

CRITICAL THEORY TODAY ¹

LA TEORÍA CRÍTICA HOY

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Abstract:

Recent publications argue about whether theory is dead but the proliferation of theoretical discourses and their diffusion creates a situation in which it is difficult to say what theory in the US has become. Nonetheless, it is possible to make some pertinent observations: the return of aesthetics has been accompanied by a decline in the importance of psychoanalysis. Two major developments are singled out: first, the revival of narratology, sometimes in connection with cognitive science, at other times in the form of an “unnatural narratology” that focuses on the myriad forms of strangeness in narrative; second, various versions of the so-called “post-human”, including ecocriticism, Human-animal studies, object-oriented ontology and speculative materialism.

Keywords: Literary theory; Aesthetics; Narratology; Ecocriticism; Object-oriented ontology; Speculative Materialism.

Resumen:

En publicaciones recientes se ha discutido sobre si la teoría ha muerto, sin embargo la proliferación de discursos teóricos así como su difusión generan una situación

1. This paper was delivered at Cornell University on November 18, 2015, as the inaugural “Culler Lecture in Theory”. I am grateful to the Society for the Humanities at Cornell and its Director, Timothy Murray, for the honor he has done me in establishing an annual lecture bearing my name.

en la que no resulta fácil decir en qué se ha transformado la teoría en los Estados Unidos. No obstante, es posible hacer algunas observaciones pertinentes: el retorno de la estética ha estado acompañado por una disminución de la importancia del psicoanálisis. Podemos destacar dos líneas de desarrollo principales: en primer lugar, el renacer de la narratología, en unas ocasiones en conexión con las ciencias cognitivas, en otras con la forma de una “narratología antinatural”, centrada en las innumerables formas de extrañeza de la narrativa; en segundo lugar, las distintas versiones del denominado “posthumano”, que incluyen la ecocrítica, los estudios animalistas, la ontología orientada a los objetos y el materialismo especulativo.

Palabras clave: Teoría literaria; Estética; Narratología; Ecocrítica; Materialismo especulativo; Ontología objetual-orientada.

In surveying recent publications about theory, I find that arguing that theory is not dead seems to have become a growth industry: titles such as *After Theory*, or *Theory after Theory* proliferate. One way, then, in which theory—the now accepted nickname for an unbounded corpus of thought in the humanities—has definitely altered the terrain of the humanities is that we now argue about whether theory is dead or not. Of course, if it really were dead we would not argue about this, unless theory is like Elvis—something that keeps being sighted—or the undead, lumbering lugubriously around. The problem is, I think, that the alleged death of theory is not easy to distinguish from its triumph: if theory does not seem to be a hot topic, it might be that today everyone in the humanities realizes that their projects are sustained by and function within some sort of theoretical framework. The more ubiquitous theory becomes, the less it seems something new and distinct. Feminism encounters a similar fate: feminists of my generation complain that young women today do not consider themselves feminists, although they take for granted all the goals and accomplishments of feminism, so that in a sense feminism might be said to have triumphed. Is this the death of feminism or its triumph? You can argue both ways.

I am joking, of course, in saying that a major effect of theory is to make us argue about whether it is dead. One of the effects of theory is to have transformed the terrain of the humanities so that it is no longer simply the repository of the culture of the past. The temporal character of the domain has changed. When I was an undergraduate—a very long time ago—people argued about what was the best way to study literature: biographical criticism, literary history, Anglo-American New Criticism’s focus on the words on the page. But this was an argument about what was *right*, what was most valid, not

about what was new, or outmoded, what was “cutting edge”, or dead. Any approach said to be the latest thing could be challenged as not having stood the test of time. Today we are much more attuned to the temporality of academic discourse, which is why you might bother to read an article about theory now or theory *today*.

Part of the explanation for this state of affairs, in the United States and the UK, at least, lies in the nature of the capitalist, corporate university: universities are no longer thought to be simply in the age-old business of instruction. Like corporations, they are supposed to innovate or die, and the fortunes of theory in the 1980s and 90s owed a good deal to the fact that administrators came to want cutting-edge projects and worried much less about “soundness”. People who could present their work as doing something new, as offering innovative perspectives, might prosper, even if the powers that be did not particularly approve of what they were doing.

