stream of consciousness points of view, which suggests the preeminence of the individual person or personality; yet Eliot’s doctrine of depersonalization – “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (7) – would seem to suggest the preeminence of the work itself (Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in a similar way argues for the disappearance of the artist). According to Eliot, the literary work does not reproduce personal emotions but rather produces a form of depersonalized “structural emotion” that expresses “feelings which are not in actual emotions at all” (10). The extinction of emotion or affect is evident throughout modernism and can be achieved through a variety of new techniques – including unreliable and multiple narrative points of view, non-mimetic styles, open poetic forms, esoteric symbolism, and non-linear or non-causal temporalities. One of the most important techniques for effacing the writer’s presence was the creation of a

persona or mask, the preparation, as Eliot puts it in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, of “a face to meet the faces that you meet.” These artistic techniques were given over to new themes, including what was once forbidden or whitewashed: sexuality and gender relations, non-Western religion and culture, anti-colonialism and racism. In modernist art, we see a dialectical movement between emotion and aesthetics, between personality and style, between a sensitive and vibrant subjectivity and the exorbitant if cool style of the artist as a kind of “spiritual-heroic refrigerating apparatus” (Joyce 223). What appears to be a contradiction is, in fact, a necessary component in a critique of traditional aesthetics. (On Eliot and modernism, see *New Criticism* 59–60.)

The modernist movement challenged the aesthetic traditions of the nineteenth century, and in the process not only renovated Romantic notions of poetry and poetics, but forged a new theoretical discourse on the novel. Innovation in the modernist novel began with a tactical redeployment of nineteenth-century realist styles (like those found in the work of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Balzac). Joseph Conrad and Henry James wrote prefaces to their works that developed some of the earliest theories of how the novel functions. Conrad’s preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* advocates a form of narrative *impressionism* that relies on “magic suggestiveness,” which is necessary for a mimetic style that remains faithful to the reality of one’s subjective impressions of the world. The absolute subjectivity of the artist and the absolute uniqueness of the modernist work of art both derive from this impressionism, which is testimony not so much to the failure of language to represent the world objectively but rather to the isolation that characterizes our subjective perceptions. “It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream,” Marlow tells his listeners, in *Heart of Darkness*, in words that sum up the narrative dilemma of so many modernist storytellers, who are confronted with “that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams” (27). The confusion of author, character, and narrator calls into question the concept of the subject as stable and self-identical, differentiated from both other subjects and other *objects* in the world. Henry James, in the prefaces to his novels, explores the function and authority of narrative point of view; he was among the first to practice and theorize about the technique of narrative focalization by which the novel achieves the effect of a specific *voic*e. Their critical reflections were developed further by critics like Percy Lubbock, whose *Craft of Fiction* elaborated on Jamesian ideas and inaugurated a tradition of novel theory concerned with the interrelationship of form and reading practices. From James to E. M. Forster to the early D. H. Lawrence and Joyce, the early modernists created substantial and singular styles that maintained clear lines of affiliation with nineteenth-century novel forms like the *Bildungsroman* and with the empirical style of realism that Ian Watt argued was the basis for the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century and that was still favored by late Victorian and Edwardian novelists like John Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett. (On the novel, see *Theory of the Novel*.)

The anti-mimetic strand of modernism that we begin to see in the 1920s with Joyce’s *Ulysses* and the work of Kafka, Virginia Woolf, and Gertrude Stein, does not reject realist styles so much as the valuation of mimesis as an aesthetic and

communicative norm and thus as a mode of social and political legitimation; it also gives priority to modes of analogy and resemblance that evade traditional realism while incorporating elements of the concrete material world into their anti-mimetic narratives. Novelists sought to go as far as possible beyond a conventional realism primarily concerned with the accurate presentation of detail. Woolf famously critiqued this desire for “a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged” and called for novelists to move beyond or stretch realism’s narrow stylistic range, to unveil life “as it really is” – “a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from beginning of consciousness to the end” (Woolf 160). As Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Bertolt Brecht and, later Beckett, demonstrate in their drama, an aesthetics grounded on mimesis, in which the artist can be assured of a stable relationship between the artwork and the world in which it is produced and received by its audience, no longer suffices because the relationship between art and the world had changed.

Woolf was among a generation of modernist writers who succeeded in breaking down an aesthetic orthodoxy that was profoundly male-dominated and in which women and their thought were primarily represented by male writers. This thesis, conveyed in her polemical *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), authorized aesthetic renovation in the service of representing women’s authentic experience. Woolf was far from alone. Writers as diverse as Stein and Djuna Barnes in fiction and Mina Loy and H.D. in poetry challenged dominant narrative and verse paradigms. H.D.’s rewriting of mythology from a feminist perspective constitutes both a critique and an appropriation of masculinist cultural traditions, and paved the way for later writers like Adrienne Rich and Angela Carter. Stein’s intensely fractured narratives put pressure on the very basis of narrative, the sentence. This kind of radical departure from a realist norm is matched in renovative energy by William Faulkner, whose rich linguistic excesses, shifting points of view, and recursive and multiple temporalities called into question the historical and causal basis of novelistic narrative. Stein and Faulkner’s experimental fictions, Marcel Proust’s *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, and Joyce’s *Ulysses*, test the limits of narrative form and characterization and foreground the role played by style in constructing the world of the novel. Temporality, both historical time and memory, is broken up into a chain of intense moments or distorted (telescoped, elongated); multiple timeframes intersect and overlap. Such experiments with narrative form not only challenged aesthetic orthodoxies, they helped to create new ones. Beginning in the 1930s we see increasingly more provocative innovations whose legibility is largely dependent on the new aesthetics illustrated by the works themselves, such as Woolf’s late novels, Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, and Beckett’s trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*). These late modernist texts served as litmus tests and tempted critics to announce the death of the novel, announcements that have proven to have missed the point.

We see a similar development in modernist poetry, particularly in the position of the speaker, whose function in lyric poetry had long been to express a coherent and consistent point of view. We can still discern such speakers in early modernist poetry, particularly in W. B. Yeats and Thomas Hardy. But by the 1920s, the poetic speaker is displaced by the diffident and abstract *personae* of such poems as Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. By the mid-1920s Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Pound’s *Cantos* were showing that the poetic

traditions that had enabled artistic expression were not only implausible in the twentieth century but inadequate to the aesthetic demands of the modernist artist confronted with new social and political realities. The associational or pastiche style of high modernism (with its mixing of linguistic and rhetorical styles and hybrid genres) manipulates multiple voices and temporal frameworks (which Pound called “ply over ply”) in a disjunctive mode of ironic self-reflexiveness. The modernist poem often foregrounds style in a way that deconstructs the relationship between form and content. Pound’s early writings on Imagism insist on the role of style as a liberating feature of modernist poetry:

An “Image” is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant to time ... It is the presentation of such “complex” instances instantaneously which gives the sense of sudden liberation; the sense of freedom from time and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art. (*Literary 4*)

Complexity, liberation, new temporalities, new forms of artistic growth – Pound’s prescription for the Imagist poet might well stand for modernism generally. Like Eliot’s “objective correlative” and Yeats’s automatic writing, Pound’s Imagism is a sign of how poetic meaning is tied to the style (linguistic and rhetorical) of the poem. As Gwendolyn says in Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*: “In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing” (150). Neither Gwendolyn nor Wilde is joking. For modernists generally, artistic style was not an affectation; nor was it a more or less excessive ornamentation. In line with other contemporary artistic practices and anticipating French phenomenology and poststructuralism, modernist writers began to see language as the proper *object* as well as the medium of aesthetic production.

Literary theory owes much to the proclamations and enigmas of the modernists. Of special importance were Eliot’s critical essays, which modeled modernist innovation by providing a new and rigorous basis for literary analysis and judgment. Foundational for him was *tradition*, which he regarded as being in dialectical relation with each new individual artist. Such a model of tradition implied a refined historical sense, “which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity” (4). Eliot attempted to make a virtue of the “dissociated sensibility” that he believed had “set in” in the seventeenth century and made it impossible to “devour any kind of experience” (247). The classical rigors of the metaphysical poets and Jacobean tragedians provided a hedge against this dissociation and allowed the development of an aesthetic in which sensation and sensibility were unified in an aesthetics of depersonalization. Connected to this willful self-alienation in the service of art is a vision of temporality that accommodates the disjunctive relation of the artist to the social world. Eliot’s revolutionary approach to history reflects a general attitude among modernists, one that is reflected in their interest in non-traditional historical thinking. Pound and Yeats were interested in cyclical theories of history, and Joyce famously adapted Giambattista Vico’s theory of history as a form of

ricorso (or recurring phases). T. E. Hulme and Woolf advocated a sense of time that drew on Henri Bergson's notion of duration (*la durée*), in which time is freed of causality and the simultaneity of experiences counters a vision of time as chronological and measured by the clock and calendar. Like Vorticism, modernist historicism breaks down or reconfigures the boundaries between past and present, memory and history and, in the most radical experiments, transforms history into pure duration, an infinitely extensive and differentiated moment.

Literary modernism was accompanied by a revolution in linguistics that saw the rise of a structuralist theory of language. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure argued, in *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), that language is grounded in the structural differences between phonemes, very basic sound units, rather than in the mimetic relation of the sign to an external referent. Unlike theories of language that posit a direct and verifiable correspondence between a word and an object or concept in the world, Saussure's structuralism is based on the idea that language functions as a system (*langue*) that determines the meaning of specific statements (*parole*) within it. Words function as SIGNS, which contain both a material SIGNIFIER (which corresponds to what Saussure called a "signal") and a SIGNIFIED (a concept or "signification"). For him, language was primarily a system of internal differences between signifiers, or *phonemes*, rather than the natural or predictable relations between signifiers and signifieds. These relations, he argued, were at bottom arbitrary, the work of convention within the language system.

