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**WHITHER THEORY?  
OÙ VA LA THÉORIE ?**



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## **Cultural Work of Literature and Theory**

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When I received the invitation to contribute to a colloquium entitled “Où va la théorie?/Whither Theory?”, I naturally felt honoured and agreed almost immediately. I liked the implied optimism that theory would have a future, that it would not wither but go somewhere, so that the only question was whither it would turn. But on second thoughts the proposed task began to look more like an occasion to make a fool of myself, and I didn't even have a bad cold like Madame Sosostriis that might serve as an excuse for a threatening grand failure at foretelling the future. The reason was that I saw myself in a sort of Catch-22 situation, for if theory was to have a real future in terms of being alive and innovative I would certainly not be able to foresee where it would turn to, and if I would be able to deduce its future direction from its present condition, this future could not be truly innovative but would look rather drab. Thus I came to the conclusion that, while optimistic about the future of theory, all I can say is that fortunately I am not able to tell you which turn theory will take. Be prepared for a surprise; the future is still open.

Yet I realized, of course, that this was also impossible, for then I would be a spoilsport, and I kept searching for a viable solution, or rather something like an acceptable detour around the dilemma, a safer substitute for the set task. And all that came to my mind was that instead of pretending to foresee where theory will go I could, of course,

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tell you what I would like to happen, what I would deplore or even fear could happen, and what seems to me most likely to happen within the domain of theory.

So that is what I am going to do now, and the perspective from which I shall approach this task is the one presented in the title of my lecture: the “cultural work of literature and theory” – in other words, the actual impact of literature and theory on the wider context of general culture when they optimally fulfil their respective functions. In doing so I am already opting for “culture” as the frame of reference for the assessment of the value of both literature and theory. This is no wonder, since “culture” has become the dominant category in what previously was called the humanities or *Geisteswissenschaften*, and under the influence of postmodern constructivism and anti-foundationalism much of what previously was considered as being anthropologically and naturally given – just think of the category of gender – turned out to be rather culturally constructed. What has turned out to be of great heuristic value is above all the interpretation of cultures as webs of signification, as complex “texts” that can be “read” in a way similar to that of a difficult literary text – though it should not be forgotten that we are dealing here with metaphor and that there is a substantial difference between a revolution in the streets and a revolution in a book, even if one grants that in a particular case the former may not have come about without the latter. And what has further been of major importance is the view that, in contrast to the traditional assumption of the homogeneity of culture, we now must reckon with a multitude of forces and positions, some more residual, some emergent, that not only coexist with the dominant ideology and hegemonic power structure but are constantly trying to get from the margin into the centre. For it is this view that has led to a heightened awareness of how cultural formations are stabilized or subverted and finally changed. After Louis Althusser had pointed out the impact of “Ideological State Apparatuses” (passim), Clifford Geertz drew our attention to “plans, recipes, rules, instructions” as control mechanisms (46), Pierre Bourdieu to “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” which he called “habitus” (53), Michel de Certeau to dominant “strategies” that carve out and appropriate a cultural space according

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to a system of norms (passim), Alan Sinfield to the impact of powerful stories (33), and Catherine Belsey to acculturation “as we learn how to speak, to follow stories, to read, write, interpret images, obey or repudiate conventions” (109). Fortunately we have, however, also been assured that there are some quite effective countermeasures against this menacing array of means of subjection – for instance, the individual “tactics” elaborated on by de Certeau (passim), or the focussing on the peripheral, the marginal, as demonstrated by Jonathan Dollimore (1990), Alan Sinfield (1992), and Judith Butler (1993). And I think you are all sufficiently acquainted with how wholly different interpretations of the same text can simultaneously be produced by members of the same professional group within one and the same culture – so that the cultural programming cannot be all too cogent.

