Available soon:

THE TUDORS John Guy
TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN Kenneth O. Morgan
WITTGENSTEIN A. C. Grayling
WORLD MUSIC Philip Bohlman
AFRICAN HISTORY John Parker and Richard Rathbone
ANCIENT EGYPT Ian Shaw
THE BRAIN Michael O'Shea
BUDDHIST ETHICS Damien Keown
CHAOS Leonard Smith
CHRISTIANITY Linda Woodhead
CITIZENSHIP Richard Bellamy
CLASSICAL ARCHITECTURE Robert Tavernor
CLONING Arlene Judith Klotzko
CONTEMPORARY ART Julian Stallabrass
THE CRUSADES Christopher Tyerman
DERRIDA Simon Glendinning
DESIGN John Heskett
DINOSAURS David Norman
DREAMING J. Allan Hobson
ECONOMICS Partha Dasgupta
THE END OF THE WORLD Bill McGuire
EXISTENTIALISM Thomas Flynn
THE FIRST WORLD WAR Michael Howard
FREE WILL Thomas Pink
FUNDAMENTALISM Malise Ruthven
HABERMAS Gordon Finlayson
HIEROGLYPHS Penelope Wilson
HIROSHIMA B. R. Tomlinson
HUMAN EVOLUTION Bernard Wood
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS Paul Wilkinson
JAZZ Brian Morton
MANDELA Tom Lodge
MEDICAL ETHICS Tony Hope
THE MIND Martin Davies
MYTH Robert Segal
NATIONALISM Steven Grosby
PERCEPTION Richard Gregory
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION Jack Copeland and Diane Proudfoot
PHOTOGRAPHY Steve Edwards
THE RAJ Denis Judd
THE RENAISSANCE Jerry Brotton
RENAISSANCE ART Geraldine Johnson
SARTRE Christina Howells
THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR Helen Graham
TRAGEDY Adrian Poole
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY Martin Conway

For more information visit our web site
www.oup.co.uk/vsi

Jonathan Culler

LITERARY THEORY

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in
Oxford New York
Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai
Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi
São Paulo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto
Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and in certain other countries
Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

First published as an Oxford University Press paperback 1997
Reissued 2000

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available
Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Culler, Jonathan D.
Literary theory: a very short introduction / Jonathan Culler.
Includes index.
1. Criticism. I. Title
PN81.C857 1997 801'.95—dc21 97-17713
ISBN 13: 978-0-19-285383-7
ISBN 10: 0-19-285383-X
10
Typeset by RefineCatch Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed in Great Britain by
Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport, Hampshire

Preface

Many introductions to literary theory describe a series of 'schools' of criticism. Theory is treated as a series of competing 'approaches', each with its theoretical positions and commitments. But the theoretical movements that introductions identify – such as structuralism, deconstruction, feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and new historicism – have a lot in common. This is why people talk about 'theory' and not just about particular theories. To introduce theory, it is better to discuss shared questions and claims than to survey theoretical schools. It is preferable to discuss important debates that do not oppose one 'school' to another but may mark salient divisions within movements. Treating contemporary theory as a set of competing approaches or methods of interpretation misses much of its interest and force, which come from its broad challenge to common sense, and from its explorations of how meaning is created and human identities take shape. I have preferred to take up a series of topics, focusing on important issues and debates about them and on what I think has been learned.

Still, anyone reading an introductory book on literary theory has a right to expect an explanation of terms such as *structuralism* and *deconstruction*. I offer brief sketches of major critical schools or movements in the Appendix, which can be read first or last or referred to constantly. Enjoy!

Jonathan Culler, Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997

Chapter 1
What is theory?

In literary and cultural studies these days there is a lot of talk about theory – not theory of literature, mind you; just plain 'theory'. To anyone outside the field, this usage must seem very odd. 'Theory of what?' you want to ask. It's surprisingly hard to say. It is not the theory of anything in particular, nor a comprehensive theory of things in general. Sometimes theory seems less an account of anything than an activity – something you do or don't do. You can be involved with theory; you can teach or study theory; you can hate theory or be afraid of it. None of this, though, helps much to understand what theory is.

