

A dark grey background featuring a network diagram of interconnected nodes and lines. The nodes are small circles in various colors (white, yellow, blue, green, red, purple) and are connected by thin, light grey lines, creating a complex web-like structure.

# Literary Criticism in the 21st Century

Theory  
Renaissance

Vincent B. Leitch

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Theory Renaissance

*Vincent B. Leitch*

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# PREFACE

There are four major claims that I want to state at the outset. First, despite all the talk about posttheory and after theory that has been floating around for several decades, there is a theory renaissance underway. Granted, it is difficult to see at first glance. Second, as my map on the flyleaf suggests, twenty-first-century theory is knowable but unmasterable (Figure 1). This chart contains 94 subdisciplines and fields circling around 12 major topics (reminiscent of planets and satellites), which can change spheres and fuse into original combinations. Third, the twenty-first-century theory renaissance takes a characteristically postmodern form, namely disorganization or disaggregation of many subdisciplines, fields, and topics. In a world in which there are 6,800 mutual funds, 20,000 wines reviewed annually in *Wine Spectator*, and innumerable sneakers to choose from—with guides for dummies everywhere to assist us in these arcane areas—proliferation and fragmentation should come as no surprise. Fourth, the 15 or so earlier well-known twentieth-century schools and movements of theory from Marxism, psychoanalysis, and formalism to postcolonial theory, New Historicism, and queer theory are, strictly speaking, a twentieth-century phenomenon. Schools and movements do not pertain to earlier centuries of theory or to the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, they remain important today as sources and resources not only for practical literary criticism but also for teaching theory. By way of simplification, the 106 items constituting my inventory of theory can be regarded as the cultural studies movement in its disaggregated form. The take-away message of my initial set of claims is that with literary and cultural criticism today, theory, for good and ill, is everywhere and nowhere.

I anticipate several questions at this point. Is the recent transformation another victory of theory following its triumph in

the 1980s? Why in any case call this complex spread “theory”? To answer the first question, I would characterize the dissemination and leveling underway as neither a triumph nor a disaster but rather a mixed blessing. Theory now occupies the role of regular practice as opposed to shocking and disruptive vanguard. Gone are the high excitement and energy revolving around theory during the cultural wars of the fin de siècle. Yet a second glance at the map, however initially befuddling, reveals that most of the current practices raise very precisely targeted critical questions of a fundamental sort. Theory, as in the past, continues to prompt and underwrite productive research and publication projects for criticism across an expanded spectrum of topics and fields. But the fractalization of theory has meant that there are very few jobs in the area. These days theory serves as an adjunct, a helpful toolkit, a secondary but indispensable strength for long-established fields and areas of literary and cultural study.

Why continue calling this proliferation “theory”? In a word, parentage. All the items on the map stem directly from recognizable contemporary schools and movements of theory. In addition, no one has successfully proposed an alternative term. I can’t think of one. “Cultural studies,” a likely contender, doesn’t fit; it remains too amorphous, plus it lacks historical foundations and precisions of “theory.” Considered comparatively, “theory” is a neutral term whereas “cultural studies” has inherited a vaguely engagé orientation linked to the social sciences. Figure 2 below offers some clarification. Here twenty-first-century theory includes distinctive methods and approaches. One among others is cultural studies.

Narrative Poetics	Quantitative Analysis
Neophenomenology	Institutional Analysis
Social Semiotics	Surface and Close Reading
New Formalisms	Histories from Below
<b>CRITICAL APPROACHES</b>	<b>CRITICAL METHODS</b>
Historicisms	Cultural Critique
Cultural Studies	Personal Criticism
Ethical Turn	Ethnography
Cognitive Theory	Oral History

FIGURE 2



While cultural studies and theory overlap, theory includes items not generally welcomed by cultural studies such as formalism, phenomenology, and narrative poetics, all experiencing revivals today. Although fusions abound, theory today maintains its legacy of autonomy. That said, I have nothing against, and I personally support, ongoing contemporary linkages of theory and cultural studies.

The chapters in this book follow a trajectory from statements of personal belief to return visits to key debates to recent monumentalizations of French theory to futures for theory. Chapter 1 previews the major topics, sentiments, and arguments of the book by means of a credo. It blends the professional and the personal, my work in theory and my family life, to illustrate the range of concerns pertinent to contemporary criticism. For example, the chapter dramatizes the increasingly important role during recent decades of financialization and free-market political economy as they shape family, self, and society. Here I argue for, while defining intimate critique, an adjunct to cultural critique, both of which should continue to play a central role in today's literary and cultural criticism. This chapter provides preliminary definitions of theory and postmodernism in their current versions.