What further substantiates the choice of “culture” as a frame of reference is the more recent development of cultural history, for – if there is at least some truth in the saying that the future needs a past – without a workable and adequate theory and method of cultural history there will be no chance of working out a promising theoretical vision of the future. What has led to a new writing of cultural history are all the major innovations that have changed historiography in general, such as the heightened awareness of the radical alterity of the past and the ensuing acceptance of the fact that historiographical writing can be no more than a selecting of items from the multiplicity of historical traces and arranging them in a “readable form”, with all kinds of identity and relations being largely the result of interpretation and narrative emplotment. Under the influence of various more recent theoretical perspectives cultural history by now shows a preference for representations, signifying practices, discursive formations, networks of symbolization as objects of observation and enquiry, the material sources being all traces that can be taken as signifiers, primarily language texts, but also paintings, maps, monuments and architecture, and this kind of investigation looks so promising that I am convinced it will continue for quite a while. And as the constructivist view of national and group identities from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* onwards has strengthened insight into the importance of

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collective cultural memory, something given due attention in France over a long period from Maurice Halbwachs's *La Mémoire collective* (1950) to Roger Chartier's *Cultural History (Pratiques de la lecture)*, Marseille: Editions Rivages, 1985, engl. 1988) and in Germany at present by a whole group of scholars and theorists inspired by Jan and Aleida Assmann's writings on *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1992), cultural history will also continue for some time to be pursued from another angle and with a different objective.

Even the few more recent developments I could mention here (that have at least to be supplemented by the highlighting of the cultural influences on the construction of gender in feminist theory and gender studies), sufficiently show that it is the category of "culture" that currently forms the most promising theoretical frame for investigations within the domain of the humanities, and it will therefore be the cultural work of theory that I will refer to when considering the future.

Making a start by delineating what I would deplore or even fear, I will begin with a few quite general features and then get more specific. What you will most probably all agree with is that I don't hope to see stagnation. I am not so sure, however, whether you will all go along with me when I admit that for this very reason I would deplore the development of anything like a theoretical monoculture, the hegemony of one particular kind of theory, however attractive and superior it may look for a while. Not only do I believe in the vitalizing and bracing effect of competition, I have also observed with too many theoretical positions and frames how they tend first to become essentialist and then to degrade into scholasticism after they have achieved a dominant position. This does not mean that a particular kind of theory – such as, right now, Critical and Cultural Theory – should not flourish more than others even for a long time; this may even be necessary in order to exploit all the possible research opportunities it promises to open up. Yet I must add that I would be profoundly irritated if we in the European countries would start imitating the American pattern of theorizing which gives almost total sway to some new-fangled approach for a decade, with everything else being dropped or, if continued, looked upon with utter contempt. This sequential substitution of fashions is the radical counterpart of traditionalist stagnation and likewise

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counter-productive in the negation of history it shares with it. There is, after all, a considerable amount of cultural work involved in all the approaches that have evolved over time, and though we see their limitations, they are still very useful in terms of the preservation of a variety of perspectives on our highly complex domain of investigation. If you are feeling that your position is cutting-edge and there is no room for nostalgia, you shouldn't forget that this edge may soon look blunt to the majority – and what, then, with the insights your anatomizing has allowed and still seems to promise?

For a similar reason I would not be happy to see the advent or strengthening of some totalizing theory, one that tries to explain the stunning variety of phenomena in terms of one or two principles. We are still haunted by the nineteenth century attempts to base everything on the category of spirit or of matter, for example. The result was that an unspeakable amount of intellectual energy and creativity was subsequently spent on repairing the quite obvious drawbacks of such a rage for order by at least partly mind-boggling excursions into metaphor and extensive strategies of looking “behind” adverse phenomena or “unmasking” obstinate positions. I must admit that I cannot see too much difference between a materialist and an idealist position whenever I am confronted with an intelligent version of one or the other. What it finally amounts to is siding in both cases with Parmenides, who, two and a half thousand years ago, maintained that all being is one. I just cannot be persuaded that it makes much sense to ascribe the same quality of substance to, say, a highly aggressive thought, a killing look, a curse, and a killing bullet. I am saying this only because of the attractiveness of the late Foucault's basing of all human history once more on one single principle, on what he calls power. The result is either a strongly reductivist vision of history or an inflation of the term “power” to a point where it becomes identical with the Aristotelian “energeia”, that is, with what makes everything real as against the sheer possibility of “dynamis”.