'Theory', we are told, has radically changed the nature of literary studies, but people who say this do not mean *literary theory*, the systematic account of the nature of literature and of the methods for analysing it. When people complain that there is too much theory in literary studies these days, they don't mean too much systematic reflection on the nature of literature or debate about the distinctive qualities of literary language, for example. Far from it. They have something else in view.

What they have in mind may be precisely that there is too much discussion of non-literary matters, too much debate about general questions whose relation to literature is scarcely evident, too much reading of difficult psychoanalytical, political, and philosophical texts.

Theory is a bunch of (mostly foreign) names; it means Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler, Louis Althusser, Gayatri Spivak, for instance.

The term *theory*

So what is theory? Part of the problem lies in the term *theory* itself, which gestures in two directions. On the one hand, we speak of 'the theory of relativity', for example, an established set of propositions. On the other hand, there is the most ordinary use of the word *theory*.

> 'Why did Laura and Michael split up?'
> 'Well, my theory is that . . .'

What does *theory* mean here? First, *theory* signals 'speculation'. But a theory is not the same as a guess. 'My guess is that . . .' would suggest that there is a right answer, which I don't happen to know: 'My guess is that Laura just got tired of Michael's carping, but we'll find out for sure when their friend Mary gets here.' A theory, by contrast, is speculation that might not be affected by what Mary says, an explanation whose truth or falsity might be hard to demonstrate.

'My theory is that . . .' also claims to offer an explanation that is not obvious. We don't expect the speaker to continue, 'My theory is that it's because Michael was having an affair with Samantha.' That wouldn't count as a theory. It hardly requires theoretical acumen to conclude that if Michael and Samantha were having an affair, that might have had some bearing on Laura's attitude toward Michael. Interestingly, if the speaker *were* to say, 'My theory is that Michael was having an affair with Samantha,' suddenly the existence of this affair becomes a matter of conjecture, no longer certain, and thus a possible theory. But generally, to count as a theory, not only must an explanation not be obvious; it should involve a certain complexity: 'My theory is that Laura was always secretly in love with her father and that Michael could never succeed in

becoming the right person.' A theory must be more than a hypothesis: it can't be obvious; it involves complex relations of a systematic kind among a number of factors; and it is not easily confirmed or disproved. If we bear these factors in mind, it becomes easier to understand what goes by the name of 'theory'.

Theory as genre

Theory in literary studies is not an account of the nature of literature or methods for its study (though such matters are part of theory and will be treated here, primarily in Chapters 2, 5, and 6). It's a body of thinking and writing whose limits are exceedingly hard to define. The philosopher Richard Rorty speaks of a new, mixed genre that began in the nineteenth century: 'Beginning in the days of Goethe and Macaulay and Carlyle and Emerson, a new kind of writing has developed which is neither the evaluation of the relative merits of literary productions, nor intellectual history, nor moral philosophy, nor social prophecy, but all of these mingled together in a new genre.' The most convenient designation of this miscellaneous genre is simply the nickname *theory*, which has come to designate works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they apparently belong. This is the simplest explanation of what makes something count as theory. Works regarded as theory *have* effects beyond their original field.

This simple explanation is an unsatisfactory definition but it does seem to capture what has happened since the 1960s: writings from outside the field of literary studies have been taken up by people in literary studies because their analyses of language, or mind, or history, or culture, offer new and persuasive accounts of textual and cultural matters. Theory in this sense is not a set of methods for literary study but an unbounded group of writings about everything under the sun, from the most technical problems of academic philosophy to the changing ways in which people have talked about and thought about

the body. The genre of 'theory' includes works of anthropology, art history, film studies, gender studies, linguistics, philosophy, political theory, psychoanalysis, science studies, social and intellectual history, and sociology. The works in question are tied to arguments in these fields, but they become 'theory' because their visions or arguments have been suggestive or productive for people who are not studying those disciplines. Works that become 'theory' offer accounts others can use about meaning, nature and culture, the functioning of the psyche, the relations of public to private experience and of larger historical forces to individual experience.