Chapter 2 provides a critical account of the antitheory phenomenon that started in the 1970s and is still with us. The heterogeneous antitheory front constitutes a neglected part of the history of contemporary criticism and theory filled with contending definitions and alternative missions for theory. In exploring half a dozen exemplary indictments of theory, I develop my own critique of theory as well as clarify my own theoretical ideas and principles. In addition, I show what is at issue in the sacred antitheory oath "I love literature."

Many calls to return to close reading and renounce ideology critique have popped up in the new century. They go under various names such as uncritical, reparative, appreciative, surface, and generous reading. Chapter 3 argues against such head-in-the-sand calls. Instead it advocates and defines a program of critical reading that blends ideology critique, close reading, cultural critique (attended by intimate critique), and pleasure reading. It refuses the either/or option of close reading versus ideology critique in favor of a both/and choice suited to criticism and education in an age of intensifying class antagonisms, disruptive reconfigurations of the family, and spreading social tensions and wars.

Chapter 4 offers a challenging interview of me conducted by a prominent Chinese professor of American literature and theory teaching at Nanjing University. His outsider perspective, skeptical and informed, allows for a set of wide-ranging questions about the status nowadays of Western multiculturalism; the pertinence of New Critical formalism over against cultural studies; the situation of theory; changes to the second edition of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001, 2010); and justifications for teaching theory today. Where Chapters 1 to 3 offer declarations of my positions in argumentative contexts, Chapters 4 and 5 provide inventories of current trends and methods through dialogue. In both cases I advocate while illustrating the merits of blending theory and cultural studies with literary criticism in our still postmodern moment.

Rather than a standard interview, Chapter 5 enacts an engaged conversation initiated by a mid-career academic literary critic of American literature and culture. While he does not identify with theory, he is open and curious about it. The chapter offers a panoramic dialogue, on one hand, of insiders talking about teaching and textbooks; scholarly methods and writing styles; cultural studies approaches versus formalist close reading; the corporatization of the university; plus many facets of theory. Beyond academe, on the other hand, we discuss media, politics, and economics in the context of early twenty-first-century cultural conditions and the role of criticism today.

Chapter 6 opens up the question of the future of theory, a concern that recurs in subsequent chapters. In this initial case, it is the future of French theory. The chapter documents the unnoticed yet impressive array of ongoing posthumous publications of French theorists and the likely futures and revisions given the number of archives containing unpublished audio and visual as well as written sources, not to mention bootleg materials (some online). It illustrates the stakes of this question by examining the posthumous book publication of Jacques Derrida's last seminar. In this work Derrida puts on display for his audience not only his influential style of writing and his excessive mode of textual analysis, but his final reflections on smart reading and living on after death. In assessing Derrida's work, I show that deconstruction enacts, in an eccentric way, the work of critique in its combined ideological, cultural, and intimate registers. Derrida's distinctive mode of close

reading, linked to the productive concept of a textual unconscious, will, I wager, continue to provoke theorists and antitheorists alike as the remaining 40-plus posthumous volumes of his seminars roll off the presses in coming years.

Chapter 7 extends the inquiry into the current second wave of French theory, its futures and its revisions, by addressing not the continuing avalanche of writing on it, but the surprising phenomenon of big biographies of French theorists like Barthes, Bourdieu, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, and Levinas. The chapter gives pride of place to Benoît Peeters's *Derrida* (2010; trans. 2012), a biography steeped in the unpublished mammoth Derrida archives. Of particular note is this work's dispassionate documenting of innumerable telling real-life events including secrets. We readers get copious details on Derrida's politics, vexed lifelong relations with French educational institutions, and complicated relationships with peers especially Althusser, Bourdieu, and Foucault. We learn about Derrida's parents and siblings, wife and three sons (one illegitimate), and decade-long extramarital affair with philosopher Sylviane Agacinski, to whom he apparently wrote 1,000 letters. If this restrained biography had a thesis, it would be that Derrida, an outsider, lived life in excess. It's worth highlighting that the lives of celebrity academic intellectuals today merit biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs. People including scholars want to know about the real lives, no longer considered as private, behind the learned works. When asked in the documentary film *Derrida* (2002) what he himself would most like to know about past thinkers, Derrida said their sex lives.