One could, of course, ask by way of objection, especially on the basis of poststructuralist epistemology, why an attempt should not be made to explain the bewildering complexity of a field of investigation like history by taking recourse to one powerful principle and then see

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which heuristic explanatory value that approach might have. There is only the slight but decisive point, which I will be coming back to, that we will hardly ever find such a merely heuristic stance among theorists, especially when it comes to important questions like what determines human history or how much freedom of decision the human subject has in view of the efficiency of acculturation. Then the discourse tends to become deadly serious, as if seriousness would enhance the quality of positions taken or improve the logic of an argument.

To come to my next point, I would also be quite unhappy if we were to import from the US a situation Wolfgang Iser recently described in the following way:

*What we are currently witnessing is a large-scale politicizing of the humanities. Group interests are vying with one another to assert their respective agendas, which all of them consider an effort to revamp the humanities, and the study of literature in particular. The conviction that "everything is political" has proved to be the lowest common denominator among the competing discourses, which fight what they hold to be hegemonic discourse (9).*

Not that I would deny the possibility of considering everything from a political angle so that "everything becomes political", just as everything becomes ethical from an ethical perspective, religious from a religious one, and aesthetic from an aesthetic one. When I first went to school I found that I couldn't even say "Good morning" without becoming political, and for those who happened to live in East Germany before 1990 the experience that everything can become political lasted much longer without becoming one whit more attractive. And I have been in the university far too long not to be aware of the influence of academic politics and also general politics on decision making. Yet it is something else again to have a situation in which political considerations become so dominant that any other mode of argument becomes futile.

I have to admit that whenever I encounter phrases like "everything is ..." or "always already" in theoretical discourse, I hear an inbuilt alarm going off, warning me that I am about to fall victim to what in German philosophical discourse is called a "Subreption", a

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sleight-of-hand smuggling-in of an unwarranted and unprovable assumption, or where what I have to do with is, rather, the blowing-up of some quite common triviality.

The last highly important thing that I would certainly not like to see in the future is a continuation of the slighting or total exclusion of literature as art and the aesthetic experience it offers that has been almost a hallmark of poststructuralist theorizing. It is a model case of both the blinding effect and arrogance of theory when it becomes too general and therefore loses sight of important differences. Neither is everything fiction, at least not in the same manner, nor is it sufficient to deal with everything on the abstract level of writing or discourse. Try to deal with a ticket you find on the windshield of your car as if it was a poem or try to deny the factuality of the Holocaust outside a novel or a play and watch what will happen. You may say that no theorist will negate such crude differences and that possible remarks to the contrary are not to be taken literally. But I admit that I am not fond of a discourse that first catches the attention with sweeping abstractions that do away with important differences within the domain it deals with, and has then to be repaired by a host of piecemeal retractions and qualifications that bring it back to normal. Yet I will not clamour about the neglect of literary works of art and the aesthetic because at present there are strong signs that it is over, and I will say something in favour of their inclusion in a moment. For this is where I shift from the list of future turns of theory I would deplore to the one change that I desire.