Theory's effects

If theory is defined by its practical effects, as what changes people's views, makes them think differently about their objects of study and their activities of studying them, what sort of effects are these?

The main effect of theory is the disputing of 'common sense': common-sense views about meaning, writing, literature, experience. For example, theory questions

- the conception that the meaning of an utterance or text is what the speaker 'had in mind',
- or the idea that writing is an expression whose truth lies elsewhere, in an experience or a state of affairs which it expresses,
- or the notion that reality is what is 'present' at a given moment.

Theory is often a pugnacious critique of common-sense notions, and further, an attempt to show that what we take for granted as 'common sense' is in fact a historical construction, a particular theory that has come to seem so natural to us that we don't even see it as a theory. As a critique of common sense and exploration of alternative conceptions, theory involves a questioning of the most basic premisses or assumptions of literary study, the unsettling of anything that might

have been taken for granted: What is meaning? What is an author? What is it to read? What is the 'I' or subject who writes, reads, or acts? How do texts relate to the circumstances in which they are produced?

What is an example of some 'theory'? Instead of talking about theory in general, let us plunge right into some difficult writing by two of the most celebrated theorists to see what we can make of it. I propose two related but contrasting cases, which involve critiques of common-sense ideas about 'sex', 'writing', and 'experience'.

Foucault on sex

In his book *The History of Sexuality*, the French intellectual historian Michel Foucault considers what he calls 'the repressive hypothesis': the common idea that sex is something that earlier periods, particularly the nineteenth century, have repressed and that moderns have fought to liberate. Far from being something natural that was repressed, Foucault suggests, 'sex' is a complex idea produced by a range of social practices, investigations, talk, and writing – 'discourses' or 'discursive practices' for short – that come together in the nineteenth century. All the sorts of talk – by doctors, clergy, novelists, psychologists, moralists, social workers, politicians – that we link with the idea of the repression of sexuality were in fact ways of bringing into being the thing we call 'sex'. Foucault writes, 'The notion of "sex" made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, pleasures; and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere.' Foucault is not denying that there are physical acts of sexual intercourse, or that humans have a biological sex and sexual organs. He is claiming that the nineteenth century found new ways of grouping together under a single category ('sex') a range of things that are potentially quite different: certain acts, which we call sexual, biological distinctions, parts of bodies, psychological reactions, and, above all, social meanings. People's ways

of talking about and dealing with these conducts, sensations, and biological functions created something different, an artificial unity, called 'sex', which came to be treated as fundamental to the identity of the individual. Then, by a crucial reversal, this thing called 'sex' was seen as the *cause* of the variety of phenomena that had been grouped together to create the idea. This process gave sexuality a new importance and a new role, making sexuality the secret of the individual's nature. Speaking of the importance of the 'sexual urge' and our 'sexual nature', Foucault notes that we have reached the point

> where we expect our intelligibility to come from what was for many centuries thought of as madness, ... our identity from what was perceived as a nameless urge. Hence the importance we ascribe to it, the reverential fear with which we surround it, the care we take to know it. Hence the fact that over the centuries it has become more important to us than our soul.

One illustration of the way sex was made the secret of the individual's being, a key source of the individual's identity, is the creation in the nineteenth century of 'the homosexual' as a type, almost a 'species'. Earlier periods had stigmatized acts of sexual intercourse between individuals of the same sex (such as sodomy), but now it became a question not of acts but of identity, not of whether someone had performed forbidden actions but of whether he 'was' a homosexual. Sodomy was an act, Foucault writes, but 'the homosexual was now a species'. Previously there were homosexual acts in which people might engage; now it was a question, rather, of a sexual core or essence thought to determine the very being of the individual: Is he *a* homosexual?

