



# Theory/Literature/Culture. The Legacy of Literary Theory in the “Post-Theoretical” Age\*

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In *After Theory*, Terry Eagleton claimed that literary and cultural studies are now in their post-theoretical age. Since then, more and more voices have echoed his statement. As Jonathan Culler put it as early as 2000 (*The Literary in Theory*), we are very much aware of the end of our faith in “high theory.” However, this proves not only that theory isn’t dead yet, but also that theory, be it literary or cultural, lives on implicitly or rather explicitly in the analytical, critical or hermeneutical approaches that are nowadays at the core of the discourse on literature and culture. Starting from these assumptions, this paper seeks to portray what we see today as the legacy of the theoretical discourse on literature and culture in the 20th century.

Keywords: literary theory, post-theory, poetics, literary studies

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## The Death of Theory

Over the last two decades, many well-grounded claims have been made as an attempt to reinforce the idea that literary studies have entered their *post-theoretical age*. This paradoxical statement may have emerged from the fact that, historically speaking, the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was clearly dominated by a heavily theoretical discourse on language and, indirectly, on literature itself; during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this theoretical discourse was used extensively not only in literary studies, but in all areas of the humanities (Pavel 1988). If, in the early '80s, those directly involved in harnessing the vast “theoretical” project of literature were right to acknowledge several remaining islands of “resistance to theory” (De Man 1986), in the late '80s there

were other, more decisive and increasingly louder voices who proclaimed either “the end of theory” (Olsen 1987) or the end of “great theories” and great theorists (Eagleton 2003).

Even in the French theoretical arena, which in the '60s gave birth to the most important structuralist and post-structuralist “theories,” heated debates were bringing into question the very usefulness of theories and the dangers of converting theories into absolute gods on earth. In the context of French literary studies, the notion of theory has been explored in close relationship with the popular practice of the structural analysis of literature. This is the reason why the whole range of theoretical debates has always been focused on the formalist aspect of literary theory or literary studies, to the detriment of the complexity and liveliness of literature and of

other cultural artefacts. In his study from 2007, *La littérature en péril* [*Literature in Peril*], after a long career dedicated to critical structuralism, Tzvetan Todorov draws attention to the real dangers that may emerge from heavily formalised literary studies, especially in the area of education. It is a fact that this intense formalisation has led to the transformation of literature into “an object speaking an absolute, self-sufficient and strictly autonomous language” (Todorov 2007: 31). In 2011, J.-M. Schaeffer made a crucial intervention in this ongoing debate with the publication of his book *Petite écologie des études littéraires: Pourquoi et comment étudier la littérature?* Right from the outset, the French scholar states that literature or literary studies can't be experiencing a crisis, and that the only real crisis is actually experienced by “our scholarly representation of *Literature*,” which affected the transmission of literary values and the study of literary works, as well as the formation of practitioners in the field of literary studies (Schaeffer 2011: 6). In Schaeffer's view, literature is one of the most intensely creative areas of human activity (6), which leads him to make the following prediction concerning the future of literary studies (including literary theory, if we consider it to be the self-reflexive dimension of literary studies): against all odds, Schaeffer claims, literary studies will continue to bring a substantial contribution to all fields of study in the socio-humanities (7).

Jonathan Culler, who has intensively popularized structuralism and deconstruction in the Anglo-American literary world (Culler 1975), notes in his polemical study from 2007, *The Literary in Theory*, that, in spite of the fact that “the death of theory” has been a largely attractive topic in contemporary humanist studies, “theory is everywhere” (Culler 2007: 2).

“Even fields previously immune or resistant, such as Chinese studies or medieval studies, today produce candidates with great theoretical sophistication—acquainted with a wide range of theoretical discourses and, more important, a penchant for posing questions that these theoretical discourses have helped them formulate, about relations between literature and popular culture, literature and politics, literature and forces of globalization, and so on. Texts are read intensively, with theoretical issues in mind, and symptomatically, in work in cultural studies that explores how they fit into various discursive practices of identity formation or the production of sexuality, the projection of imagined communities, the resistance to globalization, or the dialectics of subversion and containment.” (Culler 2007: 2)

Culler's words accurately describe the post-theoretical tendencies of the last decades: the death of theory is obviously an exaggeration, since theoretical thinking has continued throughout these years to have a tremendous influence on literary and cultural studies, as well as on the socio-humanities as a whole. If so, then perhaps the theoretical tendencies have been carefully concealed underneath some approaches to literature and culture with more practical purposes. In this sense, “post-theoretical” may refer to something that has a practical application, something that is directly connected to the present metamorphoses and interactions in today's cultural arenas.