And I will again start with some more general features and then deal with more specific ones. From what I have said about my fear of a monoculture of theory, the hegemony of one particular theoretical frame or system, it already follows that I hope there will be strong competition between various theories so that these are obliged to demonstrate their heuristic value in application. It would, however, be really wonderful if in the next few decades there emerged as many quite original theorists as we have had in the last few, with Lacan, Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze, as well as Lyotard, Habermas, Blumenberg, Iser and Luhmann, to name but a few. Then we would not have to worry about the future of theory, because the new departures they would motivate would make enough of a stir to prevent a falling-back into

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routine. And I also hope that Critical and Cultural Theory will be able to sustain the degree of flexibility it has shown so far regarding the integration of promising new theoretical approaches, so that it will be able to further maintain a prominent position within the domain of theory.

Yet while I am pretty confident that this will be so, I am much more sceptical regarding my next wish for a change, although it means no more than putting the much acclaimed poststructuralist epistemology into practice. If one operates on the assumption that we cannot be certain of any transcendental signifiers for our language games, the appropriate mode of presentation can only be the rather modest one of offering another possibility, another option with a hopefully higher heuristic potential. In contrast to this, theorists have continued to speak and write in such an assertive mode that one gets the impression that nothing has changed. And their behaviour towards those who show some scepticism or even hold views different from their own is exactly as disdainful or even aggressive as the attitude of anyone who is absolutely certain of having once and for all found the truth. Not even the fact that the career of theories over the past two centuries has become shorter and shorter has been enough to effect a change in this respect.

By pointing out some features of the mode of mere possibility that may be found rather attractive, I will therefore take the opportunity to solicit promoters of a stance and mode of presentation that is more in tune with the modest degree of certainty we can actually hope for in our abstract logic of discovery.

To offer something as a mere option, first of all, is valuable because the fact that an alternative to what we already know and hold on to exists does not imply that we are aware of it. We are not even interested in it or ready to seriously consider it so long as we are certain of the truth of what we already know. Therefore the greatest obstacle to the discovery and taking account of further possibilities is this subjective sense of certainty. As long as a given assumption is held to be valid with absolute certainty, alternative possibilities remain hidden or are systematically excluded from further consideration by being labelled as unrealizable. This explains why in principle new

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discoveries can be made and new insights be had at any given time, but historically become possible only at a particular moment.

As Thomas Kuhn (1962) has convincingly demonstrated, a significant shift to another scientific paradigm that opens up a host of previously hidden possibilities can only come about when previous certainties have been shattered to an extent we otherwise find only in political revolutions. And after such revolutions, very rapidly new systems of certainty are put in place that not only exclude and replace the previous ones but also once again close off any view of alternative possibilities for the future. Thus any change and hopefully progress as well only becomes possible because the process of investigation not only produces new certainties by excluding alternative possibilities in favour of one that becomes accepted as being true or at least more likely, but also creates new uncertainties about what was previously held to be true or valid – and thereby opens our eyes to new possibilities. This emergence of new possibilities could, by the way, make up the greatest part of the fascination that the process of theoretical or practical research holds in store – quite independently of any belief in continuous progress, for the radical scepticism regarding such progress in the humanities has, after all, not been detrimental to it.

What should also not be forgotten is the important role of the mode played by the possible for the development of a secular notion of history as a process of becoming and decay with an open future. Different as it is from the cyclical view of history in Classical Antiquity and the linear yet predestined Christian history of salvation, this notion implies that the past is considered as the necessary, as what had to be the way it was; the present as what is real yet seems contingent so long as we are uncertain about why it had to become the way it is; and the future as the domain of the possible, of what – at least from our limited angle of perception – can end up going one way or the other. At least, this is valid as a view of history devoid of metaphysical certainties, be they of a religious or of some other kind.

And as it is the possible that demarcates the open horizon of the future, this mode of existence becomes extremely important from an anthropological point of view, if one gives some credence to the view

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that human beings possess freedom of choice, however limited it may be. Only because the multiplicity of the possible has not yet become reduced to the factuality of the real does there remain any room at all for decision-making and deliberate action; and precisely because of its being the mode of an ontological lack, the possible can serve as the foundation for human freedom, responsibility, and hope, be it in a global or individual, political or ethical sense.