If the turn of criticism and theory to life writing is surprising, the recent return of postmodernism as a period concept is altogether unexpected. So much had been written on postmodernism particularly during the 1990s that critics had tired of it by decade's end. Chapter 8 documents and supports the return, which started sometime around 2010. It reviews and refines seven examples, citing among others Ihab Hassan, Linda Hutcheon, and Christopher Jencks, pioneer theorists of postmodernism, all returning recently to the topic. In this chapter I argue for retaining yet rehistoricizing the postmodern concept.

Chapter 9 fleshes out the account of the twenty-first-century theory renaissance by focusing on half a dozen exemplary major books (personal favorites), discussing their strengths and

weaknesses. While these texts address a wide range of pressing topics and illustrate a variety of current approaches, they share a focus on neoliberal political economy, identity politics, and today's corporate university. The chapter concludes with summary cameos on the renaissances of literary, critical, and cultural theory, plus a portrait of theory's relation, both productive and vexing, to today's corporate university.

In the form of an investment advisory letter, Chapter 10 sketches productive futures awaiting theory, highlighting its many strengths and contributions. It distinguishes between Theory Incorporated and the Theory Market, that is, between institutionalized theory courses, programs, and textbooks, on one hand, and theory fashions, hot topics, and jobs, on the other hand. It situates theory inside the corporate university, portraying the problems and promises of that location for the future of literary and cultural criticism.

\* \* \*

Initial versions of several of my chapters appeared earlier in journals: Chapter 1 in *Minnesota Review*, Chapter 4 translated into Chinese in *Wai Guo Wen Xue Yan Jiu (Foreign Literature Studies)*, Chapter 5 in *Symplokē*, Chapter 6 in *Genre*, Chapter 7 in *SubStance*, and Chapter 10 in *Works and Days*. I am grateful for permission to revise and reprint. For professional interest and support, I thank colleagues Ronald Schleifer, Eve Bannet, Daniel Morris, and Zhu Gang, plus my research assistant Nancy El Gendy. I remain especially grateful to colleague and close friend Jeffrey Williams, who read and commented on the chapters.



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# 1

## What I believe and why

Although I completed my US PhD in literary studies during the 1970s, I didn't assert an explicit point of view, an identifiable critical position, until the 1980s. In an article I published in 1987, "Taboo and Critique: Literary Criticism and Ethics," I outlined my own project of cultural critique, fusing poststructuralism with post-Marxist cultural studies. First, I criticized the taboo on extrinsic criticism promulgated by the American New Critics and tacitly conveyed to me by most of my professors. Second, I sketched my own program by working through faults with the 1980s critical projects of Wayne Booth (liberal pluralism), Robert Scholes (structuralism), and J. Hillis Miller (conservative deconstruction), all major critical voices of the time. Where the New Critics focused on the literary text as an autonomous aesthetic object and explicitly forbade critics from linking it with society, history, psychology, economics, politics, or ethics, cultural critics of all stripes, myself included, accepted and affirmed such links. This is no easy road to travel. When Booth, Scholes, and Miller, furthermore, all insisted that close reading precede ethical critique, they retained a mandatory formalistic phase for critical inquiry, keeping the literary text as a privileged aesthetic object on the way to broadened social concerns. They got things backwards.

The 1987 article became the opening pages of my book, an unabashed credo, *Cultural Criticism, Literary Theory, Poststructuralism* (1992), arguing a handful of positions on perennial literary topics consistent with a fin-de-siècle US cultural studies informed by poststructuralism. It was evident in my piece that I had bought into cultural studies, having been earlier identified with poststructuralism, particularly Yale deconstruction. However, my first book, *Deconstructive Criticism* (1983), followed an arc

from French structuralism and poststructuralism through Yale deconstruction to the *Boundary 2* group (cast as an alternative deconstructive project) to the wide-ranging anarchist projects of Michel Foucault and of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In the end, it parodied Yale deconstruction. Things became even clearer with my next book, *American Literary Criticism from the 1930s to the 1980s* (1988). It covered thirteen schools and movements, starting with Marxism and New Criticism, adding as firsts for histories of American criticism four separate chapters on engagé social criticism stemming from the New York Intellectuals, Feminism, Black Aesthetics, and Cultural Studies. The work traced over the course of 500 sober pages both formalist projects that dehistoricize, depoliticize, and aestheticize literary studies and antiformalist movements that deepen and extend cultural criticism. My trajectory was clear.