Beginning in the 1920s, the basic insights of Saussurean linguistics were being adopted by various schools of formalism and structuralism, related disciplines that focused, respectively, on literary and cultural forms. In some cases, as in the work of Vladimir Propp, it is difficult to disentangle the structuralist and formalist elements. His study of folktales, for example, uncovers the structural coherence across cultural boundaries of narrative and character types and provides a formalist taxonomy of folktales. Roman Jakobson typifies the formalist approach to literature, which entails primarily a negotiation between metaphoric and metonymic language functions. Literature tends to be metaphoric, while non-literary texts tend to be metonymic; however, he understood that the functions of language are not so easily separated. In fact, he argued that poetry functions precisely by "projection" of the two levels of language into each other: "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination" ("Closing Statement" 358). Formalism is less interested in the universal character of language as a structure than in how language is used to create different forms of DISCOURSE. Viktor Shklovsky, like Jakobson associated with the Moscow Circle of linguists, argues, in *Theory of Prose* (1925), that literary texts actually reveal or "lay bare" their own form through processes of *estrangement* and *defamiliarization*. These techniques make possible a reevaluation of literary language and narrative forms to the extent that these formal processes determine or become themselves the meaning of the text.

Linked to these schools of thought is the New Criticism, a practical formalism that owes a tremendous debt to the criticism and poetics of T. S. Eliot. The New Criticism flourished from the 1920s through the 1940s and was primarily concerned with poetry and poetic form. But whereas Russian formalism grew out of the science of linguistics and provided a theoretical basis for innovation in a wide variety of other

disciplines, the New Criticism emerged out of literary modernism as a set of interpretive strategies that did not have a wide impact outside literary studies. These strategies were grounded in large part on the practice and theoretical insights of modernist poet-critics, like Eliot (who edited *Criterion*), Robert Penn Warren (who co-edited the *Southern Review*), and Allen Tate (associated with the *Sewanee Review*). These writers, and the contributors and readers of the “little magazines,” were instrumental in promoting the new critical doctrines in England and the United States.

The New Criticism, which privileged the kind of esoteric and erudite poetry that invited close reading and that was eminently suited both to the teacher in the classroom and to the professional critic, was crucial to this development. It encompassed a variety of interpretive methods that shared certain key elements, the most important of which was the notion of the literary work as AUTONOMOUS and self-contained – a “verbal icon,” as W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley famously put it. For I. A. Richards, this autonomy was a form of affective unity. Referring to the difficulty of Eliot’s poetry, he asserts that the various elements of his work “are united by the accord, contrast, and interaction of their emotional effects” (290). In Richards’ view the formal unity of a literary text is a function of the subjectivity of the critic, who must not ascribe “peculiar, unique and mystic virtues to forms in themselves,” since the effects of form are bound up with the mental effects that literary works excite in readers (173). Richards’ approach was unique, however, since most New Critics, especially in the United States, downplayed the psychological dimension of the reader and stressed the verbal and rhetorical dimensions of the literary work.

The Chicago School of neo-Aristotelian formalism, which grew around R. S. Crane beginning in the 1930s, opposed the New Critics in part because of their lack of discipline in rhetorical traditions and what was perceived to be their subjective approach to interpretation. Nevertheless, the New Critical methodology and pedagogy dominated in the classroom. The growing importance of English departments in US universities helped to create a class of professionally trained academic critics, many of whom embraced the formalist methods outlined above. A crucial result of this new professional elite was the creation of college textbooks focusing on poetry and fiction – including Brooks and Warren’s *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1959) – in which new formalist modes of interpretation were made available as practical tools in the classroom. It is hard to underestimate both the CANON-forming impetus behind the New Criticism and the extent to which it and other formalist methods transformed the nature of scholarship and teaching. Though its theoretical influence was relatively slight, its effect on practical criticism has been widespread and continues to influence how literature is discussed in the classroom and in scholarly journals.

Cultural and Critical Theory, 1930s–1960s

The emergence of formalism was answered dialectically by the rise of Marxist-oriented critical theory. While aesthetic formalism was to be avoided, as V. I. Lenin insisted in the early twentieth century (see Jay 173), formalism in general represented a movement within a dialectical criticism. “Although inadequate in itself,” Martin

Jay writes, “formalism provided a vital safeguard, which substantive rationality, whether legal or logical, ignored at its peril. Formalism, in short, was a genuine moment of the dialectical totality, which ought not to be simply negated” (145). Leon Trotsky has written that formalism “opens a path – one of several paths – to the artist’s feeling for the world” and to the nature of relations between the individual artist and the “social environment” (139). However, the main emphasis in Marxian critical theory remains the materialist analysis of society and culture. One of the most significant early figures was Georg Lukács, a vocal critic of the modernist novel and a champion of “critical realism.” In 1920, in exile after the failure of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, Lukács published *Theory of the Novel*, a study strongly influenced by Hegel. He describes the novel as a “problematic” genre in that it remains anchored to an ideal of unity and fullness that is incommensurate with social conditions: “The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive TOTALITY of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality” (56).

The same problems that preoccupied Lukács also determined the nature and direction of the social theory coming out of the Institute for Social Research, founded by Felix Weil and incorporated into Frankfurt University in 1923 under the directorship of Carl Grünberg, who made Marxism its theoretical basis. Max Horkheimer became director in 1930, and the Institute relocated, in the wake of Hitler’s rise to power, to Geneva in 1933 and shortly thereafter to New York, where it was affiliated with Columbia University until it was reestablished in Germany after the war. These geopolitical developments were largely responsible for the shift of focus, in the late 1930s and 1940s, from economics and the modes of production to culture and IDEOLOGY. In the postwar period, a wide variety of methods were adopted by Institute members, with Friedrich Pollock joining Horkheimer in the Marxist analysis of state capitalism and Herbert Marcuse joining Erich Fromm in exploring psychoanalytical approaches to society and its institutions; Fromm’s theory of “social psychology” was particularly influential. What linked these disparate projects was a commitment to *critical* theory. Unlike *traditional* theory, which is grounded in scientific research and social development under capitalism, critical theory, as Horkheimer described it, entailed a dialectical overcoming of the tension between the individual and society and the abolition of “the opposition between the individual’s purposefulness, spontaneity, and rationality, and those work–process relationships on which society is built” (210). Despite differences in methodology and objects of study, the Institute theorists shared a common goal: the systematic investigation of totalitarian and authoritarian ideology (specifically fascism and Nazism), anti-Semitism, and mass commodity culture. **Theodor Adorno’s** collaboration with Horkheimer resulted in arguably the single most influential text to emerge from the Institute, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). In a dialectical critique of the Enlightenment project of MODERNITY, they demonstrate how rationality produced both the “culture industry” – Adorno’s term for the concentrated efforts of media corporations to convert cultural products into COMMODITIES – and the totalitarianism that swept through Europe beginning in the 1920s. From their viewpoint, the lost autonomy of the authentic subject is compensated for only by an empty and abstract individualism promoted by the culture industry.

Another fascinating relationship, which did not result in formal collaboration, was that between Adorno and **Walter Benjamin**. Though not formally a member of the Institute, Benjamin shared many of its concerns and, through his correspondence with him, engaged with Adorno's ideas in a provocative way. He had wide-ranging interests, including music, film, religion, literature, fashion, politics, urban geography, and the Parisian arcades. Like other Institute theorists, his work is characterized by a dialectical method; but unlike them, his understanding of history was influenced by thinkers in the Jewish Kabbalistic tradition. His emphasis on messianism led to the innovative conception of "dialectics at a standstill," which transpires in "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*), a moment of critical historical reflection that enables the redemption of the past. Benjamin also departed from the main line of Institute theory by according the subject a high degree of freedom within capitalist society. Granted, freedom was compromised from the start by the commodified world in which the individual moved; but this "fallen world" was the only one in which humanity could strive for freedom and recover something of a lost wholeness (an idea he borrowed from Kabbalistic thought). The *flâneur*, whose inauthentic subjectivity can be mobilized for progressive points of view, even in the commodified market-world of late capitalism, is the emblem of this freedom. Benjamin's tragic fate – certain that Hitler's Gestapo was on his trail, he committed suicide at the Spanish frontier on September 26, 1940 – stands as a sobering reminder of the price paid by the individual who resists totalitarianism.

The Institute returned to Frankfurt in 1953, and Adorno and Horkheimer became co-directors in 1955. Adorno's death in 1969 and Horkheimer's in 1973 marked the passing of the first generation of critical theorists, though Marcuse would remain influential throughout the 1960s and early 1970s as an intellectual mentor of anti-war activists in Europe and the United States. Beginning in the 1960s, Jürgen Habermas emerged as the leading figure of the next generation. His key works in the 1960s, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and *Legitimation Crisis*, were concerned primarily with the problem of achieving political consensus through "communicative rationality" and with resolving the crisis of ideological legitimacy through a reaffirmation of reason and the project of Enlightenment. Like his predecessors, Habermas critiqued capitalism but from a new standpoint, one in which rationality could be reconciled with a genuine form of participatory democracy. By the 1980s, critical theory had moved beyond the institutional parameters of the Frankfurt School, in part due to the rise of post-Marxist theory.

At about the same time that Habermas was reconfiguring Frankfurt School critical theory, British Marxism was finding new expression in cultural studies. After World War II, Britain changed dramatically, in part because of the shift from economic austerity to post-industrial affluence and in part because of the break up of the colonies after the partitioning of India in 1948 (this process arguably began in 1922 with the establishment of the Irish Free State). One response to these transitions and transformations was the rise of CULTURAL MATERIALISM, a form of analysis that sought in concrete social conditions the meaning of cultural movements and aesthetic works and practices. Primarily associated with historians like E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, cultural materialism ultimately drove a wide array of theoretical projects. In the early years, Richard Hoggart and **Raymond Williams**

brought materialist and sociological methods of analysis to bear on the study of mass culture and literature. Writing in 1982 about his landmark study *Culture and Society: 1780–1950* (1958), Williams remarked that he wrote it “in the post-1945 crisis of belief and affiliation” as an attempt “to understand and act in contemporary society, necessarily through its history, which had delivered this strange, unsettling, world to us” (xii). The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (UK) was established in 1964 in order to understand this new unsettling world.