In Foucault's account, 'sex' is constructed by the discourses linked with various social practices and institutions: the way in which doctors, clergy, public officials, social workers, and even novelists treat phenomena they identify as sexual. But these discourses represent sex

as something prior to the discourses themselves. Moderns have largely accepted this picture and accused these discourses and social practices of trying to control and repress the sex they are in fact constructing. Reversing this process, Foucault's analysis treats sex as an effect rather than a cause, the product of discourses which attempt to analyse, describe, and regulate the activities of human beings.

Foucault's analysis is an example of an argument from the field of history that has become 'theory' because it has inspired and been taken up by people in other fields. It is not a theory of sexuality in the sense of a set of axioms purported to be universal. It claims to be an analysis of a particular historical development, but it clearly has broader implications. It encourages you to be suspicious of what is identified as natural, as a given. Might it not, on the contrary, have been produced by the discourses of experts, by the practices linked with discourses of knowledge that claim to describe it? In Foucault's account, it is the attempt to know the truth about human beings that has produced 'sex' as the secret of human nature.

Theory's moves

A characteristic of thinking that becomes theory is that it offers striking 'moves' that people can use in thinking about other topics. One such move is Foucault's suggestion that the supposed opposition between a natural sexuality and the social forces ('power') that repress it might be, rather, a relationship of complicity: social forces bring into being the thing ('sex') they apparently work to control. A further move – a bonus, if you will – is to ask what is achieved by the *concealment* of this complicity between power and the sex it is said to repress. What is achieved when this interdependency is seen as an opposition rather than interdependency? The answer Foucault gives is that this masks the pervasiveness of power: you think that you are resisting power by championing sex, when in fact you are working entirely in the terms that power has set. To put this another way, in so far as this thing called

'sex' appears to lie outside power – as something social forces try in vain to control – power looks limited, not very powerful at all (it can't tame sex). In fact, though, power is pervasive; it is everywhere.

Power, for Foucault, is not something someone wields but 'power/knowledge': power in the form of knowledge or knowledge as power. What we think we know about the world – the conceptual framework in which we are brought to think about the world – exercises great power. Power/knowledge has produced, for example, the situation where you are defined by your sex. It has produced the situation that defines a woman as someone whose fulfilment as a person is supposed to lie in a sexual relationship with a man. The idea that sex lies outside and in opposition to power conceals the reach of power/knowledge.

There are several important things to note about this example of theory. Theory here in Foucault is analytical – the analysis of a concept – but also inherently speculative in the sense that there is no evidence you could cite to show that this is the correct hypothesis about sexuality. (There is a lot of evidence that makes his account plausible but no decisive test.) Foucault calls this kind of enquiry a 'genealogical' critique: an exposure of how supposedly basic categories, such as 'sex', are produced by discursive practices. Such a critique does not try to tell us what sex 'really' is but seeks to show how the notion has been created. Note also that Foucault here does not speak of literature at all, though this theory has proved to be of great interest to people studying literature. For one thing, literature is about sex; literature is one of the places where this idea of sex is constructed, where we find promoted the idea that people's deepest identities are tied to the kind of desire they feel for another human being. Foucault's account has been important for people studying the novel as well as for those working in gay and lesbian studies and in gender studies in general. Foucault has been especially influential as the inventor of new historical objects: things such as 'sex', 'punishment', and 'madness', which we had not previously thought of as having a history. His works treat such things as

historical constructions and thus encourage us to look at how the discursive practices of a period, including literature, may have shaped things we take for granted.

Derrida on writing

For a second example of 'theory' – as influential as Foucault's revision of the history of sexuality but with features that illustrate some differences within 'theory' – we might look at an analysis by the contemporary French philosopher Jacques Derrida of a discussion of writing and experience in the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau is a writer of the French eighteenth century often credited with helping to bring into being the modern notion of the individual self.