In 1987, I got divorced after 17 years of marriage. Also, I moved from working at a small private Southern liberal arts university for 13 years to a large Midwestern state research university. When the dust settled, I ended up a single parent with two young teenagers. Over the next ten years, I shepherded them through high school and university. These were rough times. Up close and personal I learned about the economics and politics of postmodern culture.

On the verge of bankruptcy, having doled out \$30,000 for legal expenses surrounding the divorce, I managed after 18 months of hand-to-mouth apartment dwelling to buy a house. It was done through creative financing by a Realtor along with his banker and appraiser colleagues. It appeared a miracle of free-market neoliberal economics. Why? I rented the house for six months. That became the 5% down payment. I obtained a subprime adjustable rate mortgage from a local bank, plus a small personal loan on the side from the Realtor. It all seemed a wonder, going from near-bankrupt to homeowner in 18 months. Lucky for me, the interest rate did not shoot up, nor did the price of houses drop. Eventually, I was able to refinance with a new fixed-rate mortgage, which, however, cost several thousand dollars in closing fees added to the principal of the loan. Debt proliferates.

As you might imagine, during this period I felt chronically insecure. I was fearfully checking interest rates on a regular basis. I witnessed to my astonishment the moral relativism (“flexibility”) of the real estate, appraisal, and banking industries. By the late

1990s President Clinton solidified the changes going on, radically deregulating banking and investment, and tearing down key firewalls erected during the Great Depression by President Roosevelt. Branch banks started to pop up all over the place. Credit was increasingly easy to get. Home ownership rates were rising. And single-headed households were more and more common. Critics continue to confirm, initially in the wake of feminism, that the personal is linked with the social, political, and economic. My personal story felt more and more like an introduction to the politics and economics of our late postmodern era.

The day the Clinton White House announced a freeing up of student loans in the early 1990s, I was overjoyed and relieved as, it turned out, were bankers, politicians, and university administrators. My oldest child was just starting university on her way to BA and MA degrees—and ultimately \$46,000 in loans, despite her scholarships, summer jobs, and Teaching Assistantship. My youngest child soon racked up on his BA degree \$10,000 in loans. I don't recall anyone in my 60s generation carrying much debt for their college education, whereas my children, like the majority in the US, face a decade or two or three of debt repayments. (When I was a visiting Fulbright professor in Northern Europe in the 1970s, I witnessed free university education where students received additional support from state stipends.) So I was misguided to be overjoyed at President Clinton's apparent munificence, not realizing from the outset it was a way to shift financing from state institutions to individuals, enabling the government to withdraw from paying for education. I did not recognize nor condemn this move to privatization, but I did register it immediately in growing anxiety about interest rates, credit scores, debt loads, and the financial future of my children. There is a politics of feelings and everyday family intimacies that reveals to us what's really going on in the culture. This is intimate critique, an essential survival skill for our times.

At the same moment my children moved in with me, the continent-wide retirement system for many North American university teachers began to change after decades of stability. When during the 1970s I first entered TIAA-CREF (Teachers Insurance Annuity Association-College Retirement Equities Fund), there were two accounts where I could allocate my money (a sum equal to 10% of my annual salary contributed by my university): (1) TIAA Traditional [Bonds and Mortgages] (founded 1918) and



(2) CREF Stock (established 1952). Most new faculty members at that time split their funds 50/50% or 40/60%, with other permutations possible. Arriving at a new university position in 1987, I continued the split I had had at the previous job (this time the school contributed a figure equal to roughly 15% of my salary). But starting in 1988, things at TIAA-CREF began to change more and more tellingly over the next several decades. In 1988, a new choice was added to the earlier two—the CREF Money Market Account. In 1990, two additional investment accounts appeared, CREF Bond Market and CREF Social Choice. Over the course of the 1990s other far more risky CREF options became available: Global Equities (1992), Equity Index and Growth (both 1994), Real Estate (1995), and Inflation-Linked Bond (1997). Then in 2002, TIAA-CREF opened 18 separate mutual fund accounts to retirement contributions. The year 2004 witnessed seven brand-new Lifecycle Funds, complemented by three more such accounts in 2007. In 2006, nine other TIAA-CREF retirement-class mutual funds emerged. If you're counting, this means that instead of the two previous choices, I and several million other participants now faced four dozen choices within the TIAA-CREF family of funds. By 2014, the number had risen to 77 funds. During this period, many of us, especially me, got befuddled.