Broadly speaking, British cultural studies focused on literary and cultural traditions, new media technologies, and marginalized social groups and “subcultures.” Hoggart’s work on literacy and **Stuart Hall’s** on politics and the police exemplify the sociological tenor of early work at the Birmingham Centre. Of signal importance to thinkers like Hall, Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer, and Janet Woollacott was the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who was active in the Italian Communist Party throughout the 1920s, until he was imprisoned in 1926 by Mussolini’s fascist government under the “Exceptional Laws.” Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, written in a coded fashion to evade censorship, critiqued the structure of complex capitalist societies and argued that dominant social classes exercise power primarily through HEGEMONY. From the time of Lenin, hegemony was associated with the proletariat and its political control after the revolution; for Gramsci, it came to signify modes of governance associated with any dominant class. It is achieved through modes of indirect and “spontaneous” consensus, and takes the form of DOMINATION in those “moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed” (12). In his theory of the SUPERSTRUCTURE, hegemony functions as consensus within the civil sphere and as domination in the political sphere. However, as Graeme Turner has noted, the so-called “Gramscian turn” toward the study of ideology and hegemony limited the capacity “to theorize the forms of political conflict and relations specific to the functioning of particular cultural technologies.” This was due in part to the limitations of Marxist materialism, which some British cultural studies theorists sought to remedy by turning to the work of thinkers like **Michel Foucault**, whose theory of POWER/KNOWLEDGE expanded the critical potential of Marxist critique so that theorists might “work with” ideology rather than “write it off” as a producer of false consciousness (Turner 31). Though Foucault’s work was important for many of the Centre theorists, there was a general reluctance to embrace French poststructuralism, which, by the early 1970s, had become the dominant theoretical movement in the human sciences in the Western world.

The Poststructuralist Turn, 1960s–1970s

The “poststructuralist turn” in literary theory began in France in the early 1960s and was made manifest by October 1966 in a landmark symposium on “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” at the Johns Hopkins University Humanities Center. Among those attending were René Girard, Georges Poulet, Tzvetan Todorov, Jean Hyppolite, **Roland Barthes**, **Jacques Lacan**, and **Jacques Derrida**. The majority of speakers were French and their innovative theoretical work reflected the heady

times of the Trente Glorieuses, a postwar period of growth and national renewal that spread through every sector of French society. The provocative challenge to academic traditions issued by these thinkers, particularly Barthes, Lacan, and Derrida, was greeted with enthusiasm by students and teachers in the humanities who sought an alternative to formalist and materialist methodologies.

Like most developments in literary theory, poststructuralism was less a coherent movement than a series of departures from tradition that used similar tactics to achieve sometimes quite different ends. Unlike postmodernism, which tends to bypass or dismiss the importance of structure, poststructuralism remains rooted in the problematic of structure itself, and particularly the *a priori* and transcendent logic by which structures and systems remain coherent and centered. It emerged in the 1960s during the peak period of structuralism and effectively supplanted it with an emphasis on TEXTUALITY as the means by which individuals come to know their experience of and their being in the world. As a response and a critique to structuralism, poststructuralist theorists are indebted not only to Saussure's groundbreaking insights into the structure of language but also to Claude Lévi-Strauss's use of them in the analysis of cultural practices and myths. Drawing on Saussure as well as on the formalism of Roman Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss argued, in *Structural Anthropology* (1958), that elements of culture, like kinship systems, rituals, myths, even common practices like food preparation, could be understood according to structures analogous to those found in language. Moreover, these structures could account for similarities among cultures widely separated geographically. In a sense, structural anthropology confirmed what Freud had theorized in psychoanalytic terms: that some features of human culture, like the prohibition against incest, were not only universal but could be understood and analyzed using a single method. The idea that culture could be studied as coherent and stable signifying systems and that these systems operated in a similar fashion in diverse societies had a galvanizing effect on Barthes, whose *Mythologies* (1957) analyzed aspects of everyday life – like laundry detergent, magazine covers, fashion, and sports – according to their structural dynamics. For him, “mythology” was everywhere in culture, functioning as a “second order” language (i.e., a metalanguage) that transformed the signifying power of objects, images, and everyday language.

Another key area in which structuralism made inroads was the study of narrative. Barthes' “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative” (1966), one of the earliest and most influential works in the field, argued that meaning in narrative was a function of the distribution or integration of “units” along the lines of linguistic structure. “Structurally, narrative shares the characteristics of the sentence without ever being reducible to the simple sum of its sentences: a narrative is a long sentence, just as every constative sentence is in a way the rough outline of a short narrative” (84). Like Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myth, which also functioned in a sentence-like manner, Barthes' analysis challenged our assumptions not only about narrative but also about the actors and narrators within it. Gérard Genette at about the same time began his multi-volume project *Figures* in the same vein, refining the structural categories of narrative form and exploring in new ways the function of point of view, which until this time was largely understood in very loose terms as a kind of affective distance (for example, the intimacy of first person over against the more disinterested

third person). Wayne Booth accomplished much the same thing in his *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), in which he sought to define point of view in terms of the rhetorical “implication” or stance taken by a narrator. In all of these cases, as in the structural semantics of A. J. Greimas, narrative emerged as a set of rhetorical or formal *functions* grounded in linguistic structure and difference.

Structuralism helped prepare the ground for poststructuralism, but so too did phenomenology, a branch of philosophy concerned with the problems of consciousness and of ontology (the study of being), particularly the question of what it means to exist, *to be* in the world. From Martin Heidegger to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenologists had struggled with metaphysical ideas and concepts – dichotomies like subject/object and presence/absence, transcendental ideas, dialectical closure, absolute being – in an attempt to grasp the reality of being outside the confines of an idealist philosophy that posits being as existing prior to our experience of it. In the 1950s and 1960s, phenomenological criticism, from Merleau-Ponty to Bachelard and Poulet, focused on how language mediated being in the world; like earlier thinkers, they struggled with the subject/object, mind/body dualities that plague metaphysics and ontology. One important development in this tradition was reader-response theory. Some of the earliest work in this field was done in the 1930s by the phenomenologist Roman Ingarden, who influenced later thinkers, such as Umberto Eco, Hans Robert Jauss, and **Wolfgang Iser**. Iser’s *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978) created the foundation for a theory of reading that explained how texts are constructed or completed by the active response of the reader to the challenges issued by them. In the United States, **Stanley Fish** introduced the concept of “affective stylistics,” which is grounded in the reader’s response to and construction of the literary text. His most popular and influential work, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980), combined the aesthetic dimension of Hans Robert Jauss’s reception theory with an interest in the way that academic and other social institutions created “interpretive communities” that could account both for shared reading experiences among diverse individuals and for divergent interpretations of the same text. These theories of reading complement and extend the theories of the author and textual authority advanced by Barthes and Foucault in the 1960s. As Barthes put it, the birth of the author takes place “at the cost of the death of the Author” (*Image* 148).

At the heart of poststructuralism is Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction, which took aim at the stabilizing and CENTERING constructs in structuralism and on the idea of presence, particularly in the form of a TRANSCENDENTAL SIGNIFIED, that dominated metaphysical philosophy (see *Of Grammatology*, lxv). Following Heidegger, he formulated a critique of PRESENCE in which the “being there” of things, their essence, is revealed to be nothing more than an absence, the deferral of meaning in a process of endless signification. Of the many terms Derrida used to refer to this process, the most important is DIFFÉRENCE, which refers both to the DEFERRAL of meaning and the *difference* that characterizes meaning in language (i.e., the difference between signifiers within language understood as a system). Language is haunted by this absent presence, in which meaning is decoupled from reference, and the signified of any sign is constantly deferred or SUPPLEMENTED (by signifiers) along a signifying chain. It is not that the referent is “missing” but that its absence is crucial to

signification. Derrida decisively announced this aspect of the poststructuralist project in his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Humanities,” in which he critiqued the structuralist anthropology of Lévi-Strauss and concluded that structuralism must follow philosophy into its own deconstruction. The “circle” of “destructive discourses,” from Nietzsche to Freud to Heidegger, links the history of metaphysics with its destruction. “*There is no sense,*” he writes, “in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to attack metaphysics” (*Grammatology* 250).

Though French forms of deconstruction dominated in the 1970s, there were several noteworthy developments in the United States, particularly in the work of **Paul de Man** and **J. Hillis Miller**. De Man argues for a form of rhetorical analysis that lays bare the “literariness” of the text, its essentially allegorical structure, which is paradoxically bound up with a constitutive blindness to the gaps, contradictions, and aporias that destabilize logical and grammatical understanding. Miller’s deconstructionist method is grounded in a phenomenology of reading (influenced by Georges Poulet) that marks the text itself as a phenomenal other. In both De Man and Miller duplicity and its aesthetic and ethical effects – its ironies, doubleness, blindness, and “parasitism” – are located in narrative, in rhetoric, in the very temporality of language, in which the reader and writer confront the limits of human experience *in* language. Joseph Riddel sees in deconstructionist theory a form of “negative humanism” (82) exemplified by Derrida’s critique of metaphysics and De Man’s insistence on the purely rhetorical function of language. If language is internally differentiated and if it does not refer directly to an object outside of itself, then it becomes self-referential.