But today it is hard to argue that theory or anything else in the humanities has triumphed, as the recession has made students, and especially their parents, vulnerable to this incessant media drumbeat for STEM disciplines. The media in the US and the UK have always been very suspicious of theory and were frustrated that their former complaints had no effect, but now they have their chance to joke about English majors who end up working in fast-food restaurants and learning to ask “Do you want fries with that?” and they are enjoying the opportunity to mock intellectuals who considered themselves superior. This situation seems to leave the humanities as a domain to be defended as teaching about values rather than as an exciting domain of thought and research. But I think it would be a mistake to fall back on the claim that we just teach the classics of culture. What we need now, more than ever, is the most resourceful thinking about meaning and value, mankind’s place in the world and ways of organizing life. We also need a better abbreviation—if science, technology and mathematics are STEM disciplines, should we be ROOT disciplines, or EDGE disciplines?

At any rate, there is little doubt that, as a result of the flourishing of what we call by the nickname theory, undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty are now able to take seriously a whole range of topics and types of investigations that previously were just not on the table. The result of theory is the relevance of many other sorts of intellectual work to what happens in departments of literature and cultural studies. There are all kinds of interdisciplinary possibilities. In an essay called “The University Without Condition”, Derrida speaks of the commitment to theory as “unconditional thought” (208). Certainly, its speculative character, its willingness to question what has passed as common sense and to revisit axioms of our disciplinary practices has transformed the terrain

in which we operate. Literary and cultural study is taken to include questioning of the canon and of our disciplinary assumptions and procedures, our institutional practices.

So, what about theory today? Three recent books give you a quite different sense of the terrain. First, Jane Elliott's and Derek Attridge's *Theory After Theory*.

This volume argues that theory, far from being dead, has undergone major shifts in order to come to terms with the most urgent cultural and political questions of today. Offering an overview of theory's new directions, this groundbreaking collection includes essays on affect, biopolitics, bio-philosophy, the aesthetic, and neoliberalism, as well as examinations of established areas such as subaltern studies, the postcolonial, and ethics (i).

Elliott and Attridge present theory as new radical thoughts that contest old positions and change the canon of thinkers, but they retain the basic model of theory as what contests and reverses previous ways of thinking, as in Derrida, Foucault, Butler. They present new domains of theory, such as speculative materialism, and new major figures: Rancière, Agamben. They say we should move away from the idea that such figures are necessary for theory, but they note that the reason for such figures is as shorthand for transformational ideas. For them theory is not dead; it functions much as before, but in new domains, with some new authors and new positions.

Against that, the second book, *Theory Aside*, edited by Jason Potts and Daniel Stout, two assistant professors, asks:

Where can theory go now? Where other voices concern themselves with theory's life or death, the contributors to *Theory Aside* take up another possibility: that our theoretical prospects are better served worrying less about 'what's next?' and more about 'what else?' Instead of looking for the next big thing, the fourteen prominent thinkers in this volume take up lines of thought lost or overlooked during theory's canonization. They demonstrate that intellectual progress need not depend on the discovery of a new theorist or theory (back cover).

If theory is a miscellaneous genre, if it consists of works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they apparently belong, it is because 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 an unbounded group of writings about everything under the sun, so for these authors "what else?" involves reviving once important but now neglected thinkers: Erving Goffman, C. L. R. James, Ernst Bloch, I. A. Richards, Alfred North Whitehead, and the early 20th century Russian Formalist, Alexandr Veselovski (for historical poetics). For them the challenge is to rethink the theory canon for new lines of thought by reviving older thinkers.

A third book is *Literary criticism in the 21st Century: Theory Renaissance*, by Vincent Leitch, who has devoted his career to chronicling theory and criticism (he is the editor of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* and author of a whole series of books that survey theory). *Theory Renaissance* announces:

For more than a decade literary criticism has been thought to be in a post-theory age. Despite this, the work of thinkers such as Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault and new writers such as Agamben and Rancière continues to be central to literary studies. *Literary Criticism in the 21st Century* explores the explosion of new theoretical approaches that has seen a renaissance in theory and its importance in the institutional settings of the humanities today". (jacket copy)².

