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Introduction: The Place of Theory Today

Martin Middeke and Christoph Reinfandt

Taking stock of the ‘history and current condition of theory’ for teaching purposes in 2011, Richard Bradford diagnosed ‘the ongoing, curious—though apparently not atrophied—condition of After Theory’ for the disciplines of literary and cultural studies (Bradford 1–2). While there is certainly a lot of theoretical thinking being done, there seems to be no unifying paradigm which could serve as a platform for dialogue between the various theoretical interests that can be identified, such as, for example, the renewed interest in the phenomenological side of reading processes that figures the (reading of a) text as an event (see Attridge; Felski 2008; Wiemann), the increased acknowledgement of the foundational importance of media history for all cultural (and that includes theoretical) practices and formations (see, for example, Siskin and Warner), the impact of cognitive approaches on a variety of fields in the humanities (see Zunshine), the turn towards notions of a cultural ecology in the larger context of complexity thinking (chaos theory, systems theory, self-organization, posthumanism; see, for example, Morton; Wolfe), or the longing for ‘new sociologies of literature’ (Felski and English) and other

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hotspots of theoretical debate identified by the journal *New Literary History* under Rita Felski's editorship.

What all these reorientations share is an anxiety as to where we are going after poststructuralism, an anxiety based on a longing to go beyond the confines of the linguistic turn by focusing on the interplay and incommensurability between textual materiality (language, writing, print, text/book, other media formats) and its reference (with all caveats attached) to culture (practices and artefacts) and the reality constituted and constructed under these conditions. The perspective of deconstruction, it turns out, is perceived to fail (or partially fail) to acknowledge the specific productivity of writing: its active capability to transform exteriority, lack, and culture into interiority, depth, and nature. The new approaches no longer carry the burden of having to prove that all metaphysical identities cancel themselves through never being able to fully control the semiotic sphere from which they derive. Instead, they want to address the question of how such constructions positively function and how they can acquire the power of social and technical reality principles in spite of their basically unstable status.¹

Doing theory in its most inclusive sense seems to involve four basic orientations, which can be heuristically mapped onto the vertical axis of abstraction/applicability and the horizontal axis of culture/cognition in the following chart:

metatheory
cultural theory – critical theory
textual theory

In its most abstract dimension, the condition of After Theory has induced a strong tendency towards *metatheory*, that is, a theory that reflects upon theory and its most foundational concerns and dimensions such as ontology, epistemology and truth, the roles of representation and mediation, the emergence of constructivism and its relation to fictionality, and finally modern culture's increasing reliance on and acknowledgement of reflexivity leading to what we will call 'The Cultures of Reflexivity' in the first Interlude chapter in this volume. Symptomatic in this respect would be recent book titles like *Theory after Theory* (Birns), *Theory after*

'*Theory*' (Elliot and Attridge), or, in yet another turn of the screw in typically German fashion, *Theorytheory* (Grizelj and Jahraus; our trans.).

The middle layer, where most theoretical activity takes place, ranges from *cultural theory*, which 'opens out from the object(s) under consideration in the effort to provide a broad social and historical context for understanding' to *critical theory* (used here in a broader understanding as an umbrella term for literary theories founded on critique), which 'turns inward to enable us to assess the adequacy of our ways of seeing and thinking' (Payne and Barbera xiii). While the "outward" dimension of culture has been customarily addressed in terms of social structure with its concomitant power relations in terms of gender, race, and class by politically oriented approaches, aspects of representation (in both the political and the epistemological sense of the word) and mediation and their influence on the formation of historical semantics have become prominent foci of interest in recent years. It is in this dimension that theories on concepts like ideology or habitus have tried to come to terms with the interface between "outward" culture and the "inward" processes of making sense, which have been addressed in more broadly experiential as well as more specialized phenomenological and, more recently, cognitive terms—the systematic contours of this interface will be traced in the second Interlude chapter on 'Ideologies of Habitus'.