The general critique of metaphysics and elaboration of the concept of *différance* resulted in new theories of TEXTUALITY and semiotics and new strategies of interpretation. Preeminent in this regard was the concept of INTERTEXTUALITY, the complex and self-reflexive relations between and among texts within discourse networks (e.g., the novel) that are not necessarily deliberately created by the author (in the sense of influence) but are rather a function of the network itself. The linguist, poststructuralist, and psychoanalyst **Julia Kristeva** pioneered a form of intertextuality that drew on the work of the Russian theorist **M. M. Bakhtin**. Bakhtin emphasized the DIALOGIC structure of literary discourse, particularly the novel, and its openness to language forms of any kind. His theory of HETEROGLOSSIA, though first published in the 1930s, did not have a pronounced effect in European theory until Kristeva and others began to use his work. The idea that the language of the novel was stratified with different ideologically encoded styles, that a dominant monological novelistic voice often suppressed other potential voices, led many theorists to argue that intertextuality was not simply a potential for connection between texts but was in fact the very condition of textual communication as such. It is fair to say that Bakhtin was poststructuralist *avant la lettre*.

Kristeva’s work on intertextuality together with Barthes’ later theories of writing and textuality speak to a concern with discourse as a system in which language is organized according to the kinds of statements it makes. Michel Foucault’s work is crucial to the task of grasping this idea of a DISCOURSE FORMATION. In *Archaeology of Knowledge*, he takes as a “starting-point whatever unities are already given,” not in order to study them (for they are “dubious”), but to “make use of them

just long enough to ask myself what unities they form; by what right they can claim a field that specifies them in space and a continuity that individualizes them in time; according to what laws they are formed.” He will accept “the groupings that history suggests only to subject them at once to interrogation” (26). This tactical maneuver, which he uses to analyze the discursive unities behind medicine, justice, history, psychiatry, and other fields, is not unlike deconstruction: it accepts the existence of unities, but refuses to accept their essential or universal character. In formulating a theory of discourse formations and an ARCHAEOLOGICAL mode of analyzing them, Foucault moves beyond the poststructuralist project, however, for in his work, as in that of the postmodern philosopher Gilles Deleuze, we find concepts of dispersion and the event that in some ways leave the very idea of structure behind. But this does not mean that we leave behind the subject of power, which the late Foucault sees as possessing a kind of tactical AGENCY. This is why his project, and that of other poststructuralists, cannot help but engage in a “critique of our historical era” (“What” 42).

Another exemplary figure in this regard is the French psychoanalyst **Jacques Lacan**, who offers a critique of the subject grounded in structuralist linguistics and Freudian psychoanalysis. At issue for Lacan is the status of the SUBJECT and the nature of language in psychoanalysis. Lacan began writing in the late 1930s and held his first public seminar on psychoanalysis at Sainte-Anne hospital in Paris in 1953. Dissatisfied with the tendencies of ego-psychology, which he believed simplified the nature and role of the ego in the subject, he called for a “return to Freud” from the perspective of structural linguistics and poststructuralist theories of desire, the sacred, the body, and death. Of signal importance for Lacan was the function of language in the formation of the unconscious, which Freud had touched on in his discussion of the dream-work in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In a 1957 lecture, Lacan famously remarked that “It is the whole structure of language that psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious” (139), and he drew on Saussure’s theory of the signifier/signified relation to demonstrate his point. The emphasis on language and signification puts Lacan squarely in the structuralist camp, though his development of Saussurean ideas is clearly poststructuralist. One indication of Lacan’s movement away from structuralism is his theory of the orders of human experience. Lacan argued that the individual begins by being immersed in an IMAGINARY order of fantasy, linked indivisibly to the maternal body with no differentiation between self and other. The Oedipal crisis forces the individual to sever the connection to the maternal body and enter the SYMBOLIC order (the Name-of-the-Father, as Lacan puts it). In neither case is the individual able to experience the unmediated material existence that Lacan calls the REAL. The Symbolic order is of particular importance to Lacan, for it is the locus not only of law and reason, the traditional authorities behind PATRIARCHAL power, but also of the “big OTHER,” which corresponds to the unconscious, that space in which we hear the voice of our own subjectivity (“I”) calling to us from outside of ourselves and fashioning our ego (“me”) in an endless circuit of unattainable desires held out to us in the form of the *other* (*objet petit a*). The immersion in the language of the unconscious presents with “a fading or eclipse of the subject” (301).

Lacanian psychoanalysis, together with the strategy of deconstructing binary oppositions and the structures they support, revolutionized feminist theory, which

critiqued gender difference and interrogated the patriarchal foundations of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and rationality. The use and abuse of Lacan by feminists like Jane Gallop, **Teresa de Lauretis**, and Laura Mulvey illustrates an important feature of poststructuralist thought, for feminism's response to Lacan was to go even further in the direction of acclaiming the Other, the negative component in the dialectics of psychoanalysis. This appropriation of Lacan leads to a radical FORECLOSURE of the phallic order (i.e., the Name-of-the-Father) that is at the same time an opening in and for the Other. Alice Jardine, writing in 1985, speaks of "a reincorporation and reconceptualization of that which has been the master narratives' own 'nonknowledge,' what has eluded them, what has engulfed them" (25). This nonknowledge is an ambivalent state of subjectivity achievable only outside dialectical closure, in a persistently negative relation to dominant discourses. Feminist poststructuralism is grounded in this kind of negative critique, particularly in France, where Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) had already pioneered a dialectical analysis of gender and sexuality and insisted that woman's alienation within a patriarchal order could be overcome only by linking identity to a critique of the philosophical presuppositions of that order. Beauvoir articulated in philosophical terms some of the same issues raised by Virginia Woolf and later by Betty Friedan (in *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963), Kate Millett (in *Sexual Politics*, 1970), and Germaine Greer (in *The Female Eunuch*, 1970). She was to enjoy tremendous influence among French feminist thinkers in the 1960s and 1970s. As Millett's book plainly shows, the politics of gender difference are at the core of this second wave of feminism (the first having crested in the suffragette movement and in the work of modernists like Woolf and H.D.). In the United States, a certain pragmatism prevailed in the feminist approach to equal rights, which is noted too in the work of **Elaine Showalter**, **Sandra Gilbert**, and **Susan Gubar**. For these critics, the representation of women in literature indexes social attitudes, and the aim of the critic is not only to critique a canon formed and defended by men but also to recognize and promote a canon formed by women.

A significant turn in feminism occurred in the mid-1970s, when the philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray challenged the phallogocentrism of psychoanalysis and "speculative" philosophy since Plato, all of which was founded on the reduction of women to the *speculum*, an object that exists solely to constitute another's subjectivity (in the representation of desire). It is a form of existence without essence: "Subjectivity denied to woman: indisputably this provides the financial backing for every irreducible constitution of an object: of representation, of discourse, of desire. Once imagine that woman imagines and the object loses its fixed, obsessional character" (133). In contrast to US feminism, French feminism is oriented toward philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, and politics. **Hélène Cixous'** "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975) and **Luce Irigaray's** *Speculum of the Other Woman* were critical challenges to patriarchal and masculinist discourse, specifically to the "sex/gender system" that "traffics in women" for the economic benefit of men (see Rubin). This feminist critique of social and cultural institutions is grounded in poststructuralist theories of language and representation. In some cases, as in the work of Irigaray and Cixous, we find that the critique extends to reason and rationality, indeed to the entire edifice of Western philosophy. This critique yielded a practice, *ÉCRITURE FÉMININE* (literally, "feminine writing" but typically translated as "writing the body"), that was indebted

to Lacan even as it posited an alternative to his work. The interdisciplinary character of this practice is illustrated well in Julia Kristeva's work, in which linguistics, SEMIOTICS, psychoanalysis, and Bakhtinian DIALOGISM create what she calls "semanalysis." One of the outcomes of this deconstruction of masculinist and patriarchal discourse is a new focus on questions of gender identity and difference, for both identity and difference are formed in the context of linguistic and social performance. These questions constellate in SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM, which holds that one's identity is neither essential nor immutable but is rather the outcome of multiple social institutions, discourses, relationships, and interactions. As Beauvoir said of women, one is made not born.

Culture, Gender, and History, 1980s–1990s

In 1981, Fredric Jameson, one of the most influential Marxist critics in the United States, declared, "Always historicize!" He meant to galvanize late twentieth-century Marxism against postmodernist attacks on history, but his call is echoed in new work across the theoretical spectrum. New historicism, cultural studies, gender theory, postmodernism, postcolonial studies, transnational studies – all of these theoretical fields are noted for their use of historiographic methods to theorize DIFFERENCE. Of course, the desire to theorize difference – including cultural, ethnic, sexual, gender, and other forms of difference – has its roots in the general concept of linguistic difference theorized by Saussure and the poststructuralists. But it is plain that for these new theorists, difference is a function of specific social, cultural, and historical pressures and forces. It is important to emphasize that the historicization of difference does not constitute a departure from or break with poststructuralism; on the contrary, it testifies to the continued relevance of poststructuralist innovations.

This historicization of difference is nowhere more apparent than in postcolonial studies, which is rooted in the Négritude movement in former British and French colonies and in the work of Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi. This first generation of postcolonial theory consists largely in a dialectical critique of colonial power and nationalism, but Fanon stands out for his psychological insights into violence and the relationship between the individual and the nation. We see in this early anti-colonial discourse a pedagogical impulse, a need to educate the people about the historical conditions of their own existence. However, anti-colonial nationalists often had no alternative but the historical discourse created in Europe for *Europeans* (a point not lost on Jean-Paul Sartre, who championed Fanon and Memmi in their struggle against French colonialism in the Maghreb). The field of postcolonial studies was transformed by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which drew on poststructuralist theories of difference and discourse to critique the ethnocentric historical vision of empire. This pivotal work exemplifies the archaeological approach developed by Foucault, which allowed Said to map the discourse formation of Orientalism, a vast structure of Western knowledge that effectively created the East as *Orientalized*. The "cultural strength" of the West, Said argued, led to an assumption "that the Orient and everything in it was, if not patently inferior to, then in need of corrective study by the West" (41). Some theorists have

criticized Said for not representing the reverse process – representations of the West produced by colonial and postcolonial intellectuals and artists – but we should not let such criticism prevent us from seeing that Said pointed the way for those who, in the 1980s, began “writing back” to the empire.