Theory Renaissance is a collection of essays, combining personal reflections, with discussion of the continuing fortunes of Derrida and Foucault, socio-political work in critical theory, and globalization. It offers a chart with a dozen broad domains, each with 6-12 subfields, again documenting an excess, which requires introductions like his. It has the virtue of indicating the impossibility of trying to cover the field of theory and, for my purposes here, of justifying a plan to discuss just two domains that I find especially interesting, but let me first offer a couple of observations about salient developments:

1. A striking aspect of recent theory has been a return of interest in aesthetics, which for a time had been a dirty word: aesthetics was seen as elitist and was pushed aside by literary and cultural theory of the late 20th century. Traditional aesthetic concepts, such as artistic genius, the autonomy and universality of art, and its inherent spiritual value, were inextricably tied to conceptions of the subject and of the independence of discourse from social forces that theory of various schools was engaged in combating³. But without aesthetics, the French theorist Jacques Rancière has argued, there is no art: without specifically aesthetic values or perspectives, so-called art will merge with everything else—into a sea of consumer objects, we might say (2008). This is a very pertinent issue today, interestingly addressed by Sianne Ngai, for instance, in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, which deals with both popular culture and high culture and engages aesthetic theorists such as Adorno. Ngai argues that these are familiar transperiod categories applicable to a range of media, and genres, both affective and conceptual; they resist institution-

2. Interestingly, an earlier work of his, *Living with Theory*, announced on the back cover: Across the globe, the field of literary theory has injected a broad array of innovative concepts into intellectual life – compulsory heterosexuality, cultural capital, hybridity, interpretive communities, and whiteness, to name just a few. In this provocative Manifesto, Vincent Leitch argues that the field of theory, like other spheres of postmodern consumer culture, has become overburdened with new terms and approaches, creating a compelling need for maps and guides.
What has happened in theory, or to theory, is an explosion that apparently creates the need for books like his.

3. For the ideological critique of aesthetics, see Eagleton; for the return to aesthetics, Loesberg.

alization and are valuable precisely for their ability to help explain the remarkable smoothness with which supposedly resistant art has integrated itself in consumer culture.

Jacques Rancière has been particularly important in reversing the critique of aesthetics as elitist. Western aesthetics, what Rancière calls “the aesthetic regime”, replaced in the early 19th century what he calls the “representative regime” inherited from Aristotle, a regime based on literary and artistic genres and structured by rules concerning appropriate and inappropriate subjects for art and for particular means of representation (2011). In the late 18th century, at the time of the French Revolution, these rules were challenged; henceforth anything could be the subject of art or literature. Victor Hugo wrote that he had put “un bonnet rouge”—a revolutionary hat—on the old dictionary: no longer were there noble words and ignoble words. The romantic revolution in literature and art was a democratizing project, Rancière has vigorously reminded us, leading to the breaking of links between art and aristocracy, to the foundation of museums, and to general projects of aesthetic education.

Today, the questions of aesthetics and democratization are connected with the subject of new media. The world of new digital media, hypertext, and computer games poses new aesthetic questions: especially about the finished verbal artifact as the norm—as electronic form makes texts into potentially mutable instances. Fortunately, such questions are no longer seen as outdated or elitist.

Second observation: psychoanalysis, which for several decades was central to theory, has suffered a significant decline in importance. For many years it was a major domain of intellectual speculation and analysis that belonged above all to theory, since it lacked any other proper academic home. Some of that intellectual energy has been diverted into trauma theory—the work of Cathy Caruth is exemplary here—and into affect studies (Eve Sedgwick was a pioneer and Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* an important point of reference: both dealing with dimensions of personal experience for which psychoanalysis might previously have been called in)⁴. Some of the energy has also gone into focus on the body in biopolitics, the study of the strategies and mechanisms of knowledge, power, and processes of subjectivation through which human life processes are managed. But my point is that the reading of Freud and Lacan has not remained fundamental for anyone working in theory, whereas work on, say, Foucault and Derrida still has.

But I want to focus on two developments among many that seem to me especially significant.

4. See also Glotfelty and Fromm’s *Affect Theory Reader*.

I. First, the revival of Narratology, the theory of narrative and formal study of narrative structure, which was a major aspect of structuralist literary theory. This had for some time been a rather neglected enterprise, not very dynamic, but it recently has undergone renovation, has been making a comeback. Instead of focusing mostly on 19th and 20th century literary narrative, recent narratology has given an important place to stories people tell in ordinary life, and also to a broader historical range of narratives; and it has also attempted, in one strand, to draw on cognitive science in describing the operations involved in processing narrative—a major form of intelligibility (Herman). (It is not clear whether the so-called “cognitivist turn” is actually yielding new insights or just a new vocabulary—blending instead of metaphor—but time will tell).