### Theory/Theories

The “theoretical” dimension, generally viewed as a “system of ideas” (Morin 1991), represents one of the most important mechanisms through which, given a specific cultural context, literature as a polymorph phenomenon can be validated, systematized, and institutionalized. At the core of the “theoretical” dimension sits a range of definitions, concepts, axioms and—especially in the case of literary studies—reading practices that aim at capturing a relevant meaning; out of a variety of discourse practices circulating in a given culture, the theoretical dimension should be able to formulate the image of a symbolic phenomenon that proves essential for cultural identity.

Ideally, the “theoretical” dimension of literary studies would encourage a certain degree of openness towards a continuous dialogue with other metamorphosed literary forms and with “cultural phenomena”; such openness would certainly lead to the critical re-evaluation of the very nature of literary studies.

In fact, the history of modern literary theory (extending over the 20<sup>th</sup> century) is made of numerous instances when literary studies opened towards the re-evaluation of their own nature. Russian Formalism marks the inauguration of this history. As early as 1926, in his essay *The Theory of the “Formal Method”*, Boris Mikhailovich Eikhenbaum notes that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the unitary theoretical views that we now find representative of the Formalist Russian School used to be nothing other than “a struggle for a science of literature that would be both independent and factual” and also a struggle for a definition of literature as a “subject matter of literary study” (Eikhenbaum 1965: 102). By rejecting the vague concepts and the hectic disciplines dominating the era before the turn of the century, Russian Formalism was



actually trying to establish a connection with one of the theoretical approaches of Antiquity, one that was exclusively dedicated to literary study: poetics. From the beginning of Romanticism and until 1900, this theoretical approach had not been very popular, because literary studies had all embraced a deterministic view on literature and were extensively using a variety of hermeneutical grids: philosophical, religious, and psychological. By advertising critical thinking and generating polemic debates, Russian Formalism not only produced a set of tools necessary for discussing and analysing literature (literariness, literary devices, imagery, narrative techniques, etc.), but also started an epistemological debate over the ways of studying literature.

We should bear in mind the fact that the Russian Formalists were able to provide analytical tools and generate theoretical thinking due to the intensely animated atmosphere promoted throughout the aesthetic modernity, which developed creativity and the intellectual spirit. It seems that the huge payoff came with the emergence of the radical representations of modernity, the avant-garde and other artistic experiments, which clearly illustrated the equally innovative artistic spirit of this science of literature.

In fact, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps under the influence of the diverse aesthetical experiments of modernity, there emerged a number of different approaches to literature, each broadening the world of literary studies by addressing particularly complex literary issues. Literary phenomenology, as perceived by Roman Ingarden, is much akin to Russian Formalism if we look at its analytical results, which, once promoted by the Geneva School, would later become an attempt at clarifying the relationship between the subject and the world as object. The Prague Structuralist School is similar to the above-mentioned schools in that it paid an equal amount of attention to the aesthetic function of literature and to the problem of literary reception. Taking a further step beyond the canonical interpretations of literature, Freudian psychoanalysis soon drew attention to the deep underlying symbolic structures of artistic works; in so doing, it actually triggered a critical inquiry into the deeper levels of the text and, in the end, it managed to demolish the traditional view on the subject. Marxism would raise awareness of the ideological undertones of the so-called “superstructure” (including culture/literature).

After the Second World War, all these new theoretical approaches paved the way for the spectacular manifestations of French Structuralism, which would soon become the leading methodological voice to conquer all areas of the humanities, literary studies, anthropology, philosophy, and political

studies. Closely following Russian Structuralism by continuing its approaches to the literary phenomenon, in the years after the war, French Structuralism responded promptly to the increasing demand for the creation of a “coherent system” which would piece together the fractured knowledge of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Scholes 1974; Pavel 1988). At the same time, Structuralism continued the project of methodological openness that had already been on the agenda of Russian Formalists, deeply interested in the self-reflexive nature of their studies. As perceived by the Russian Formalists, this openness was descriptive and analytical (they elaborated a set of tools for textual analysis and were interested in assessing basic literary elements), as well as critical (they raised questions about the complexities of the literary language). The fact that the Structuralists bracketed off the aesthetic value and the text’s historicity soon enabled the transfer of their tools into the cultural arenas of anthropology, history, pop culture, etc. However, in the early ’70s, the popular message of Structuralism was quickly destroyed by its excessive formalization, with Structuralism remaining, nevertheless, an extremely powerful school, with clear pedagogical, descriptive and analytical purposes (Scholes 1974: 40).