And finally, on the ground, as it were, there has been a renewed interest in *textual theory*. For a long time this interest has gone hand in hand with a spirit of rehabilitating the virtues of philology with its regard for the material text and the material conditions of its cultural production vis-à-vis the 'specifically literary interpretation of culture' fostered by the modernist turn to language and hermeneutics (or, later, by the postmodernist emergence of 'meta-interpretive interests that played themselves out, in diverse ways, under the banner of theory'; McGann 13). More recently, textual theory has been reformulated in a spirit of acknowledging that, 'in literary scholarship, the Age of Theory has yielded to the age of the material text and its fortunes' (Chaudhuri 2). And yet, the problem of interpretation has not been overcome, and we will address this conundrum in a final Interlude chapter entitled 'On Interpretation' between the sections on critical theory and textual theory.

All this would seem to indicate that a new mode of theory will have to be developed, a mode of theory more alert to the material conditions of writing and reading in evolving and converging media contexts as well as in private and institutional situations, a mode of theory which combines

the insights of philology, hermeneutics, and Theory on a new footing and acknowledges the interface between the semiotics of texts and available cultural semantics. A similar step “beyond Theory” in the emphatic sense established by the late 1980s emerges from the ongoing debate about reading in the humanities. While the traditional hermeneutics of affirmation predicated on *what* a text means was under the auspices of Theory superseded by a hermeneutics of suspicion with its overwhelming interest in *why* a text means in the politically grounded agendas of “critical reading”, “symptomatic reading”, or “suspicious reading” inspired by Marxism, psychoanalysis, and the linguistic turn in general, more recent approaches have taken their cue from the cultural, medial, and material turns that followed and insisted on the necessity to take into account and even practice ‘uncritical reading’ (Warner), ‘surface reading’ (Best and Marcus), or at least ‘reflective reading’ (Felski 2009), replacing the emphatic *why* of suspicion with a more functionally minded *how* in the process.

‘Before Theory’:	hermeneutical reading	‘what’?
‘Theory’:	critical/symptomatic/suspicious reading	‘why’?
‘After Theory’:	uncritical/surface/reflective reading	‘how’?

Of these new developments, it is probably Rita Felski’s notion of “reflective reading” that seems most integrative in its attempt at ‘harness[ing] the intellectual and theoretical curiosity associated with critique to develop more compelling and comprehensive accounts of why texts matter to us’ by ‘assum[ing] that literature’s worldly knowledge is not only suspicious, subversive or adversarial, [but] that it can also amplify and replenish our sense of how things are’ (Felski 2009, 34).²

Following up on the diagnosis of a postmodernist “disaggregation” of theory in the humanities since the 1970s that Vincent Leitch discussed a decade ago in a volume with the same title as ours, these recent developments suggest that the return of materiality as a concern of theory (see, for example, Coole and Frost, as well as, with a neo- or late-Marxist bent, Nilges and Sauri) has added an additional punning layer of meaning to the title *Theory Matters* which justifies it on new grounds: It is our contention that the borderlines of the dimensions of a theoretical preoccupation with culture and literary texts are not mutually exclusive but permeable. In fact, the reading coordinates emerging from any theoretical endeavour would have to bring down the insights of metatheory, cultural theory, and critical

theory to the level of practice, application, and method, in short: to the level of encounters between readers and texts of all kinds that characterize both contemporary culture at large and the typical teaching situation of the discipline of literary and cultural studies. Such reading coordinates would have to address the relationship between normative and reflexive reading practices with their various individual and institutional contexts as well as the relationship between the long-standing and still valid paradigm of mimesis of reality and the emerging paradigm of a mimesis of process. The tentative ideal of a metatheory of practice instead of a merely theoretical metatheory and, vice versa, of a textual practice which is likewise fuelled by (meta)theoretical reflection governs the overall approach of the volume. Such an ideal is basically functional and acknowledges the differentiation of knowledge in its uneasy relationship with notions of progress even within the discipline while trying to counter this complexity with establishing well-organized general aims and a road map for integrating the various levels of doing theory.