The most important narratological study, Monika Fludernik’s groundbreaking *Towards A “Natural” Narratology*, takes storytelling, of the sort that happens in daily life as well as in fiction, as central and breaks with a plot-based narratology; for her, something can be a narrative if someone *experiences* it. And she attempts to assimilate recent cognitivist work to narratology, without abandoning the fundamental achievements of the narratological tradition.

Another excellent and original work is Rick Altman’s *Theory of Narrative*. Altman, a well-known film theorist, explicitly sets out to construct a new theory of narrative based not on plot, much less on the assumption that the norm for narrative is an unbroken plot thread, but on what he calls “following”. A narrative follows one character or group or switches between one and another. So, narratives are distinguished by their different following patterns (different kinds of modulation from one scene or unit to another), which yield an elementary typology: there are dual-focus narratives, single focus narratives, and multiple focus narratives. In crafting a narratology that is truly based on narrative in general and not just on literary narrative, Altman uses many vivid cinematic examples. This can be considered part of what is sometimes called the intermodal strand of narratology today—interest in narratives across media, in different media. Altman is very deft at showing the advantages of his terminologically simple scheme over traditional narratological analysis and offers what ought to be a starting point for further refinements.

But most interesting to me is what is called *Unnatural Narratology* in reaction to Fludernik’s title but primarily against classic narratology, which posited, for instance, that a narrative is the narration of a sequence of events and thus involves a fundamental distinction between the events—what happened—and the telling, the discourse in which they are reported (with a particular point of view). Classical narratology also maintained that every narrative has a narrator, even if not manifest—it seems natural to say that a story is told by someone. In principle, then, this is a narrator distinct from

the author. And narratology assumed that a story may be either fiction, with no claim to truth, the projection of a fictional world, or non-fiction, with truth claims.

Now of course, narratologists have always known that there are many narratives that do not fit this model—narratives where for various reasons we cannot determine what happened, or where the narrative perspective cannot be understood as that of an ordinary person, or where borderlines between fiction and non-fiction are disrupted. Identifying such anomalies was one of the functions of normative narratological models, but as such cases are multiplied in what we often call postmodernism, the new Unnatural Narratology takes the sensible view that instead of regarding all such cases as anomalous narratives, narrative theory should decenter itself and bring into its ken the full range of narratives.⁵ Then narratives that fit the classical model can be regarded as a special case: one that follows a mimetic model where fictional narrative is an imitation of real-world narratives, a real-world narrative but set in a fictional frame, with a fictional narrator but telling what is presented as a representation of real events, with an identifiable chronology and a human teller with a particular point of view on it.

Unnatural Narratology stresses the anti-mimetic character of a lot of fiction, which calls attention to its fictive nature in various ways. There are, for instance, stories such as Robert Coover's "The Babysitter", where it is impossible to determine what actually happened: there are multiple, contradictory fragments of scenarios, which are impossible to sort out, even if one decides to take many of them as fantasies of particular characters. There are narratives with narrators that are not ordinary persons: a very wide range of possibilities here, from non-human narrators—a horse in John Hawkes' "Sweet William", a corpse in Beckett's "The Calmative", a man who has become a 150-pound female breast in Philip Roth's "The Breast", the disembodied voice that narrates Beckett's *The Unnamable*, or Saleem Sinai, who is a radio receiver for the thoughts of others, in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*—to such unidentifiable narrative voices, if they can be called that at all, as that of *Finnegans Wake*. Not so bizarre but also unnatural, in the sense that their capacities are different from those of real individuals, are character narrators, from Marcel of Proust's *Recherche*, to Ishmael of *Moby Dick* and Nick Carraway of *The Great Gatsby*, who narrate things that they could not have known.