But first, a bit of background. Traditionally, Western philosophy has distinguished 'reality' from 'appearance', *things* themselves from *representations* of them, and *thought* from *signs* that express it. Signs or representations, in this view, are but a way to get at reality, truth, or ideas, and they should be as transparent as possible; they should not get in the way, should not affect or infect the thought or truth they represent. In this framework, speech has seemed the immediate manifestation or presence of thought, while writing, which operates in the absence of the speaker, has been treated as an artificial and derivative representation of speech, a potentially misleading sign of a sign.

Rousseau follows this tradition, which has passed into common sense, when he writes, 'Languages are made to be spoken; writing serves only as a supplement to speech.' Here Derrida intervenes, asking 'what is a supplement?' Webster's defines *supplement* as 'something that completes or makes an addition'. Does writing 'complete' speech by supplying something essential that was missing, or does it add something that speech could perfectly well do without? Rousseau repeatedly characterizes writing as a mere addition, an inessential extra,

even 'a disease of speech': writing consists of signs that introduce the possibility of misunderstanding since they are read in the absence of the speaker, who is not there to explain or correct. But though Rousseau calls writing an inessential extra, his works in fact treat it as what completes or makes up for something lacking in speech: writing is repeatedly brought in to compensate for the flaws in speech, such as the possibility of misunderstanding. For instance, Rousseau writes in his *Confessions*, which inaugurates the notion of the self as an 'inner' reality unknown to society, that he has chosen to write his *Confessions* and to hide himself from society because in society he would show himself 'not just at a disadvantage but as completely different from what I am. . . . If I were present people would never have known what I was worth.' For Rousseau, then, his 'true' inner self is different from the self that appears in conversations with others, and he needs writing to supplement the misleading signs of his speech. Writing turns out to be essential because speech has qualities previously attributed to writing: like writing, it consists of signs that are not transparent, do not automatically convey the meaning intended by the speaker, but are open to interpretation.

Writing is a supplement to speech but speech is already a supplement: children, Rousseau writes, quickly learn to use speech 'to supplement their own weakness . . . for it does not need much experience to realize how pleasant it is to act through the hands of others and to move the world simply by moving the tongue'. In a move characteristic of theory, Derrida treats this particular case as an instance of a common structure or a logic: a 'logic of supplementarity' that he discovers in Rousseau's works. This logic is a structure where the thing supplemented (speech) turns out to need supplementation because it proves to have the same qualities originally thought to characterize only the supplement (writing). I shall try to explain.

Rousseau needs writing because speech gets misinterpreted. More generally, he needs signs because things themselves don't satisfy. In the

Confessions Rousseau describes his love as an adolescent for Madame de Warens, in whose house he lived and whom he called 'Maman'.

> I would never finish if I were to describe in detail all the follies that the recollection of my dear Maman made me commit when I was no longer in her presence. How often I kissed my bed, recalling that she had slept in it, my curtains and all the furniture in the room, since they belonged to her and her beautiful hand had touched them, even the floor, on which I prostrated myself, thinking that she had walked upon it.

These different objects function in her absence as supplements or substitutes for her presence. But it turns out that even in her presence the same structure, the same need for supplements, persists. Rousseau continues,

> Sometimes even in her presence I committed extravagances that only the most violent love seemed capable of inspiring. One day at table, just as she had put a piece of food into her mouth, I exclaimed that I saw a hair on it. She put the morsel back on her plate; I eagerly seized and swallowed it.

Her absence, when he has to make do with substitutes or signs that recall her to him, is first contrasted with her presence. But it turns out that her presence is not a moment of fulfilment, of immediate access to the thing itself, without supplements or signs; in her presence too the structure, the need for supplements is the same. Hence the grotesque incident of swallowing the food she had put into her mouth. And the chain of substitutions can be continued. Even if Rousseau were to 'possess her', as we say, he would still feel that she escaped him and could only be anticipated and recalled. And 'Maman' herself is a substitute for the mother Rousseau never knew – a mother who would not have sufficed but who would, like all mothers, have failed to satisfy and have required supplements.