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A short survey of the chapters of this book illustrates major approaches to the question of where the place of (literary and cultural) theory today can be allocated. Literature and/as cultural material(s), contexts, texts, textures, objects, signifiers delineate a highly interdisciplinary, reflexive, counter-discursive, alternative imaginary. The chapters suggest a creative and imaginative cross-fertilizing, a structural affinity of reality, theory, and art. Theory functions as an instance of cultural (self-)reflection, as an inventive mediating instance which seeks to explain and to express the complex and contingent relationality that exists between all constituent parts, factors, and motivations which make up and influence the reading and interpreting of both literature/culture and lifeworld, that is, the world that we experience together. The chapters prove that doing theory, on the one hand, advises us to pay attention to and accept the singular and the particular, but, on the other hand, this does not mean that we have to give up all attempts at generalization. The search for conclusion and abstraction, given that both are always preliminary and temporary, must go beyond theory-political correctness or the resistant nature of the particular.

In the opening essay of the *metatheory* section of the volume, J. Hillis Miller investigates whether or not “rhetorical readings” still play a role in the age of digital telecommunications and media. On the one hand, he accentuates the potential inherent in the knowledge of rhetoric in the study of literature in order to lay bare and expose ideologies and their

manipulative strategies; on the other hand, he advocates the development of a pictographic theory of reading mixed media productions, that is, the need to transfer some of the protocols of “rhetorical reading” to works that are multimedia mixtures of words, sounds, and visual images, along with the material, bodily gestures of hand–eye coordination (digital dexterity) that are necessary, for example, to play a video game.

Gerold Sedlmayr interrogates the specific literariness of theory. By juxtaposing theoretical stances such as those of the German media-philosopher Friedrich Kittler or Derek Attridge in *The Singularity of Literature*, Sedlmayr addresses the issue of a demand for “objective” and/or “singular” targets and objectives of theoretical methodologies in literary studies. Attridge’s assumption that literary theory depends on the theorist’s experiencing of literature—an experiencing constituted by an excess of “rationality”—is combined in the chapter with Paul de Man’s advocating of a subversively political, because self-confidently “rhetorical”, kind of theory. This highlights the fact that, for de Man, the demand for objectivity in literary studies is far from self-evident; rather, it is the consequence of past knowledge formations. Hence theory can serve to question tendencies to naturalize academic discourses as objective and non-ideological. The literariness of theory evolves from the acknowledgement of the fact that texts not only very much resist our attempts to understand them completely, but that our desire for understanding them is also based upon their alterity. Further drawing on Paul de Man, Sedlmayr argues that it is the task of theory to dismantle the historical interconnectedness of knowledge and to go beyond the establishment of purely subjective points of view.

Taking his cue from J. Hillis Miller’s deconstructive reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s unfinished poem ‘The Triumph of Life’, Christian Huck goes beyond purely rhetorical reading by taking the materiality of the book into account. Reader and text are understood as being engaged in a contingent meeting, which is mediated by the materiality of the book. Huck suggests that reading a poem would have to account for the affective responses of corporeal readers as well as for the interpretative efforts of the educated readers’ minds. Materiality offers contexts that go beyond mere signification processes. Huck concludes that the performativity of the text as medium entails a specific semantic substratum which would be lost in a purely rhetorical reading. Understanding literature, therefore, rests on both meaning and materiality. Media can be looked upon as ‘material-semiotic nodes’ (Huck) as they open avenues of possible meanings, but then are themselves nothing but specific realizations within a specific historical continuum and its potentialities.

Both Julian Wolfreys's and Dino Galetti's contributions turn to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in order to evaluate such central categories as subject, matter, material, perception, perspective, and epistemological difference with regard to both the interpretation of literature and the consequences for theoretical conceptualizing. For Wolfreys, the theoretician is witness to the material experience of being; theory is presented as a veritable reflection of the temporal and processual character of existence. Perception as memory of the trace of experience can only return as an after-effect, in the manner of re-presentation, of mental image, the trace of a trace. Being and theory are constituted by this alterity, which suggests that the self is informed by loss, by change, by incompleteness. In a similar vein, Galetti reads Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida critically, and claims that essentiality allows for actual and ideal books, authors and so on, and essential generality isolates the sorts of spatio-temporal situations which teachers and theorists often use. In turn, fantasy permits the creating of the world of fiction in which both authors and readers engage, and the Idea in the Kantian sense allows for an origin "beyond" fantasy. Even though "literarity" is not an essential quality of literature, which itself is no essence, value judgements and pragmatic distinctions between fact and fiction must be possible even if the essences on which such distinctions are based are constantly changing.