There are, of course, unnatural narrative strategies that have become quite conventional, from the talking beasts of fables to so-called omniscient narrative voices. But Unnatural Narratology wants to stress, first, the exceptional character of much fiction—that it is not realistic narration with a fictional frame around it—and then, instead of simply registering these as anomalous cases, asks both what is the effect of these unnatural

5. See Alber et al., Alber and Heinze, and Richardson.

strategies and how readers process them. Here there is a major disagreement between Unnatural Narratologists oriented toward cognitive science, who want whenever possible to argue that we use the same models for processing strange fictional texts that we do for making sense of other narratives, and those narratologists who insist on the *unnatural* processing strategies that such fictions induce. The naturalizing strategies involve, for example, taking a strange narration to be unreliable, or a fantasy, or dream, whereas the unnatural strategies do not limit narrative possibilities to what is plausible in real-world narratives but often bring into play a meta-level, where the impossibility is recuperated as a special fictional technique. So, for example, with “The Babysitter”, instead of imagining that there is a narrator who is hopelessly confused or schizophrenic, we take this as an authorial commentary on narration itself and the rules of ordinary plot construction. With the less extreme examples, when Marcel, or Ishmael, or Nick Carraway tell us something that they could not have known, we should not assume, as the mimetic model would lead us to do, that they are imagining it or lying, or dreaming, but rather that this is an authorial technique for giving us authoritative information. A surprising unnatural narrative convention might be that when the narratorial functions are operating independently of the character functions—that is, when the narrative provides information not easily relatable to the character narrator—then, surprisingly, the narration will be reliable and authoritative, and the source of information is taken to be not the unknowing character narrator but the stipulating or world-creating author.

Taking as a point of departure resistance to mimetic reductionism, resistance to the assumption that we can make sense of narratives through models based on realist parameters, Unnatural Narratology seems to me a very promising branch of poetics, the investigation of the procedures by which we make sense of the strange texts that increasingly people the world of fiction with strange doings and unnatural voices.

II. The second major development—though it might perhaps, rather, be seen as a series of developments—is what I am inclined to refer to as the mishmash of the post-human, a series of theoretical enterprises which have in common the resistance to the anthropocentric vision of the universe that has for so long been a mark of the humanities: Man is the measure of all things.

I say “mishmash” because for instance, Ecocriticism, devoted to the celebration of nature and of attempts to repair of the damage done to the environment by industrialization, does not sit very well with treatment of the human as cyborg. This latter form of questioning of the distinction between man and machine has been a theoretical topic ever since Donna Haraway announced in “A Cyborg Manifesto” of 1985 that “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we

are cyborgs” (150). The cyborg, hybrid creature of science fiction, part person and part robot, she writes, “can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (181). The two other strands of my post-human mishmash are human-animal studies, which explore and resist the various ways in which we have made the distinction, have constituted ourselves as radically different from animals, and, last, the recent philosophical attempt to break out of the Kantian framework, which goes by such names as “object-oriented ontology” and “speculative materialism”, attempting to think a world of things independent of our faculties.

The characterization of the animal as *other* has long helped to define the human. But how is the distinction between the human and the animal made, on what grounds? With “the question of the animal”, “Human-Animal Studies”, has become a burgeoning interdisciplinary field. Some critiques of the human/animal opposition foreground the commonalities and continuities promoting a “being with” animals (Hearne, Haraway 2007). On the other hand, a powerful strain of recent theoretical work focuses on the *discontinuities*, the radical otherness and inaccessibility of animals, whom we cannot presume to understand (especially once we move beyond animals Westerners like to believe they understand, such as dogs and horses) (Calarco, Wolfe). Stressing the role that notions of the animal have played in defining the human, this approach demands respect for the otherness of animals and accuses proponents of the first approach of anthropomorphizing, treating animals according to human models. There is quite a lively debate here⁶.

Undoing of the boundary between human and animal and promotion of respect for animals is certainly consonant with Ecocriticism, which undertakes similar critiques of the opposition between man and nature that helped construct a humanism in which nature in the West even now is treated as matter to be exploited⁷. This accompanies an encompassing ecological movement that challenges the anthropocentrism of humans and that seeks to promote respect for the environment and all non-human others: the well-being of the full range of life forms, human and non-human, and of the environment is an end to which other purposes should answer. But traditional celebrations of nature, it is argued, still put man at the center: nature as a place for us to restore ourselves, where we can escape the world that is too much with us, where getting and spending we lay waste our powers. Do we save the environment for *ourselves*—*it is easier to mount this sort of argument: reduce greenhouse emissions lest our coastal cities be flooded* we save the environment for itself, striving to remain consistent in our opposition to anthropo-