In part as a response to Said’s work, a number of important new theorists began to emerge, and in them we can discern a coherent field of study taking shape. South Asian thinkers took the lead in the early 1980s. Ashis Nandy’s *The Intimate Enemy* (1983), and the Subaltern Studies Group, especially the work of **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak** and Ranajit Guha, revealed both the nature of the effects of colonial discourse in India and the outlines of a nativist and revisionist historiography that could counter dominant narratives about Indian history and its people. The ambivalence of colonial power is in some ways the contradiction at the heart of the nation itself, a contradiction between the needs of the abstract universal idea of the nation and the objective particularity of everyday life. For **Homi Bhabha**, this ambivalence produces a disjunction in which “the invention of historicity, mastery, mimesis” (the core of colonial power) and the “‘other scene’ *Entstellung*, displacement, fantasy, psychic defense, and an ‘open’ textuality” (the space of colonial mimicry) (*Location* 107–8). This ambivalence is doubly problematic when we consider issues of gender, for Western feminism, in its attempt to theorize the status of women, too often neglects the social specificity of women’s experience in colonial and postcolonial locations. Theorists like Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Sara Suleri, and Ania Loomba have challenged the authority of patriarchal imperial power and a dominant Western vision of feminism and social change. In some cases, as in Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), theory itself is called into question, particularly its assumption that the social conditions of the non-Western subject can be grasped by an analytical methodology grounded in Western philosophical traditions.

From the mid-1980s, important work appeared by Peter Hulme and Antonio Benitez-Rojo on the encounters between European explorers and indigenous peoples in the Caribbean. In the 1990s, scholars like V. Y. Mudimbe and Achille Mbembe were establishing a standpoint for African critique of postcolonial modernity. Former and current British Commonwealth countries – especially Australia, whose colonial development was complicated by the penal colonies established in the eighteenth century – have their own peculiar postcolonial conditions. Work by Helen Tiffin, Bob Hodge, Vijay Mishra, and Graham Huggan has been especially important since 1990 for drawing our attention to the problems faced by Aboriginal peoples and to the impact of large-scale immigration and SETTLER COLONIZATION. In a similar manner, Irish studies has forged its own brand of postcolonial inquiry which emphasizes Ireland’s character as a METROCOLONY and its long history of intimate mismanagement by the British Parliament and the Anglo-Irish ruling class. Because of its close proximity to the center of Empire, Ireland experienced colonialism in a unique fashion. In this regard, it resembled India, where the English language and English political and cultural traditions had become entrenched after centuries of colonial administration. As Luke Gibbons, Declan Kiberd, Joe Cleary, and David Lloyd have pointed out, Ireland’s metrocolonial status did not immunize it against the problems faced by other colonial and postcolonial territories. The rise of Irish studies coincides roughly with the accelerated interest in the Asian world beyond

South Asia and the Islamic world. In the twenty-first century, postcolonial theory has increasingly been used to talk about native and indigenous experience in the Americas and to analyze transnationalism throughout the world. We might therefore regard transnationalism as a late development that encompasses the postcolonial world within a vast and complex global environment. Benedict Anderson, Immanuel Wallerstein, Pheng Cheah, and David Palumbo-Lui have explored the implications of a transnational perspective that situates colonial and postcolonial experiences within global networks of trade, communication, and domination and offered a new arena for the dialectical expression of colonial modernity.

Postcolonial and transnational approaches are implicitly forms of historical revisionism and therefore share a set of common concerns with New Historicism, preeminently in the work of US scholars like **Stephen Greenblatt**, Catherine Gallagher, and Walter Benn Michaels. Rooted in Marxist theory and poststructuralist theories of TEXTUALITY and DISCOURSE, New Historicism developed a method for reading literary texts deep within their social and cultural contexts. For example, as Greenblatt has noted, the historical analysis of cultural discourse in the sixteenth century made possible new contexts and new readings of Shakespeare's plays. By virtue of this deep style contextualization, indebted in part to Clifford Geertz's ethnographic technique of "deep description," the New Historicist critic could open up points of contact between the text and its milieu as well as between the reader and the text itself. New Historicists were therefore very attuned to the multiple determinations that constitute the cultural text and thus to historical stratifications that are best understood in non-linear or non-causal ways. Foucault's theories of archaeology and discourse formation were a significant influence on New Historicism, for they provided the framework for mapping historical fields and a model for analysis that gave historical description a qualitative value. If we occasionally find a critic overemphasizing context at the expense of a literary analysis, we just as often discover fresh perspectives that allow us to hear more clearly what the cultural text, distant from us in time, has to say.

The presupposition of historical context and awareness, of a critical eye toward the past and its injustices – in everyday life, in politics, in representations – is the starting point for a critique of race and ethnicity that is, in certain particulars, allied to postcolonial studies. We see this beginning to happen in the work of W. E. B. Du Bois who, in 1903, put forward the idea of "double consciousness." This was a provocative idea, one that emphasized not only a consciousness of racial DIFFERENCE but also a sense of radical internal division, a sense of "two-ness" that Du Bois understood in terms of a doubling of the soul, of the struggle to be human in America. This double consciousness is grounded in the slave trade, which reduced the value of the African subject over against the European. Like the pernicious sexual inequalities that Barbara Smith and bell hooks unmask, it is foundational and systematic. The identity of the African American, like that of other immigrant Americans, is internally split: "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (9). From the time of the Harlem Renaissance to the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, a discourse of African American experience flourished. By the 1980s, Smith, Houston Baker, and **Henry Louis Gates** had defined the initial parameters of an African American literary criticism. In *The*

Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism (1988), Gates explores the complex and dialectical interplay of native traditions, like the “signifying monkey” motif found in African and early slave literatures, and how native traditions intersect with poststructuralist theories of language and signification.

If Gates offered a way to syncretize Western and African approaches to literary theory, the Afrocentrism of Martin Bernal and Molefi K. Asante advocated the reinstatement of Africa and African culture at the center of Western cultural and intellectual history. Their revisionist histories realigned the discussion of race and slavery in the United States while calling into question the place of Africa in the Western imaginary. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the idea of the “black Atlantic” became popular as transnationalist and transatlantic approaches in Anglo-American and postcolonial studies were establishing new models for understanding the patterns of movement underlying not only the slave trade but all forms of immigration to the United States. In many respects, African American studies found a new global context in which to situate the unique *national* experience of African Americans. Ethnic and indigenous studies, in rethinking localism, have contributed new perspectives to the transnational project of deconstructing oppressive binary concepts and forms associated with nationalism. In some cases, as in US indigenous literatures, figures of the *other* (the trickster and the coyote, for example) become powerful allies in forming authentic individual and group identities that offer credible alternatives to a dominant national culture. But the *other* also comes in the form of a conquering culture, an implacable opponent in an undialectical contest in which all is at stake. (In this, the US indigenous experience duplicates that of colonial oppression, which is the freezing or forfeiture of the dialectic in the colonizer’s favor.) This double experience of ALTERITY, like the “double consciousness” described by Du Bois, situates identity at a crossroads and makes it impossible to choose decisively to remain on one side only of a boundary line. This is particularly evident in Chicano/a studies, which grew out of the politics of the United Farm Workers’ struggle of the late 1960s. A keynote text is Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), which announced a radical break with monolingual theoretical discourse, in which the *other* is the object of reflection, and challenged the border between creative and critical writing. In Chicano/a literatures we see a further dimension of the paradox, for at the borderline, where existence is fluid and the social *other* is a familiar, even intimate, presence, the threshold is also a halting point (but not a cessation), where identity is shaped in a process of geographical and cultural reciprocity. Like African American studies at this time, Chicano/a studies was in the avant-garde when it came to theorizing race, ethnicity, and cultural difference. Moraga, Sonia Saldívar-Hull, and others have diversified the theoretical base of Chicano/a studies with work on the legal system, feminism, bicultural experience, and the status of race in the twenty-first century.

The field of Asian American studies, which was emerging at this time, pursued some of the same theoretical issues and addressed some of the same social and political problems. Of particular interest were the linked ideas of immigration and assimilation. Important work in fiction and memoir by Maine Hong Kingston was followed by theoretical projects by such figures as Lisa Lowe, Gail Ching-Liang Low, and David Palumbo-Liu. Palumbo-Liu’s description of how Asian America is

conceived in the US imaginary might well apply to other similar experiences of assimilation and difference in the United Kingdom and Europe. He considers the 1930s, when immigration, politics (nationalist and fascist), and war created transformations of populations by new flows of immigrants, refugees, and “displaced persons”: “the mixture of foreign with the domestic and the various possibilities of interracial and interethnic connections presented a new set of concerns” (40). The United States tried to regulate this flow, but inevitably the US imaginary is “rescripted” by immigration and, even more so, the processes of assimilation and resistance that persist in the generations after first arrival.