Benjamin Noys's essay is a discerning negotiation of Bruno Latour's rehabilitation of matter against materialism. Noys interprets the loose materiality of Gordon Lish's experimental novel *Peru* as an example of that particular kind of object which works of fiction constitute as these do not form coherent materialities because they interweave forms of abstraction as well as materiality. In doing this, Noys proves that inasmuch as literary studies are interested in Latour's turn to materiality, Latour himself is interested in text and textualization. It appears, finally, that literary objects are not passively subjected to processes of theoretical abstraction. Instead, the literary object itself can test the theoretical forms of abstraction. Lish's novel proves that the repetitions of language and the experience of violence, for instance, engage with the question of value in literary and economic terms. This intervention troubles the Latourian tendency to reduce abstraction onto a level field of multiple objects, while also suggesting that "materialism" is not simply confined to "matter" or "objects". Consequently, Noys argues that materialism must be considered against matter, which would contest Latour's matter against materialism.

In the context of *cultural theory* with its broad contextualization for understanding, the institution of the university holds a central position. Thomas Docherty subjects the university to a rigorous scrutiny. Docherty

sees the university as a place geared to neo-liberalism, management, and bureaucracy, which is therefore severely threatened as a place of theory as well as of academic and intellectual freedom by economic interests and power structures. Theory here functions as a tool of intellectual resistance.

Ingrid Hotz-Davies diagnoses a need for a material turn in Gender Studies. Drawing amongst others on Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman's *Material Feminisms*, her interpretation of A. L. Kennedy's novel *The Blue Book* advocates gender theories which keep highlighting the fact that our social environments gender us, but which, furthermore and beyond that, point out that we are surrounded by a shared material interactivity in which both minds and bodies are seen to be invariably open and porous. Bodies, minds, and the matter they consist of will have to be theorized without simply reproducing sex (and gender) again, and here, it seems, sometimes literature (or art in general) can achieve more than theory.

Lars Eckstein and Christoph Reinfandt read the works of German sociologist and systems theorist Niklas Luhmann in the context of spaces of transcultural encounter where "global designs and local histories" (Walter E. Mignolo) interact and thus make the question of inclusion into or exclusion from "world society" (Luhmann) particularly pressing. Rather than following blindly the path of Luhmann's theory, a productive encounter of systems theory and postcolonial theory would have to demonstrate the complex social worlds of today's urban peripheries—contact zones, as it were, in which local histories and global designs are constantly renegotiated.

While feminist, queer, and postcolonial/anti-racist theories have from their respective vantage points interrogated a perceived privileged nexus between subjecthood and agency (even if constructed, in the wake of Althusser and Butler, as subjectivity in subjection), Dirk Wiemann discusses the alternative notion of a "radical passivity" articulating itself in terms of evacuation, silence, and refusal. This alternative model—the epitome of which, Wiemann illustrates, is *Bartleby the Scrivener's* resolution "I would prefer not to"—offers up a critique of the organizing logic of agency and subjectivity itself and also opts out of certain systems built around a dialectic of colonizer and colonized. Literature itself can be regarded as a privileged site of articulation—if not production—of a radically passive form of subjectivity. Drawing on Jacques Rancière, Wiemann suggests that radical passivity has strong affinities with the notion of democratic indifference that Rancière identifies as the hallmark of the "mute speech" of literature.

Nicola Glaubitz reconstructs the literary turn in organization studies, focusing on processes of differentiation in that discipline whose results (a plurality of seemingly incompatible theoretical approaches) resemble the situation in literary studies. She singles out the phenomena and the concepts of complexity and contingency as the main problems addressed in organization studies since the 1970s. The problem of complexity strongly motivates the revision of so-called rational science models (systems theory) in favour of literary and cultural theory (deconstruction, narratology, discourse analysis, a concern with issues of class and gender). Organization studies researchers claim that a perspective on organizations as constituted by language, text, and narrative highlights hitherto neglected aspects: the processual or event-like nature of orders, and the instability of ordering principles. Reflections on the pragmatics of texts, narratives, reading, and writing can therefore inform a shift of theoretical perspective towards specific modes of observing culture.