What even more specifically pertains to our present debate about the future of theory is the fact that what is valid for our decision-making and action also applies to the domain of cognition. Only uncertainty about the true nature and condition of the real, the fundamental conviction that things may be possibly this way or another, keeps a space open for that unending search for “truth” that has found its most systematic form in the Western project of science. When we – for whatsoever reason – think we know everything about reality, the game of science (and of theory) is over.

Yet fortunately the game of theory is not over, not only because we do not know everything yet, but because there is not only poststructuralist “Theory” with a capital T, but also the broad domain of theoretical discourse, with several theories competing for hegemony – just as we have had it since the very beginning of Western philosophy. And though each theory tends to be presented with the conviction of its truth or superiority, the multiple certainties cancel or at least relativise each other, so what remains is merely a more or less strong possibility.

Even if a situation in the future should arise in which theorists admit as much, there would still be fierce competition about which theory has a greater claim to being an apt description and efficient analysis of the real. Theorists want their theories to have greater validity than just being merely possible, and this can only be achieved by displacing all other theories. This makes for a pretty dynamic situation of intellectual struggle and competitive marketing as long as vested interests of the ruling powers do not manage to stifle it; and competition between theories appears to be one of the chief agents of cultural change.

Looking back on the history of theorizing, however, it seems that the cards in this game have been marked at any given time, the

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chances of some theories being incomparably better than those of others – which is to say that the wide open field of the possible always was historically limited. In order to understand this, one obviously has to take recourse to meta-theory, to a theorizing that deals with the similarities and differences between extant theories from both a systematic and a historical perspective, and one work that offers a meta-theory of great value with regard to the issue under discussion is Hans Blumenberg's *Paradigmen einer Metaphorologie* [paradigms of a metaphorology]. Assuming that every conceptual system is based on a central metaphor which both enables and limits the operations of conceptualizing, and combining this assumption with the observation that the dominant theories of any one historical period are based on one and the same central metaphor, Blumenberg came to see why theorizing was historically determined and what was the cause of major changes. Taking up his theory, my own list of change-inducing metaphorical shifts would be: from the mirror to the anatomy at the end of the 16th century, from the anatomy to the courtroom, the court of taste and reason in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, from there to the organic as a result of the Romantic yearning for Nature, then in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a kind of meta-organicism, the turn to genealogy, a further turn in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century towards theatrical metaphors of appearance and essence, then slightly altered to that of engineering and architecture in structuralism, only to be led to its paradoxical extreme in “deconstruction” and replaced by writing, a central metaphor still in place yet hard-pressed by various offers from the life-saving area of ecology and from the life-sciences – one need only think of autopoiesis, the root rhizome antithesis, schizophrenia or paranoia and the like. So prophesying which turn theory will take in the future means guessing what the next central metaphor will be that both enables and limits conceptual thought, a task that depends at least as much on the powers of the imagination as on knowledge of current trends and the logic of their development.

Yet I have not yet arrived at the point where I will join this game of prophecy, and am still on the much firmer ground of what turn I would like theory to take in the more immediate future. As far as the choice of a new central metaphor is concerned, I would straightaway

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hope that it will not occlude or, worse, erase the demarcation line between aesthetic experience and other kinds of experience as well as between literature as art and other kinds of texts and discourses respectively, as has unfortunately been the case ever since the advent of structuralism. When I speak of the aesthetic I am not referring to aestheticism or some bourgeois ideology but to the human ability to shift the normal modes of existence by considering the real as something merely possible, or by creating works of art, in order to make the merely possible become real in such a way that it will still be considered as something merely possible. And when I say “something”, this is to be taken literally in the sense of something sensory, something possessing the particularity of “things” perceived by the senses, including bodies.