Allied in many ways with Chicano/a and Asian American studies, Native American studies has had a long history of resistance to the social and cultural institutions responsible for the decimation and displacement of native peoples. Landmark early works include Vine Deloria’s *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969) and Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970), which critiqued the anthropological representation and social repression of native peoples and offered a revisionist history of the United States. Subsequent work, mostly in the late 1980s and 1990s, contextualized Native American experience within the broader framework of cultural diversity in the United States and created greater awareness of native intellectual thought. Of special importance from the 1980s was the work of Gerald Vizenor, who combined a deep knowledge of native literatures with an interest in Western theoretical discourse, including the concerns of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Of special interest is the critique of the US government’s colonialist relations with native peoples, which has led critics like Kevin Bruyneel to explore the possibilities of “the third space of sovereignty.” These issues of race, ethnicity, and culture identity have become part of a larger conversation about globalization and transnational development. Central to this conversation are issues of assimilation and social integration in a world system in which national borders and identities are less important for local politics and personal identity. Palumbo-Liu, along with Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, have argued for a world-systems approach to the global history of nationalism and capitalism in which a new cosmopolitanism remakes international cultural connections on the model of global capital flows and trends.

At the heart of this new emphasis on cosmopolitanism and global world systems is a renewed consideration of culture, particularly forms of so-called popular culture that tend to find worldwide distribution and consumption. In this regard, cultural studies, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, has learned much from post-Marxist, postcolonial, and transnational theories of culture. By the 1990s, nearly every facet of culture was explored, primarily via a deconstruction of the high/low cultural divide, an opposition rooted in the modernism/mass culture distinction that has managed to remain firmly in place despite the concerted attempt by critical theory to dislodge it. Angela McRobbie and Janice Radway, for example, have shown how popular music and literature, youth culture, and middle-class literary tastes serve as vital barometers for larger social and cultural transformations and problems. This trend in cultural studies has reinvigorated film and media studies. Slavoj Žižek’s work in film studies, especially his Lacanian readings of Hitchcock, has transformed the field by introducing a theoretical model that conjoined Hegelian

critical theory and psychoanalysis. Feminist film theorists like Teresa de Lauretis and Laura Mulvey have critiqued the gendered dynamics of representation, particularly the *gaze* that is doubly represented in film, once by the filmmaker, whose gaze constructs or composes human actors as objects in a visual medium, and again by the viewer whose own gaze reduplicates the filmmaker's. Their work demonstrates the power of a deconstructionist approach to the "determining male gaze" of film and other media forms.

Of course, the challenge to culture is not a new one; we see it in early critical theory and in Derrida's deconstruction of structuralist anthropology. Certainly it is the challenge issued by Lacan, Foucault, and French philosophical feminists, all of whom offered new methods of mapping and interpreting the discourse formations that communicate cultural knowledge and competence. This is the chief importance for literary theory of the French sociologist **Pierre Bourdieu**, whose conception of the SOCIAL FIELD has provided us with innovative paradigms for understanding how "cultural capital" circulates and how individuals negotiate increasingly complex societies. His theory of HABITUS attempts to account for the "socialized subjectivity" of an active agent in the world whose *dispositions* (skills and competences acquired in a given social field) are the mark of social status and *distinction*. The limits and rules that structure the social field, in which the social agent achieves distinction, are neither arbitrary nor external but are constituted by the aggregate of successful social experiences (or "moves") that constitute the field. Foucault's theories of discourse and power and **Judith Butler**'s work on PERFORMATIVITY have been especially influential in developing modes of SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM in which ESSENTIALIST notions of sexual and gender identity are revealed as ideological constructs masquerading as "natural." These constructs play a profound role in the personal choices made by men and women in concrete social situations. Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) has been enormously influential in describing the social constructionist thesis and in illustrating the social and political implications of the passive performance of traditional gender roles and of upsetting such roles in self-aware and subversive forms of performativity. Butler was also instrumental in pointing out that there is no common enemy, no "universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination" (*Gender Trouble* 3). The problem is in the cultural systems at large, particularly in repressive norms of identity, sexual orientation, and social belonging that restrict individual and collective freedoms. This line of theoretical investigation was followed by Anne Fausto-Sterling, Susan Bordo, and **Elizabeth Grosz**, whose work on the body, on the link between science and gender, and on the very idea of a "natural" fact has transformed not only our conceptions of culture but of the natural world that is typically opposed to it. We see in this important work the wide-ranging influence of feminism, which has become fundamental to every discipline in the human and social sciences.

To some extent we see in this emphasis on gender and sexuality a legacy of the poststructuralist critique of difference, particularly of binary structures of knowledge and power. Nowhere is this more evident than in new theories of sexual difference and the critique of compulsory heterosexuality that characterizes societies throughout the world. In the mid-1970s, Monique Wittig, Jeffner Allen, Sarah Hoagland, and Adrienne Rich brought the lesbian body and lesbian sexuality out of the closet and

fashioned a theoretical and artistic style that forcefully countered patriarchal power and masculinist intellectual traditions. In fact, it is possible to argue that the feminist critique of gender and sexuality made possible a similar critical “outing” of male homoeroticism and homosexuality. We see this most clearly in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s pioneering study, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). Sedgwick builds on Gayle Rubin’s theory of “sex/gender systems” and René Gerard’s conception of “triangular desire” in her development of two key ideas: homosocial desire and homosexual panic. According to Sedgwick, in the structures of triangular desire, women mediate the desire of men, which is thereby constituted as a form of HOMOSOCIALITY that enables relations of power among men while simultaneously displacing the disruptive homoerotic desire that might spring up between men without such mediation.

Sedgwick’s work is unquestionably foundational for the field of queer theory, which offers a critique of the sex/gender system, specifically of the structural homophobia that leads to pernicious forms of homosocial desire (like homosexual panic). It also valorizes (by revaluing) the very condition of being “queer,” which includes a range of homosexual and homoerotic positions and ultimately encompasses drag and “female masculinity.” Sara Ahmed’s work on “queer phenomenology” seeks to understand this otherness as a function of orientation within broader categories, like race and gender, for she hopes “to offer a new way of thinking about the spatiality of sexuality, gender, and race.” As in gay and lesbian studies and so many other literary theories, the body becomes a location for meaning, an object in the world, but also a meaningful object, whose impression on us “is dependent on past histories” (1–2). The affective and existential dimension of queer theory links it with other theories of sexual identity, such as masculinity studies, and also with a posthumanist discourse that seeks to move beyond patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality, and the sex/gender system.

The tendency in these theories of culture, identity, sexuality, and historical revisionism is to rethink the possibilities of human agency in a way that refuses to foreclose participation of any group or individual on the basis of invidious stereotypes or categories of social and cultural exclusion. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, this tendency became especially notable in the refinements of postmodernist critique and in a resurgence of Marxist approaches to culture and politics. If in 1980 Jameson felt the need to declare “always historicize,” by the turn of the century one could greet such a call only by saying, “as opposed to what?”

Postmodernism and Post-Marxism, 1980s–2000s

In the era of high theory, from the 1970s to the 1990s, the crucial questions of gender, identity, class and race were raised in theoretical terms that presupposed the legitimacy of theory (of philosophical reflection and analysis) and the very possibility of cultural analysis. But we see in this period, particularly after 1990, new directions in postmodernism and post-Marxism that call into question the assurances of theory but in a way that rejuvenates the theory project by sharpening its self-critical dimension, thereby giving it greater powers of social and cultural critique. Though

some might feel that postmodernist and Marxist approaches are antithetical (based on misconceptions that postmodernism rejects history and politics), it is the case that the two intellectual currents, especially by the late twentieth century, are deeply entwined. In fact, many seminal postmodernists, like **Jean-François Lyotard** and **Jean Baudrillard**, began writing from Marxist and socialist perspectives. And the postmodern philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy remains deeply interested in Hegel and the “restlessness of the negative”; his work exemplifies the affinity between postmodernism and the dialectical tradition that inspired Marx. The post-Marxist could not help but concede the reality of postmodernity as a phase of late capitalist development, and the postmodernist cannot help but confirm a materialist approach to society, culture, and aesthetics. Both approaches can be understood as part of a general critique of modernity, with roots in Marxist theory, critical theory, and the modernist movements in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. And while, in the 1970s, the postmodernist Lyotard debated the critical theorist Habermas about whether the project of Enlightenment was finished or still in progress, the fact is that both sides were concerned with the same problem: the value and destiny of an intellectual tradition that was, in the late twentieth century, in crisis. That their answers differed should surprise no one who has even a basic understanding of the history of literary theory.

The “post” in postmodernism can thus be understood as the temporal space of a critique of modernity. Postmodernism rejects any discourse that legitimizes or perpetuates universal truths in the form of ideology and or that advocates a conception of history as dialectical movement toward an absolute end (i.e., in the State). It is profoundly opposed to literary or cultural forms that take solace in mimetic representations that falsify human experience in the service of outmoded conventions or national traditions. Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* (1979), one of the most important postmodernist critiques, points to the loss of social and political legitimacy that was once conferred upon society by the grand myths of human progress and technological modernity, the MASTER NARRATIVES that explain, justify, and thereby sustain universal truth, historical destiny, and the meaning and value of the past. As Theodor Adorno and other critical theorists well understood, the narratives of enlightenment are essentially narratives of domination in which social inequalities and injustices are normalized. Lyotard argues that master narratives, or *les grands récits*, need to be supplanted by *les petits récits*, local narratives, indigenous ethnographies, paralogy, language games – in short, a “pragmatics of knowledge” (Lyotard *Postmodern* 61). Opposed to idealist totalities, the postmodernist is likely to promote non-teleological and hierarchical networks and ASSEMBLAGES. In *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *Thousand Plateaus* (1980), **Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari** seek to bypass through critique the dialectical relation between capital and the subject, understood as the *subject* of a neurotic discourse and of commodified desire. The “schizoid” subject escapes self-identity in the vertiginous and unregulated terrain of non-identity. Over against cathexis (the expenditure of psychic energy or *libido*) and sublimation, Deleuze and Guattari offer flows and intensities of desire; they describe desiring machines that subvert the patriarchal family (“Mommy, Daddy and Me”) and the repressive logic of capitalism in order to RETERRITORIALIZE SOCIAL FORMATIONS (“bodies without organs”). This conception of desire displaces the Freudian concept of desire as lack – i.e., the

Oedipus complex – and introduces the “schizoid” subject who escapes domination and repressive forms of centered, normative subjectivity. In the vertiginous and unregulated terrain of non-identity, desire is grounded in mobility, expenditure, and (re)distribution, while knowledge is multiplied and dispersed across overlapping and integrated networks. In this postmodern frame of reference, totality gives way to aggregation and multiples, to the kinds of complex wholes found in the RHIZOMATIC structures of communications networks, transnational power, and the internet. It is possible that these alternatives can answer Georges Bataille’s call for a “sum of all possibles” in philosophy (258), a form of totality that can include and account for all forms of human experience, including death, the erotic, and the sacred.