This closing of literature within itself, emerging from the overly formalized practices of Structuralism, sparked off tensions which, in turn, announced an imminent break from Structuralism; what was later known as Post-Structuralism came to fill this gap. However, one could pick up hints of an imminent change as early as the ’60s—in the work of Roland Barthes, for instance: *The Death of the Author* (1968) and *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) truly marked a hermeneutical turning point in literary studies, which, up to that moment, had been heavily concerned with structural conceptualizations and with the constitutive elements of discourse. Post-Structuralist thought tried to re-establish and renew the ties with the vague pre-war theoretical practices. Nietzsche’s intensely critical lessons taught during the critical modernity would later be developed by Michel Foucault’s and Jacques Derrida’s philosophies of suspicion, which were to become more and more concerned with the power relationships from within culture and literature and with the unstable nature of language. The lessons taught by Post-Structuralists closely resonated with the lessons developed in line with the Marxist and psychoanalytical traditions, thoroughly renewed through the critical voices of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, etc.) and through Lacan’s psychoanalysis, respectively. In addition, the great post-war voices of the New Left (Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and Stuart Hall) became extremely interested in reading

popular culture within an ideological framework; in the '70s, all these new theoretical practices led not only to the emergence of new cultural and ideological readings of literature, but, more importantly, to the very birth of a new academic discipline—cultural studies, which celebrated a more ambivalent and less “triumphalist” view on culture.

Since then, *theory* has ceased to be merely a “theory of literature” and has become a “critical theory,” paying more and more attention to widely spread cultural phenomena. From this vantage point, literature is nothing more than a product of popular culture, which can be interpreted through ideological lenses. After first experimenting with textualism, American Post-Structuralist Barbara Johnson influenced this critical approach, enhancing its practical appeal by transferring deconstructive practices into the arena of major cultural and political issues: gender and racial identity, the cultural canon, cultural institutions, etc. Since the '80s, parts of the vast corpus of “critical theory” have been selected circumstantially, to suit particular readings or literary and cultural interpretations. From that moment on, as a result of this exposure to diversity, “theory” has been shattered into a multitude of theories, which have gradually come to support various militant interpretations in the cultural space. We could name these new theories—feminism, postcolonialism, gay and lesbian criticism, etc.—identity interpretation theories (Tucan 2007: 38). The new theoretical openness of the early days of Post-Structuralism served as a disciplinary melting pot with clear practical consequences for today’s cultural metamorphoses.

These clear-cut theoretical divisions and the highly politicized areas of academic research may have led to the new critical approaches to literature and to the complex reinterpretations currently offered in universities by the ever more popular cognitive sciences. Cognitive poetics has directly inherited this analytical manner of studying literature in relation to cognition and of interpreting the complexities of language and its ability to generate new meanings. Cognitive poetics is currently attempting to re-evaluate the analytical tools for dealing with literature and for establishing connections with the cultural space; therefore, this new science of literary criticism finds itself in direct opposition to the studies emerging from the Post-Structuralist paradigm, and tries to express a critical position towards the Post-Structuralist way of dealing with meaning and interpretation (Tucan 2013: 39). By doing this, scholars of cognitive poetics attempt to offer an alternative to the “spreading dissatisfaction with the more bleakly relativistic and antihumanist strands of poststructuralism” (Richardson and Steen 2002: 1).

## The Legacy of Literary Theory

Starting from this brief outline, we may now begin to reconsider the history of critical thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to reformulate the legacy of literary theory in what we may now call the “post-theoretical age.”

First, there is a theoretical and *analytical* line of thought, which reduces literature to an explicit and autonomous object; it is concerned with highlighting the generic elements of literature and refining the terminology and the methods of analysis. The theory of literature can offer the necessary methodology for studying literature; it is a fact that this methodology is always subject to the inherent metamorphoses triggered by the changes of paradigm in the humanities and in literary art. From Aristotle to French Structuralism, spanning the stylistics and the neo-rhetoric of the '70s, all the way to the new cognitive poetics, the theoretical and analytical project of literary studies (closely linked to the reinvention of several long-standing academic disciplines in Western culture, namely poetics and rhetoric) has aimed at changing the literary phenomenon according to new structures and typologies. These changes have been particularly useful for “critical” and “hermeneutical” projects undertaking specific goals in history and society. Although this type of project was extremely powerful in the humanities and in the social sciences in the '60s and the '70s (Pavel 1988), because it seemed to have moved away from its instrumental attributions, in its more recent instantiations (for instance, Post-Structuralism and the transformation of literary theory into critical theory), it took on the task of defining the circumstantial and historical nature of literature and of its frameworks; this endeavor legitimized new types of literary hermeneutics on the literary market.