6. For an important statement, see Derrida, 2008.

7. A pioneering collection is Glotfelty and Fromm.

centrism? Promotion of the concept of the *Anthropocene*, as the era since the beginning of the industrial revolution, when the irreparable human impact on the planet began, is an attempt to highlight the degradation of the natural environment as an inescapable fact of our world, but as well as putting man at the center, this leads to the argument that there is really no such thing as nature or the environment, against which human activity can differentiate itself, since any background is already structured by, suffused with our action; and what we now call nature is often what has been artificially preserved or highlighted, as much a cultural product as anything else. But to treat nature as a human construction, it can be argued, plays right into the enemy's hands by obfuscating the material reality of the world that we wish to protect and enhance. When Timothy Morton argues that "the environment is just a name for a flickering shimmering field of forces in constant flux", and "nature does not strictly exist", the grounds on which to critique ecological damage also flicker (2010, 10, 5).⁸

The ecological thinking of someone like Morton can be related to object-oriented ontology, which is first of all a claim that nothing, and certainly not man, has special ontological status; instead of thinking of objects, even objects that humans have made, as there for us, they must be granted an independent existence, independent of human cognition. To put *things* at the center of a new metaphysics implies that they do not exist just for us.⁹ This so-called democratic ontology can certainly promote care for objects—trees, stones, oceans—but can post humanism rigorously exclude anthropocentrism without reducing everything to the same?

What is called "speculative realism", associated above all with the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, seeks resolutely to oppose Kant's Copernican revolution on which most modern thought is based: that we do not know things in themselves but only things as they are adapted to our faculties. What would it mean to think about reality without taking as central the question of the relation between the world and our faculties? Meillassoux calls us to focus, rather, on what he calls "the great outdoors, the eternal in-itself, whose being is indifferent to whether it is thought" (63). This corresponds, of course, with common-sense metaphysics: the world exists independently of whether we can know it or not. The world cannot be contained or constrained by our access to it. But of course to say anything about the world seems to depend on what we can know. Whence the description of this realism as *speculative*. But Meillassoux makes a distinction between sensible qualities of objects—qualities that depend on a relation to perceivers – and other, mathematically definable qualities that he claims do

8. More generally, see Morton 2007.

9. See Bogost and Shaviro.

not, as support for his realism.

There are certainly affinities between this and a much discussed recent work of theory, Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, which advances the concept of *distributed agency*, stressing the range of ways in which non-human actors participate in events, not just as objects of our will but as compliant or resistant actors. This is a controversial book that rereads some of the history of philosophy in ways that are seen as stressing magical or mysterious forces that should not bemuse a contemporary scientific understanding, but it can be consonant with versions of ecocriticism when it resists the separation of man from the environment, as in Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory, which insists that, living in the world, we are part of systems of *distributed cognition*, some of it embodied in our minds, some in natural systems, some in the smart environments that we and our machines have created.

Actor-Network theory is connected with the more technologically-oriented strand of posthuman thought, as in Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman*, which charts a shift in understanding of the human: from autonomous subjects to nodes of embodiment in increasingly complex systems with feedback loops. The systems of which we form a part are now able to fly airplanes, set stock prices, find information and do a host of other things more quickly and efficiently than mind by itself ever could. Though for many purposes we still have recourse to traditional notions of individuals, free will, and agency, these are seen as heuristic fictions, which we use to try to make sense of a world in which pattern emerges against a background of randomness, through recursive operations. What we call the human, for instance, would be a selection of features from machinic systems and natural processes: Life and consciousness as emergent effects of machinic processes.

Although the notion of the "post-human" is above all an attention-getting device, it is a logical development of the movement of contemporary theory, which has contested the traditional model of the human subject as autonomous, rational, self-conscious, and possessed of free will. Conscious agency, we could say, is a story consciousness tells itself in order to explain what in fact happens as a result of the interaction of a complex of factors: we are part of complex systems or circuits that we do not control. The fundamental claim is that we have always been post-human, always other than that image of the human suggested by humanism. Computers and other devices have only made evident what was the case all along: the psyche with its drives, for example, was never a device that we controlled, and our bodies are extremely complex mechanisms that have always in many ways escaped the understanding.

How far this line of thinking is really compatible with an ecocriticism emphasizing

our disruptive place in ecosystems we do not understand is far from clear. There are some respects in which they might be allies; others in which they seem temperamentally and ideologically at different poles. Boundaries between one and another form of post-humanism—deep ecology, object-oriented ontology, are quite porous, although the affective charge and often political programs can be quite different. If I were younger I would take a serious interest in this mishmash, because it does pose a great many questions that are both conceptually difficult and crucial for the future. Let me make two points to conclude.