In literary works of art, the actual things to be perceived are, of course, usually only series of black forms arranged on pages of white paper (or a white screen) that have to be taken as language signs and deciphered while the actual design of their shape more often than not is taken to be of minor importance. What is important is their kind and sequential arrangement, and on this level literary works of art accord with J.M. Cameron’s minimal definition of any language text as “these words in this order” (145). This is, of course, well known to you from cases where the actual shape of a text handed down from the past is not clear and a special discipline, textual criticism or textual philology, tries to reconstruct it or even ‘create’ one according to certain standards. Yet the actual equivalent to the sensory quality of paintings, sculptures, performances is only reached on the level of signification as a product of the imagination. And this has again to be taken literally in the sense of being a *mere* product of the imagination, because what characterizes literary works of art is, to quote Derrida, a “*suspended* relation to meaning and reference” (48). What is imagined is quite specific situations and events, acts and inward states that serve as constituents of an artificial world-making by “exemplification”, to use Nelson Goodman’s term. And the result is that – as with other works of art – the claim to validity in comparison with theoretical discourse is very modest indeed. Marking in some way or other their fictitiousness and presenting merely something like individual cases, literary works of

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art play down both the degree and the scope of the validity of what they present – with the effect that we are invited to share the experiences of imaginary characters: to visit strange places and distant times, encounter a multiplicity of events and actions, persons and thoughts and emotions, without being forced to make decisions about how much or in which way that which we encounter does concern us, to what degree it has to be taken as typical or even generally valid or merely idiosyncratic.

If we are told by postmodern epistemology that for lack of a transcendental signifier there is no justification for a truth claim in *any* discourse beyond the frame of a world-making based on the differentiation provided by language, the one discourse in which this is actually taken seriously is that of literature, because, as Paul de Man remarked, “ultimately all literary rhetoric in general is of itself deconstructive” (50). And I hope I have pointed out strongly enough that it is the “aesthetic”, the sensory quality of the literary imagination on which this validation modesty, this self-deconstruction, is based; it is typical that interpretations of literary works of art that use a conceptual discourse have to take these sensory qualities in a metaphorical sense in order to construct their allegories of reading, which always imply some sort of truth claim.

This definitional detour has only been necessary because of the historical relativity and systemic ambivalence of the semantic which the signifier “literature” has come to possess, and I must add that according to common practices I also expect a significant degree of formal and/or contentual innovation in order to be able to speak of a literary work of art. Only after such a minimal conceptual demarcation can I hope to communicate what I hold to be the cultural work of literature and theory and what I above all wish for the future.

By addressing the *cultural* work I wanted to indicate that I am focussing my attention on the trans-individual significance of both literary works of art and theory, and what is signalled by speaking of cultural *work* is the thesis that literature – as well as theory – does have a significant impact on culture – perhaps not least *because* it seems that literature and theory, like Auden’s definition of poetry, “make nothing happen”. What I have to demonstrate here is, however, above

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all the cultural work done by literary works of art because theory usually is sufficiently convinced of its own cultural value to grant itself an appropriate place within its constructions of “culture”.

What enables literature to do some cultural work which theory *cannot* do is precisely its modesty regarding the claim to validity as this has been delineated. Only its freely admitting that it is “only” a novel, a play, or a poem, its “*suspended* relation to meaning and reference”, protects a literary work of art from “the law” and gives it, again according to Derrida, “in principle the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history” (37). At least in some cultures, among them Western culture, it has been possible for literature to open up, inhabit and circumscribe a free space, a space for that “free play” within the interaction between the fictive and the imaginary that Wolfgang Iser has shown to be the specific effect of literary texts (222-238).