This may explain the second type of theoretical thinking in literary studies, namely *speculative thinking*. A historical overview of all interpretive practices, ranging from traditional literary history to the contemporary identity hermeneutics of Post-Structuralism (Feminism and Postcolonialism), would show that each particular interpretation is founded on a theoretical hypothesis on literature; this “theory” may be both a premise and a final statement. The hermeneutical inquiry starts with a clear theoretical hypothesis on literature: after having been confirmed through critical interpretation and disseminated as the truth of the text, this hypothesis may become a doctrine. In fact, these hermeneutical practices take place when “literary theories” are assumed, used, confirmed, and largely disseminated. In this case, the concept of “literary theory” becomes



highly speculative in that it responds to the wide range of definitions of literature—be they explicit or implicit, conflicting or compatible—which sit at the basis of interpretation (literary hermeneutics) and of critical evaluation (literary criticism).

Having acquired multiple functions, these “theories” may be of an open and polemical nature, as opposed to the previous understandings of literature and literary studies (the early highly critical post-structuralist “theory” is a good illustration). As such, they may become the theoretical basis for a large set of hermeneutical practices, or they may “close” and thus become mere “doctrines” of literature (identity hermeneutics are a case in point). The second line of theoretical thought lies at the heart of a genuine tension between speculation and doctrine. It enabled the creation of a history of literary ideas and of literary studies, which harbor conflicting definitions of literature.

Clearly, this second line of thought is responsible for the tension generated between synchronous or successive literary theories; I have tried to locate this critical tension in the vicinity of *speculation* and *doctrine*, by which I mean the space between the contemplation of literature (the *projective* moment, so to speak), the critique of a dominant speculative model (a *polemical* moment *per se*) and the affirmation of a new model (a *doctrinal* moment). From this point of view, the history of literary studies and the selection of a set of literary practices give voice to an acute need for a critical reflection on literary theories, which, in its turn, might give birth to a third line of critical thinking: an *epistemological* one. The way I see this third type of thinking is closely related to the way in which Antoine Compagnon sees literature in his book *The Demon of Theory* (1998). To Compagnon, literature is a “relativistic” and “ironic” object; the critic sees “the theory of literature” as a constant questioning of the nature of literary knowledge. This epistemological line of thought suggests that we are currently experiencing a change in the history of literary theory. The rhetorical mode claiming that the theory has died, along with the rather ambiguous ways of “doing theory” (i.e. methodological, speculative, and epistemological), with a clear role in various practical and critical projects, reveal not only the crisis of the discipline itself, but also a metamorphosis transforming the “regime of relevance” of its object(s): literature and/or culture.

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In one of his articles, Galin Tihanov (2004) places the birth of modern literary theory at the intersection of two regimes of relevance: one practical and the other one artistic.

“[...] literary theory emerged in Eastern and Central Europe in the interwar decades as one of the conceptual products of the transition from a regime of relevance that recognizes literature for its role in social and political practice to a regime that values literature primarily for its qualities as an art.” (Tihanov 2004: 78-79)

With the onset of the artistic regime of relevance, there emerged the analytical project of literary theory mentioned above and, at the same time, an autonomous idea of literature began to develop. The other practical regime of relevance, however, continued to be in close relation to the idea of literature during this time period. Under the influence of modern critical thought, this regime was transformed into a critical regime of relevance. Starting with the ‘60s, this enabled the existence of what I have defined above as the speculative project of literary theory, which enlarged the borders of the particular object of literary theory, opening its gates toward cultural phenomena. This also allowed literary theory to manifest particularly as critical theory. Although Tihanov chooses to describe this regime of relevance as “low-key” (Tihanov 2004: 79), I’d rather see it as the return of the old practical regime of relevance in a new critical form. The fact is that the object of literary theory, which has now become critical theory, changed and along with this changed the relationships between the analytical project of literary theory and the new speculative project, the former being subordinated to the latter. From this vantage point, more specifically starting with the ‘80s, louder and more categorical voices could be heard in their attempt to annihilate the theory (for instance, Knapp, Benn 1982). These were the voices that favoured more practical approaches to literary studies and, at the same time, expressed a clear preference for delimiting the borders of their object between the territories of literature itself. In the end, the resistance to theory is rather the resistance to changing the manner in which it was conceived the object of theory and its regime of relevance. Whenever these two elements are slightly reshaped, one can clearly understand the need for reshaping the theoretical project on literature and its inevitable transformation but also the appearance of these voices proclaiming if not the death of theory at least its utter uselessness. But the epistemological tension in such moments of crisis always shows the need for new theoretical projects, which can manifest in analytical, methodological and speculative ways, so as to help redefine both its object and its regime of relevance.

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