The section on *critical theory* or, in other words, literary and cultural theories which turn inward in order to assess adequate ways of seeing and thinking, very much focuses on aspects of cultural ecology, literary ethics, and (the future of) narratology in the context of complexity studies. Hubert Zapf maps out the ways in which cultural ecology has transformed critical theory. Literature is understood as an ecological cultural force both in a thematic sense as well as in explicitly environmental forms of writing and in the forms and functions of aesthetic communication. A cultural-ecological conception of literature does not entail a naïve, realist understanding of the world, of epistemology, and of aesthetics; at the same time, however, radically constructivist stances are exposed as no longer viable in the face of a globalized world.

As far as literary ethics is concerned, Derek Attridge elaborates on how literature as a cultural event has ethical and political effects. Concepts of individual experience and cultural events are seen as two sides of the same coin. Linked to the question of ethics is the question of responsibility. To respond responsibly to a work means to read attentively and to read ‘with an openness to that which one has never encountered before’ (Attridge). In this sense, the question of individual responsibility relates to the wider social and political function of literature in which works of literature can be sites of resistance to dominant ideologies and a culture of instrumentalization.

Sebastian Domsch indicates that the moral agency of readers as well as of players of video games consists in the conscious acceptance of entering

the game of fictionality or simulation. Text and world are supposed to be connected in order to offer alternative versions of the world, which can be engaged with in a playful fashion and even embraced as these versions are identified as fictional. This, Domsch points out, is the ineluctable function of all fictionality and therefore, he concludes, there can never be an outside of ethics. In reading stories as much as in playing narrative games, there is a consciousness of fictionality, of being inside something that is distinct from life and contingent. It is this consciousness that is ethically relevant, and that is both deconstruction's contribution to ethical criticism and vice versa.

In a similar fashion, Martin Middeke asserts a structural affinity between literature and what Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben have called the "inoperative" and "coming community". Reading literature resembles the inoperative/coming community because both are characterized by the dissociability of self and Other, singular and plural, the particular and the generic. Singularity and negativity, temporality and finitude, and *ekstasis* and potentiality emerge as signatures of an ontological "compearance" (that is, "appearing together") of authors, texts, contexts, and readers. The ethical consequence of this compearance lies in its quality of resistance to totality and totalitarianism as well as in the rejection of free-floating (neo-liberal) individuality. Literature as coming community, ethics, and theory function as complex dispositions.

Richard Walsh's contribution explains from a narratological point of view why the integration of complexity science is able to redeem diminishments of the theoretical dimension of literary narratology hitherto brought forward by contextualist as well as cognitive approaches to narrative. Contextualist narratologies have rarely moved beyond formalism without also subordinating theory to interpretation; cognitive narratology has tended to invoke the sciences of the mind as a source of new concepts and terms with which to describe the experience of the literary text and the value of that encounter. Walsh argues in favour of a dialogic interdisciplinarity. Complexity studies constitute a means of conceptual perspective-taking that attaches theoretical questions of narrative to bare cognitive functions and also reimagines a dialogue between cognitivism on the one hand and contextualism on the other.

The last section on *textual theory* is introduced by an essay by the late Herbert Grabes, who investigates the fate of texts rather than "text" or "textuality", that is, of quite specific assemblies of particular signifiers in a fixed sequence. Grabes understands "theory" in the sense in which it

has become disseminated in the domains of literary and cultural studies as well as linguistics since the 1960s: that is, as a theory of language claiming in some cases to be, as such, also a theory of everything cultural—and in a few cases to even be a theory of everything. Grabes advocates the self-sufficiency, unpredictability, and creative complexity of literary texts which, so to speak, have a life of their own rather than support particular views of particular theorists. What keeps us interpreting is this very unpredictability and incommensurability of reading, theorizing, and writing.