That this is not generally the case has to do with the fact that it is quite a courageous concession on the part of the powers that be to grant such a free space within which their own authority or the assumptions on which it rests can be imaginatively questioned. To quote Derrida once more: “The law of literature tends, in principle, to defy or lift the law. It therefore allows one to think the essence of the law of this ‘everything to say’. It is an institution which overflows the institution” (36), or, as Louis Althusser has it, a literary work of art, like any work of art, by achieving through its formal composition an “internal distancing” from the ideology from which it arises, may “make us perceive” that ideology (204), and Pierre Macherey is even more specific in pointing out that “by mingling the real uses of language in an endless confrontation”, by “experimenting with language rather than inventing it, the literary work is both the analogy of a knowledge and a caricature of customary ideology” (59), and is therefore able to reveal its constructedness.

It may sound convincing enough that, due to their self-deconstructive rhetoric, literary works of art quite generally signal to those living within the culture in which they are produced (but also to

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those within other or later cultures within which they are received) that this culture or these cultures are based, as Nietzsche aggressively phrased it, on “lies”, on the “obligation to lie according to a fixed convention, lie in herds in a style obligatory for everyone” (611, my translation). Yet at the same time they can use the free space granted to them to quite indirectly persuade their readers, through the chosen mode of presentation and/or their specific artificial world-making and distribution of sympathies, to prefer some ways of feeling, thinking, speaking, or acting rather than others, and thus to exert an influence on their hierarchy of values. And what they denigrate, tolerate or promote may equally well be in favour of the centre or the margin of culture, may appear as residual, dominant or emergent. Thus, in contrast to the possibility Althusser and Macherey have pointed out, there is also the one Bourdieu draws attention to: namely, that by reproducing social positions art will help to sustain, and even reinforce, current systems of symbolic value (165) and, insofar as it does so, may be considered in a traditionally Marxist way as a manifestation of the ruling ideology. One should add, however, that the more a literary work is really innovative in relation to the development of art the less it will be prone to merely copy the “current systems of symbolic value”, so that one has to go to the works of less creative authors to learn more about these systems. In an aphoristic manner, one could say that it is those latter works that mirror cultural history, whereas literary works of ‘true’ artistic achievement have helped to keep that history alive by demonstrating the limits of culture, history’s Other.

As no culture seems to be homogeneous enough to be free from inner strife nor sufficiently isolated to escape pressure from outside, there are only two options for its survival: one is to brutally suppress any change and the other is to react in a flexible manner and change as much as the altered conditions require. Whereas the first strategy leads to a fossilization of culture that can be kept up for a while before suffering a major shake-up, the second one is very efficient yet requires those who have the most influence to be able to achieve an inner distancing from the norms and conventions of the culture they live in. And though theory in principle could be very helpful in this by offering other conceptual frames than the one that enjoys primacy,

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unfortunately such offers are more often than not repudiated. They are repudiated because they are regarded as direct threats to the validity of the theoretical explanation of the world and the self and the hierarchies of value one is used to and that are accepted by the majority, or at least by all those considered to be experts. To accept a new theory almost always requires giving up the one currently in place; as I mentioned before, at least more general theories can only become valid by displacing others. This, at least, seems to be different in the case of new perspectives and new hierarchies of value offered by literary works of art. As such innovations are introduced with no more than a claim to validity in one particular case and it is left to the readers to treat them as an exception or grant them wider influence, they tend to meet with much less opposition and to a certain degree are even able to escape censorship. As the enormous impact of the Bible over centuries convincingly demonstrates, paradigmatic stories tend to be at least as efficient in disseminating a particular world-view as the most tightly argued theoretical discourse – except with us theorists, of course, who are enamoured of our conceptual grasp of whatever concerns us.

What does concern us, I assume, is the splitting-up of culture into separate fields constructed and demarcated by specialized discourses that, according to Habermas, have proliferated since the Age of the Enlightenment. For this tendency has created a need for what Jürgen Link has called an inter-discourse (284-307), that tries to guarantee the necessary degree of reintegration. And literary texts are seen as fulfilling such a synthesizing function, in that they tend to reintegrate all discourses of a culture by means of connotation. They help us not to forget that departmentalized and compartmentalized reality is a product of our own doing and that the splitting-up of the life-world is no more than a heuristic procedure.