Subsequent work by all these thinkers through the early 1990s constituted an aesthetics of affects and absences, of perverse images that confuse our relation to the real – an aesthetics in which the sublime finally emerges not as the struggle to comprehend the incomprehensible but rather as the very incomprehensibility of language itself, the abyss that makes all knowledge possible. Repeating a gesture that goes back to Kant, postmodernists find in aesthetics the mediating point of human thought and the sensuous real. But whereas Kant bypassed the real with the non-concept of a “supersensible substrate of humanity,” postmodernists embrace the real in the only forms possible for our perception: the absolute privation of the “thing-in-itself” and the endless precession of simulations that stand in for it. The classic tradition of aesthetics wished to mediate the realms of sense and reason, while the postmodernist tends to collapse them, so that reason takes on the vitalist character of an “immaterial materialism” or, as Baudrillard puts it, the sensuousness of “demon images.” The post-Marxist theorist **Jacques Rancière** sees, in postmodernism, a complex disengagement from modernism’s uneasy complicity with the aesthetic regime, which amounts to the attainment of a “specificity of art” that comes at the cost of the very regime that identified aesthetics as a way of making art possible (68f).

From Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco during and after World War II to Don DeLillo, John Barth, and Thomas Pynchon in the 1960s and 1970s, postmodernist literature depicts a world bereft of legitimation (narrative and otherwise), a world in which progress had reached the dead ends of alienation and narcissism. Indeed, as many theorists have argued, the postmodernist literary text is not interested in the world at all, for its main concern appears to be to represent its own operations. Paul Ricoeur speaks, not approvingly, of the “ideology of the absolute text,” in which the referential function (that is, the way literature talks about the world in which we live) is suspended, and there arises in its place seemingly endless self-referentiality, the sublime abyss of language. Robert Scholes and Linda Hutcheon, who have developed theories of FABULATION and METAFICTION, respectively, argue that postmodern fiction tends to comment on and thematize its own linguistic and narrative practices. There are certainly precedents in modernist and avant-garde art for this form of self-referentiality, but postmodernism has brought it to the forefront in new and stimulating ways.

The postmodernist engagement with modernist aesthetics is mirrored in the post-Marxist critique of capitalism in postmodernity, for here too we find roots in modernist critical theory. For example, Adorno’s analysis of the culture industry might well qualify as an inaugural post-Marxist project, save for his reluctance to

part with the category of the authentic subject, dialectical methods, and the idea of an autonomous art, free of reason's conceptual reductions and the alienating influence of a commodity market. For some scholars, the initial point of emergence lies in the 1930s with Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemony; for others, **Louis Althusser's** work in the 1960s marks a decisive moment, for his development of certain key concepts – particularly **IDEOLOGY** and structural causality – redefines the way we regard the relation between **BASE** and **SUPERSTRUCTURE** and thus constitutes a significant revision of classical Marxism. Still others would locate the turning point in the 1980s, with the work of Fredric Jameson, who revolutionized Marxist literary criticism with the idea of the “political unconscious” and who revitalized the analysis of postmodern art and culture. By most estimations, Post-Marxism was securely established with the publication of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). What is common to all of these figures is the understanding that late capitalism distributes power in new ways. For one thing, because global capital has reached such a degree of rational interconnection and interdependence, nationalism ceases to be a viable point of departure for critique and political action. And while the nation-state does not disappear from view, its modes of legitimation have shifted from narratives of origin that are, at bottom, local mythologies to the disjunctive relations of the nation-state within a geopolitical arena in which multiple and overlapping polygonal connections override the old interstate rivalries of the imperial age (which came to a head in the Cold War period of the mid-twentieth century). What to a postmodernist might seem aleatory and governed by “flows” of information, to a post-Marxist, especially someone like Wallerstein, might seem a densely and intricately articulated global politics mediated by elite interests (the military–industrial–financial complex) that no longer pledge allegiance to a national power.

An important development running coevally with post-Marxism and postmodernism is critical theory, particularly the critique of modernity in the work of Anthony Giddens, Habermas, and Seyla Benhabib. For these thinkers, the crisis of modernity is not that the project of Enlightenment is exhausted or no longer relevant to a postmodern world, but rather that it is unfinished. Giddens, for example, counters Adorno's and the early Foucault's skepticism about the subject's agency with respect to **POWER/KNOWLEDGE** by focusing on “the self-reflexive project of the self” (215), which can serve as a safeguard against a capitalist world in which the subject is commodified and loses all vestiges of freedom. For Giddens, the subject is able to negotiate and “construct” her own identity amid often antagonistic social forces. The idea that social constructionism could evade the recourse to ideological interpellation resonates also in the work of Habermas and his successors who respond to the crisis of legitimacy in the West with new forms of collectivity grounded not in revolutionary political action but rather in rational communication and consensus. One might call this a form of humanist Marxism (directly counter to Althusser's anti-humanism). This is especially the case in the work of Seyla Benhabib, who confronts the problem of global capitalism with a form of transnational cosmopolitanism, which she defines as “a normative philosophy for carrying the universalistic norms of discourse ethics beyond the confines of the nation-state” (18). Her idea of a “discourse ethics,” in which interlocutors are

“moral conversation partners,” resituates Habermas’s “communicative rationality” in a social totality defined by diversity and transnational interrelation. In this context, the concerns of critical theory intersect with those of transnationalism and postcolonial theory that seek models of community and sociality beyond the concept of the nation-state. Like the “cosmopolitics” put forward by Cheah and Bruce Robbins and Wallerstein’s world-systems theory, Benhabib’s cosmopolitanism seeks to redefine the basis and structure of *community* in terms of an openness to gender and ethnic difference but also to new visions of society and the distribution of power and resources. Wallerstein’s work has been particularly influential, for it offers a historical approach to complex, interconnected world economies that uses Marxist theory to investigate complex new forms of global capitalism. His “world historical sociology,” which started to gain ground among literary theorists in the 1990s, criticizes modernization theory for retaining an outmoded conception of the nation and its role in capitalist development. It offers instead an analytical method that can account for multicultural social formations, global markets, and transnational movements of people and language.

From the early 1990s, Benhabib, along with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell, began to use critical theory to address social and political issues concerning women outside the traditional framework of Western feminism. Questions about the possibility of social activism and identity politics became increasingly important in a post-Cold War era in which the subject of postmodernity was threatened with irrelevance. According to Jennifer Wicke, feminism needed “to catch up to a reality we barely have a name for, the postmodern situation of a theory of identity that seeks to overcome the limitations of fixed, immutable, and hierarchical identities, with a feminism still involved in a straightforward identity politics” (33). Fundamental aspects of social life – the legal status of women, the ethics of reproduction, intellectual and aesthetic life, class and racial identity – continue to be the focus of a postmodern feminist theory that appropriates materialist analysis to subvert the dominant discourse of identity that runs from Descartes to poststructuralism. Postmodern feminists, like post-Marxists, pose urgent questions about major transformations in the nature of modernization, knowledge formation, and technical progress that marked both the enduring legacy of the Enlightenment and the limits of its traditional modes of understanding the world.

Post-Marxism, postmodernism, feminism, and critical theorists converge on a number of points, particularly on the importance of Kant and Hegel, whose conceptions of UNIVERSALITY and TOTALITY undergo an immanent critique that makes them available in new ways as tactics in critical analysis (for example, of gender, sexuality, the subject, the state, political actions, and so on). From Jean-François Lyotard’s Kantian postmodernism to Slavoj Žižek’s twenty-first-century Hegelianism, we are reminded of the continued relevance of dialectics, aesthetics, and the category of the universal. Žižek, Butler, and Laclau have put forward new theories of “provisional totality” and “contingent universality” that can serve tactically as the ground of collective political action (see Butler et al.). Thus, Žižek can claim that “Kantian formalism and radical historicism are not really opposites, but two sides of the same coin” (Butler et al. 111). These forms of “postfoundationalism” remind us of the continuing

relevance of idealist philosophy, but they also underscore the importance of innovation and renovation in theoretical traditions.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the post-Marxist critique of culture had effectively eclipsed the postmodernist project, which is a way of saying that it drew it into dialectical collaboration. But it has also developed something like a post-dialectical standpoint, which has resulted in new theories of the One (Deleuze) and the multiple (Alain Badiou) and new paradigms for political agency and political aesthetics (Rancière), all of which enables an ironic return to the very center of humanism and humanist philosophy: the nexus of reason and sensation in the self-governing realm of art. For the post-Marxist, the capitalist mode of production and the fetishistic culture it (re)enforces must be overcome; however, as Adorno illustrates so well, this overcoming must itself be overcome. In an administered society, even immanent critique, “tarrying with the negative” (as Žižek puts it), can end up affirming the dialectical domination of a master narrative that thrives on opportunities to optimize its own evolution by managing crisis, as both Habermas and Claus Offe have demonstrated. Culture critique, the first moment of overcoming a reified daily life, must itself be subjected to a clarifying revision, a struggle down to the basic units of argument. Adorno’s style, like that of Deleuze, Lyotard, Badiou, and so many others, exemplifies this struggle both with and in dialectics, a victory sought over the very thing that triumphs. In a sense, these theorists write from a posthumanist perspective, one that seeks to move beyond the idea of human being *as such*. This perspective takes literary theory in new directions; it opens up the possibility of altering the human presence in this negotiation, to resituate the human in a natural world, not in order to dominate it but to see it from the standpoint of *other beings*.