In a way different from Benjamin Noys's essay mentioned earlier, David J. Alworth revisits Bruno Latour. He examines both the literariness of Latour's writing (for example, the use of metaphor, the densely textured irony) as well as his debt to narratology and to semiotics. Alworth also considers how Latour approaches imaginative literature, pointing out that Latour seems to consider a familiarity with (the conventions of) literature to be central to his own theoretical programme. Alworth thus provides an account of the role played by the literary object, especially the novel, within Actor-Network-Theory (ANT). His interpretation of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* reads the novel as an effort to reconstruct and reconfigure society. Applying ANT in Latour's understanding to this reconstruction allows us to rethink basic assumptions about text and context, about literary as well as social form.

Christoph Reinfandt's contribution on 'Reading Textures' comments upon the recent renaissance of the term "texture". Turning to various conceptualizations of the conditioning of reading processes in terms of phenomenology (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick), cognitive aesthetics (Peter Stockwell), and communication/cultural practice (Richard H. R. Harper), Reinfandt proves how highly relevant these are for the debate about the possibility or even necessity of moving beyond the unspoken agenda of "critical reading" in literary and cultural studies, be it in terms of "uncritical reading" (Michael Warner), "surface reading" (Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus) or "reflective reading" (Rita Felski). Furthermore, he discusses the potential and limitations of the double-edged notion of *reading textures/reading textures* with regard to conceptualizations of media texts. Reading textures thus encompass cultural practices of sense-making beyond representation. Theorizing such textures implies a shift in textual theory from what texts/objects mean to "what does what it means mean" (Steven Connor).

In a similar vein, Sukanta Chaudhuri argues that we conceptualize texts and works by abstracting from their realized forms. 'The work *is*',

Chaudhuri asserts, ‘what we take it to be’. While Plato saw the reality of an object as inhering in an ideal form *beyond* or *behind* its material manifestations, Aristotle saw the reality as inherent *in* those manifestations and only deducible from them in conceptual terms. For the former, the universal is truly absolute; for the latter it is, in a manner of speaking, contingent. The way we interpret as well as edit texts is very much dependent on which stance we take between these two concepts. Elaborating on the search for or at least the potentiality of a consolidated *Hamlet*, Chaudhuri clarifies that each version over four hundred years can be seen as a unique point in a temporal universe that is endless in principle, while the material evidence of a manuscript, for instance, and hence the myth of an ideal source survive at the same time. The material evidence thus embodies a controlling mental construct: a text is both a structure and a process. ‘Neither Plato nor Aristotle alone will serve’, Chaudhuri concludes.

* * *

So why does theory matter? Why are theories useful and inevitable for the literary or cultural scholar? Why would we want scholars to have self-conscious, imaginative, and creative access to theoretical discourse, and why would we want them to participate actively in it regardless if this concerns issues of metatheory, cultural or critical theory, and textual theory? Or wouldn’t we even want them to ideally have a creative and imaginative awareness of all these levels? These questions cannot be adequately answered without delineating major functions of theoretical discourse and reflection. In conclusion, we should therefore like to propose four such functions:

1. Theories provide us with criteria for a heuristically plausible demarcation of the subject (matter) we research into. Some aspects, thus, are foregrounded by a particular theory, while others, inevitably so, are relegated to the background.
2. Theories provide hypotheses which relate to, explain, and establish transparent major episteme(s), that is, major definitions of ‘the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice’ (Foucault 168).
3. Theories provide conceptual, terminological, and representational frameworks for textual and cultural analysis.

4. Theories provide interesting questions; they correlate past and present realities, controversies, concerns, circumstances, attitudes, and events. That is to say, theories—just like symbols or a repertoire of symbols, beings, objects, actions, or procedures—function as perceptible as well as imaginable carriers of meaning. A particular culture, society, or community may entail or produce particular theories; theories themselves shed light on a particular culture and the way it endows texts or objects with a particular meaning.

NOTES

1. The formulations beginning with ‘The perspective of deconstruction ...’ take their cue from Albrecht Koschorke’s programme for a ‘mediology’ which has been immensely influential in the German theory debate. For the German original see Koschorke 1999, 344–5. Koschorke has since convincingly spelled out the broader epistemic implications of this approach in terms of a general theory of narrative in modern culture (see Koschorke 2012).
2. In more recent essays, Felski has insisted on the potential of a hermeneutics of suspicion in Paul Ricoeur’s sense vis-à-vis the self-confirmatory agendas of critique/Theory (see Felski 2012a, b).

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