'Through this series of supplements', Derrida writes, 'there emerges a law: that of an endless linked series, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing that they defer: the impression of the thing itself, of immediate presence, or originary perception. Immediacy is derived. Everything begins with the intermediary.' The more these texts want to tell us of the importance of the presence of the thing itself, the more they show the necessity of intermediaries. These signs or supplements are in fact responsible for the sense that there is something there (like Maman) to grasp. What we learn from these texts is that the idea of the original is created by the copies, and that the original is always deferred – never to be grasped. The conclusion is that our common-sense notion of reality as something present, and of the original as something that was once present, proves untenable: experience is always mediated by signs and the 'original' is produced as an effect of signs, of supplements.

For Derrida, Rousseau's texts, like many others, propose that instead of thinking of life as something to which signs and texts are added to represent it, we should conceive of life itself as suffused with signs, made what it is by processes of signification. Writings may claim that reality is prior to signification, but in fact they show that, in a famous phrase of Derrida's, 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte' – 'There is no outside-of-text': when you think you are getting outside signs and text, to 'reality itself', what you find is more text, more signs, chains of supplements. Derrida writes,

> What we have tried to show in following the connecting thread of the 'dangerous supplement' is that in what we call the real life of these 'flesh and blood' creatures, . . . there has never been anything but writing, there have never been anything but supplements and substitutional significations which could only arise in a chain of differential relations. . . . And so on indefinitely, for we have read *in the text* that the absolute present, Nature, what is named by words like 'real mother,' etc. have always already escaped, have never existed; that what inaugurates meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.

This does not mean that there is no difference between the presence of 'Maman' or her absence or between a 'real' event and a fictional one. It's that her presence turns out to be a particular kind of absence, still requiring mediations and supplements.

What the examples show

Foucault and Derrida are often grouped together as 'post-structuralists' (see Appendix), but these two examples of 'theory' present striking differences. Derrida's offers a reading or interpretation of texts, identifying a logic at work in a text. Foucault's claim is not based on texts – in fact he cites amazingly few actual documents or discourses – but offers a general framework for thinking about texts and discourses in general. Derrida's interpretation shows the extent to which literary works themselves, such as Rousseau's *Confessions*, are theoretical: they offer explicit speculative arguments about writing, desire, and substitution or supplementation, and they guide thinking about these topics in ways that they leave implicit. Foucault, on the other hand, proposes to show us not how insightful or wise texts are but how far the discourses of doctors, scientists, novelists, and others create the things they claim only to analyse. Derrida shows how theoretical the literary works are, Foucault how creatively productive the discourses of knowledge are.

There also seems to be a difference in what they are claiming and what questions arise. Derrida is claiming to tell us what Rousseau's texts say or show, so the question that arises is whether what Rousseau's texts say is true. Foucault claims to analyse a particular historical moment, so the question that arises is whether his large generalizations hold for other times and places. Raising follow-up questions like these is, in turn, our way of stepping into 'theory' and practising it.

Both examples of theory illustrate that theory involves speculative practice: accounts of desire, language, and so on, that challenge received ideas (that there is something natural, called 'sex'; that signs represent prior realities). So doing, they incite you to rethink the categories with which you may be reflecting on literature. These examples display the main thrust of recent theory, which has been the critique of whatever is taken as natural, the demonstration that what has been thought or declared natural is in fact a historical, cultural product. What happens can be grasped through a different example: when Aretha Franklin sings 'You make me feel like a natural woman', she seems happy to be confirmed in a 'natural' sexual identity, prior to culture, by a man's treatment of her. But her formulation, 'you make me feel *like* a natural woman', suggests that the supposedly natural or given identity is a cultural role, an effect that has been produced within culture: she *isn't* a 'natural woman' but has to be made to feel *like* one. The natural woman is a cultural product.