Posthumanism: Theory at the *Fin de Siècle*

At the turn of the millennium, we now speak of the posthuman, and by doing so, we invoke the humanism that it is at the heart of intellectual development in the West for hundreds of years. In a sense, posthumanism is implicit in the concept of humanism itself, for we can discern it in the works of the great nineteenth-century explorers of the human – Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud – who each delivered a tremendous blow to the self-assurance and preeminence of humanism. At the same time, each tends to reinscribe its majesty in the alternative, a dialectical outcome summed up succinctly in Nietzsche’s concept of the *Übermensch* (“overman”). For poststructuralists like Foucault and Barthes and philosophers like Bataille, the primacy of “man” was challenged and the homocentric nature of our knowledge and perceptions (the anthropomorphism of all things) was unveiled as an arrogant and shortsighted standpoint. Since Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* (1947), it has grown increasingly difficult to maintain the position that the concept *human* and the order of knowledge that we designate *humanism* can provide a stable foundation upon which to confront our present situation, to understand the meaning of the past and to build toward a viable, *humane* future.

In the dialectics of identity that characterizes so much discourse on humanism, subjectivity is bound up with mastering the *other*: to be human is *not to be something*

else, and that “something else” is typically designated *non-human*. It is, as Nietzsche put it, to take “man as measure of the world” (“On Truth and Lies” 86). However, as phenomenology has revealed, our “apartness” is only a function of perspective. If we learn to see and feel differently, as Merleau-Ponty and others urge us to do, if we can acknowledge that the thing/object gazes at us from its standpoint (its being), we can enter into a kind of communion with that which we can never actually *be*. This cooperative and critical non-identity is an openness to the gaze of the *other* and to the possibility of an *other* intention toward or orientation to the world. Foucault’s work is enormously important to posthumanism, particularly his genealogical method, which is ideally suited to the theorist who wishes to challenge all things whose value rests on the basis of their emergence *for human being*. In the very late work on sexuality and the subject of power, Foucault clears the ground for a Nietzschean overcoming of human limits – posthuman, but in the sense that human being becomes more open and multiple, less constrained by ideology and conformist cultural codes.

The posthumanist subject is dethroned, but not dialectically cancelled or *SUBLATED*; its being is conceded, along with that of other objects, in an ontology that revalues and realigns the human among an expanded order of beings. The first stage of the posthumanist project is the recognition that while all our philosophies are built upon human thought, speculation, imagination, and writing, there is being beyond the human. Shakespeare, at the heart of the Renaissance humanist moment, foresaw this “beyond”: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (*Hamlet* I.v.66–7). For the posthumanist, this “something more” is not *TRANSCENDENT* but profoundly *IMMANENT*. Understood in terms of immanent being in the world, human beings share a condition with other forms of being. Thus **Donna Haraway** redefines the relationship between nature and culture, in part by exploring the role of non-human actors, such as cyborgs and animals, while **N. Katherine Hayles** explores the interface between human and technological being and advocates a greater sensitivity toward hybrid modes of existence (e.g., the coupling of consciousness to “smart” prosthetic devices). The non-human, which is removed from us from the start by being designated as the absence of human being, is nevertheless caught up *in its own being* and perhaps its own unknowable way of knowing the world. This presupposition underlies a good deal of the writing that I consider under the rubric *posthuman*. From animal studies and ecocriticism, to disability studies and cognitive theory, posthumanism announces, in Bruno Latour’s memorable phrase, the “birth of ‘non-humanity’” (13).

We may feel more comfortable nowadays talking about science and culture together, in part because we have learned to speak about complex scientific ideas in a “vernacular” fashion, even if we do not always follow the mathematics involved. Indeed, C. P. Snow’s “two cultures” idea (put forward in 1959) – that there was a radical break or schism between scientific and humanist cultures – would be untenable to a posthumanist, who would find the terms themselves unstable and tendentious and the idea of a break difficult to entertain. Habermasian critical theory advocates an integration of these cultures, along with the sphere of ethics, but a posthumanist would see them not as separate spheres needing better articulation but as knowledge domains caught up in reciprocal processes of legitimation and

innovation. In these processes, the spheres of science and literature and the humanities are impossible to separate for analysis. Interdisciplinary research and study testifies also to this tendency toward an imbrication or collation of different domains (here we see the influence of Foucault and Bourdieu) as well as to a critical component in the reciprocal interchange. On this view, the trend toward collaboration between the humanities and the life sciences is not a resolution of the old “two cultures” debate but a more provocative reopening of it, for the current interdisciplinary formations have done nothing if not allowed both science and the humanities to ask searching questions about the other’s status, each one exploring in different ways a landscape in which the human is no longer the “crown of creation.” Posthumanism constitutes not simply a further elaboration of cultural studies (as some critics aver) but an interrogation of what is “given” in culture critique: *nature*. It unveils the myth of this givenness and reveals it as a product of human labor and perception, at the same time that it challenges the separation of culture from the “given” world in which cultural experience unfolds and from which it acquires its materials.

This unveiling is itself the object of new ontologies of the *non-human*. This is not a return to the Romantic tradition of *Naturphilosophie* (the total knowledge of nature) but rather a radical rethinking of what constitutes nature and our knowledge of it, a knowledge that can never be total. These new ontologies are grounded in Heidegger’s phenomenology but they also challenge the very basis of his work: human *Da-sein*, that form of being that makes possible and accommodates all other forms of being. These “object-oriented ontologies” all ask, in one form or another, the same question: how can we know the being of another *non-human* being? For Ian Bogost, what is required is a form of “alien phenomenology,” governed by new forms of ontology (“tiny,” “flat,” “object-oriented”), that seeks even more rigorously than in previous phenomenological projects to move beyond a homocentric perspective. Ideas as much as things, plants as much as sentient beasts are, for these theorists, beings of equal status: the smallest object or thing contains a universe, and its relation to other objects or things is the central philosophical dilemma. Thus the idea of the “alien,” far from designating an extraterrestrial being, designates *all beings in their interrelation*: “The alien is anything – and everything ... The true alien recedes interminably even as it surrounds us completely. It is not hidden in the darkness of the outer cosmos or in the deep-sea shelf but in plain sight, everywhere, in everything” (Bogost 34). As Graham Harman writes, “every object is both a substance and a complex of relations” – “lemon meringue, popsicles, Ajax Amsterdam, reggae bands, grains of sand. Each of these things remains a unitary substance beyond its impact on others” (19, 85). The smallest object is an autonomous form, a world unto itself, much as Romantic poets like William Blake and Walt Whitman have noted. But the new ontologists approach this insight with the fervor of scientists who hope to get at and describe the being of objects. As other theorists, like Gerald Bruns, are quick to point out, the posthumanist world is made up of “zones of indistinction.” This idea, which goes back to the insights of Baruch Spinoza and other philosophers, is meant to underscore the radical decentering of a dualistic perspective that privileges a knowing subject over the object that is known. A perspective, in short, that is ground precisely in the capacity to make distinctions.

In posthumanism at large, the question is both ethical in a traditional way – what is my responsibility to other beings? – and aesthetic in a way that is traceable to Nietzsche and modernists like Wilde – what is my responsibility in the representation of things, of the *beautiful thing*? In one sense, the posthumanist project is a grand *ricorso*, for it embraces the Nietzschean possibility of humanity overcoming itself. In quite another sense, it overcomes this desire to overcome humanity by posing the question of humanity itself. But this questioning too is in the spirit of Nietzsche, who knew all-too-well about the posthumous nature of the truly free spirit, that most profound of contradictions: the philosopher who can laugh at his own humanity from the perspective of his self-overcoming.

Conclusion

Since the 1980s, the death of literary theory has been announced with a dispiriting regularity. In the twenty-first century, this announcement has taken the form of a “meta-theory” about the institutions and sociopolitical conditions that produce theoretical ideas and discourse. Indicative of this trend is an article, published in 2012, in which Jeffrey Williams writes that “Critical University Studies has succeeded literary theory as a nexus of intellectual energy” (B7). There is no doubt that writing about the university, especially in the United States, is a strong new theoretical trend, as is new work being done on the rise of the global university and online/distance learning. However, this brief history shows that literary theory cannot be succeeded in this way (if anything, critical university studies is yet another development of the materialist–historical trend that begins with Hegel). It is in no danger of suffering yet another premature death. *The Literary Theory Handbook* puts forward the evidence of scholars and theorists, artists and critics, all of whom point toward the general good health and robust spirit of theory. In fact, one is tempted to see the last twenty years, since 1990 or so, as a period of revival, during which the two main strands of theory – the formalist/structuralist, which emphasizes language and textuality, and the materialist/historical, which emphasizes culture and ideology – come together in multiple and nuanced ways. While one pathway or another might dominate the course of theory in any given epoch, the two main strands are by and large interdependent. This is nowhere more evident than in the account of theory in the posthumanist epoch, during which formalism and historicism interacted and imbricated with one another, producing exciting new combinations and raising new and controversial questions about the subject, language, identity, textuality, race, gender, and a host of other topics. If anything remains constant in this variegated history, it is the impulse to understand how literary and cultural texts create meaning and how we, as readers, can understand the value and variety of human experience in the world. In this, I believe we are the anticipated heirs, Nietzsche’s true peers: “We children of the future, how *could* we be at home in this today!” (*Gay Science* §377). Posthumanism, like so many theories of the twenty-first century, prepares us for the future by offering both trenchant criticism of the human condition and a pathway that inspires hope for what lies beyond our human being.

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