First, Human-Animal studies and Ecocriticism are not just theoretical movements but political movements driven by a commitment to justice. For instance, after women's liberation and gay liberation, a certain logic—the contesting of hierarchical oppositions that have marginalized certain groups to create norms—might point toward animal liberation, and then plant liberation. But at what point does this theoretical reflection become counterproductive? Machine liberation? An ontology that insists on the democracy of all objects may be resistant to many goals we would want to defend. Writers on object-oriented ontology are fond of lists of random objects: bonobos, buttons, bacteria, bulldozers—are all equally worthy of our care? What is the relationship between these theoretical explorations and the causes that may have helped instigate them?

Second, I should say a word about the relation of these theoretical developments to literature.

For Ecocriticism, of course, it is literature that, since the romantic period, has celebrated nature as a source of value to be set against a world of cities and machines, and, at the other end of the spectrum of ecological thought, Morton grants an important role to art—though not one I understand—in the “dark ecology” that flows from his disruption of the distinction between man and nature (2010).

For Human-Animal studies, the representation of animals in literature offers some particularly imaginative engagements with the paradoxes that beset the theoretical explorations, where the inclinations to anthropomorphize animals in questioning various boundaries between human and animal is countered by the insistence on the otherness of animals, which we should not presume to try to understand. There are representations of animals in literature, Laura Brown argues, that escape some of the paradoxes that theory has explored because the creatures of literature are simultaneously anthropomorphized and other, they “mingle human-associated and human-alienating impulses, anthropomorphism and alterity, in a way that takes the question of the human-animal relationship in a different direction” from the theoretical dichotomy: more varied and speculatively fantastical and thus more exploratory of true otherness (23). Animals may

be used to bring abstractions into the realm of everyday experience, offering unusual perspectives on effects of hierarchy, diversity, and difference. Poems featuring animals may be unusually imaginative attempts to think in sympathy with the singularity of animals while nonetheless foregrounding the impossibility of finding words that do not appropriate them for human purposes.

For theorists of the post-human such as Katherine Hayles, literature has always functioned as a technology designed to change the cognition of the reader, and now in new electronic systems, feedback loops enable different levels of interaction between text and reader to continuously inform and mutually determine one another, transforming texts as readers perform them. In Jorge Luis Borges's fantastical story "The Book of Sand", the letters shift into new positions every time the book is closed. Now in electronic texts, words and images may shift, through algorithms or programs that create an infinite number of possible recombinations. We have been accustomed to say, of great literature, that the text always has surprises in store, so that readers always find something new in it. Electronic texts can literalize (and perhaps trivialize) this condition. More significantly, they can lead to a reimagining of the literary work as an instrument or game to be played. Will more focus on event and evaluation lead to a democratization of aesthetics in the electronic era? Hayles herself, while focusing on the various distinctive modes of interaction or 'intermediation' that electronic literature engages, stresses the continuity between the functioning of these new textual modes and traditional literary works, which can also be seen as instruments to be played and devices to transform consciousness.

Finally, for object-oriented ontology it is literature that has done the most to try to imagine non-human perspectives, since poets and novelists have been quite resourceful in devising worlds where objects seem to take priority over humans and where human perspectives may seem absent. A forthcoming book by a young scholar at Notre Dame, Kate Marshall, *Novels by Aliens*, will make some of these perspectives more concrete for literary scholars. Here we rejoin, fortuitously, Unnatural Narratology, in that the imagining of non-human narrators or perspectives is a major fictional device, one that can gain new respectability from its association with a serious-sounding philosophical movement.

Whatever happens, I do feel confident that there will continue to be a very active, extremely engaging, theoretical enterprise that is highly germane to literary and cultural studies.

Since theory not just an evolving corpus of works, but thinking about thinking, it calls us to question how a discipline frames questions, asking whether there are not other, better ways to proceed, and what we would mean by "better". The impetus to theory

is a desire to understand what one is doing, to question commitments and their implications. Theory is driven by the impossible desire to step outside one's thought, both to place it and to understand it, and also by a desire—a possible desire—for change, both in the ways of one's own thought, which always could be sharper, more knowledgeable and capacious, more self-reflecting, and for change in the world which our thought engages, so there will always be new developments, will always be changes in the realm of theory, for a publication devoted to "theory today".

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