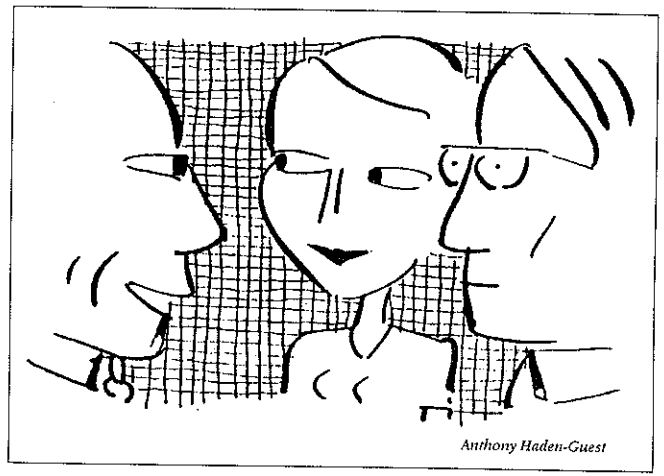
Theory makes other arguments analogous to this one, whether maintaining that apparently natural social arrangements and institutions, and also the habits of thought of a society, are the product of underlying economic relations and ongoing power struggles, or that the phenomena of conscious life may be produced by unconscious forces, or that what we call the self or subject is produced in and through the systems of language and culture, or that what we call 'presence', 'origin', or the 'original' is created by copies, an effect of repetition.

So what is theory? Four main points have emerged.

1. Theory is interdisciplinary – discourse with effects outside an original discipline.
2. Theory is analytical and speculative – an attempt to work out what is involved in what we call sex or language or writing or meaning or the subject.

3. Theory is a critique of common sense, of concepts taken as natural.
4. Theory is reflexive, thinking about thinking, enquiry into the categories we use in making sense of things, in literature and in other discursive practices.

As a result, theory is intimidating. One of the most dismaying features of theory today is that it is endless. It is not something that you could ever master, not a particular group of texts you could learn so as to 'know theory'. It is an unbounded corpus of writings which is always being augmented as the young and the restless, in critiques of the guiding conceptions of their elders, promote the contributions to theory of new thinkers and rediscover the work of older, neglected ones. Theory is thus a source of intimidation, a resource for constant upstagings: 'What? you haven't read Lacan! How can you talk about the lyric without addressing the specular constitution of the speaking subject?' Or 'how can you write about the Victorian novel without using Foucault's account of the deployment of sexuality and the hysterization



'You're a terrorist? Thank God. I understood Meg to say you were a theorist.'

of women's bodies and Gayatri Spivak's demonstration of the role of colonialism in the construction of the metropolitan subject?' At times, theory presents itself as a diabolical sentence condemning you to hard reading in unfamiliar fields, where even the completion of one task will bring not respite but further difficult assignments. ('Spivak? Yes, but have you read Benita Parry's critique of Spivak and her response?')

The unmasterability of theory is a major cause of resistance to it. No matter how well versed you may think yourself, you can never be sure whether you 'have to read' Jean Baudrillard, Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, Hélène Cixous, C. L. R. James, Melanie Klein, or Julia Kristeva, or whether you can 'safely' forget them. (It will, of course, depend on who 'you' are and who you want to be.) A good deal of the hostility to theory no doubt comes from the fact that to admit the importance of theory is to make an open-ended commitment, to leave yourself in a position where there are always important things you don't know. But this is the condition of life itself.

Theory makes you desire mastery: you hope that theoretical reading will give you the concepts to organize and understand the phenomena that concern you. But theory makes mastery impossible, not only because there is always more to know, but, more specifically and more painfully, because theory is itself the questioning of presumed results and the assumptions on which they are based. The nature of theory is to undo, through a contesting of premisses and postulates, what you thought you knew, so the effects of theory are not predictable. You have not become master, but neither are you where you were before. You reflect on your reading in new ways. You have different questions to ask and a better sense of the implications of the questions you put to works you read.

This very short introduction will not make you a master of theory, and not just because it is very short, but it outlines significant lines of

thought and areas of debate, especially those pertaining to literature. It presents examples of theoretical investigation in the hope that readers will find theory valuable and engaging and take occasion to sample the pleasures of thought.