All this and much more can be said in favour of my urgent wish that theory will in the future take a turn towards paying due attention to the aesthetic and art in general and literary works of art in particular. If theory does not acknowledge art as theory's cultural Other, it becomes an ideology of control, order and hopefully some pragmatism that lacks nothing but the joy of life and the desire for

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novelty and change. Then reason will appear as the opponent of intuition, as Nietzsche already pointed out a long time ago:

*There are epochs in which reasonable and intuitive men are standing next to each other, the one in fear of intuition, the other full of scorn for abstraction; the latter being as unreasonable, as the former inartistic. Both desire to hold sway over life: this one by answering to the most urgent needs with judiciousness and orderliness, that one by not seeing those needs as an "overly joyful hero" and by taking as real only a life dissimulated into illusion and beauty (620-21, my translation).*

And though Nietzsche did not manage to sketch a compromise worth living, I intensely wish that future theory will do so. Then all my hopes in that regard will be fulfilled.

There remains, however, one problem that has gained in urgency lately and therefore has to be added to my list of future tasks for theory. What I mean is the growing awareness of cultural difference under the impact of globalization, an awareness of difference that may for lack of mutual understanding well turn into a nagging sense of antagonism. What I would warmly welcome, therefore, is a further theoretical investigation of what Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser have called the "translatability" of cultures (1996), an intensive theoretical inquiry into which conditions and strategies are favourable to the increase of mutual understanding and respect between people acculturated in quite different ways. The key is most probably increased communication, but I have the impression that much can still be done on the theoretical level to promote better praxis.

This is an appropriate juncture for me to shift from wishful thinking to the more sober area of what seems to be, for me, the most plausible turn theory might well take in the near future, because I think that one of its subjects will be the interrelations between cultures, both within one and the same nation-state and on a broadly regional or even global scale. And as this will unavoidably touch on religion, I also assume that the cultural role of religion will come into greater focus.

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Yet not only interrelations between whole cultures, but also internal interrelations between the different domains and levels of one and the same culture as well as relations between corresponding domains of different cultures will most probably become a favourite subject of theory, not only because the analysis of constituents has already reached a pretty high level and a shift to a more holistic perspective is only logical, but also because pressure is likely to increase from such quarters as neurology and computer science with their basic metaphor of a dynamic-flow network. This may well suggest that Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, whose central concept of autopoiesis has been taken over from biology and neurophysiology, will enjoy within the Anglo-American sphere of theorizing culture the attention it has already found among sociologists.

Not only regarding systems theory, but also quite generally we will, of course, have to reckon for a considerable time with the tendency to perfect and create variations of already existing theories, and most probably there will also be attempts to combine parts and aspects of such theories in a novel manner. What I am not so sure about is how long the concentration on the margin will persist once this concentration at least in theory has led to the margin becoming the centre (as in postcolonial studies). Perhaps the more recent return of interest in the aesthetic can be interpreted as a signal that those aspects of culture which a long time ago were at the centre of attention but have been pushed to the margin in more recent theory are gaining new interest because they can now be treated as something wrongly considered as marginal. And a similar question-mark has to be put after the future career of the primary interest of theory in the suppressed or repressed. After race, class and gender have been given due attention as differentiating frames for social rating and causes of discrimination, and the family or the symbolic order of language for individual tragedy, it will depend on whether a new categorial frame can be found. I might suggest again something like religion or belief, though this is not the place for making an intervention but for an assessment of what in all probability lies on the horizon. Yet I trust that I may be permitted this degree of speculation, since I hope that all these predictions prove to be false – false because we will surely be surprised

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by unsuspected new turns of theory, perhaps even quite radical turns arising out of some choice of new central metaphors that will provide new theoretical perspectives on venerable problem areas and/or open up new areas of theoretical investigation. That is to say: what I wish for theory is a future that remains open to the potentiality of the world.

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