Along the way I wondered, do I or my colleagues know enough about stocks, bonds, real estate, indexes, rating agencies, and so on to make good investment choices? During the 1990s, like it or not, we were all being turned into individual investors. That for me was a worrisome new burden. Previously I did not read investment account prospectuses and quarterly reports, nor did I monitor investment news. When my home computer got linked to the Internet in the late 1990s, I began to monitor finances, as well as to work, on a 24/7 basis. If it were not for their rules limiting the number of trades each quarter, TIAA-CREF might have turned me into a day trader over the course of the 1990s. This is my personal experience with mainstream casino capitalism, the triumphalist neoliberal free-market dogma spreading from the 1970s, which went into hyper drive in the nineties. It has become harder and harder for me not to talk about the recent reconfiguration of money, mortgages, work, education, retirement, debt, and their impact on the family as well as day-to-day life. The

way I see it, this is a mode of criticism we need. It is different from the impersonal speculative way many critics do critique. Nearer home, the industry calls it “financial literacy.” I prefer the broader intimate critique.

The social as well as economic transformations of our times have affected me in dramatic ways. It first started to register on me and my family in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Before my generation, there were two divorces in my huge Irish-Italian American Catholic family, a social network rooted in Islip and Babylon Townships on the south shore of Long Island. In my generation, there have been several dozen divorces, plus lots of mobility given a nationwide job market. Personally, I feel I have been living in exile as migrant labor since I got my first job in the South, followed by positions in the Midwest and the Southwest—four decades away from “home” and counting. The single-headed household, often uprooted from the extended family, caught up in mortgage and student debt, increasingly worried about health care expenses plus retirement, and befuddled by financial choices, describes not only my reality but that of so many others in the dramatically shrinking middle class. I hasten to add that my two siblings, an older sister and a younger brother, have long shuttled in and out of the working poor, a new and growing class of the nickled and dimed, without retirement accounts, health insurance, or owned homes. So much for the world of family values.

The psychological syndrome that fits our late postmodern social insecurity is, I believe, panic attacks. I’ve had them. This is different from the paranoia typical of the Cold War period of my youth. Panic attacks involve more or less continuous stress, anxiety, and distraction, compounded by overwork, caffeine, sugar, excessive options at every turn, speed, multitasking, a 24/7 reality, too much news and media, an absence of quiet time and relaxation, not to mention leisure. Some people seem to thrive on this regimen. The rising generation appears more adapted to it, texting like bandits while popping anxiety pills in record numbers.

The mode of criticism that is best suited to these times, it has seemed obvious to me, is a renewed ideological and cultural critique with political economy, particularly finance, at center stage. It also has to deal with the feelings, emotions, and intimacies that social tides set in motion. Increasingly since the 1980s, I have felt that my

job as a university professor entails teaching not only protocols of close reading but techniques of cultural critique.

Unplanned happenings, unexpected events, and accidents have played a decisive role in my personal life and career. Very early on, my economics teacher at the state Merchant Marine academy in New York told me to consult Heilbrunner's *The Worldly Philosophers* for my course project on nineteenth-century economic theory. When I asked a librarian about worldly philosophy and Heil-something, he sent me to Heidegger. A fateful event. I was 18 years old and just opening to the world of literature, philosophy, and economics, but with neither direction nor mentor. Two years later, following a Do-It-Yourself immersion in existentialism, Beat literature, and left Keynesian economics, I walked out of this military academy liberated (no more uniforms) and became a literature major.

The month after I started on my new road, my younger brother, a high school senior, died in a drunk-driving car accident. That had the effect of solidifying my anger at God into agnosticism and bouts of atheism. My eleven years of rigorous Cold War American Catholic education, all in uniform, predating the liberalizations of the Vatican II Council and teaching dreadful medieval dogmas, prepared me poorly for the world. Not surprisingly, I am a long-time secularist, who believes in freedom from religion as well as freedom of religion. I have little good to say about fundamentalisms, which have visited members of my family as well as a broad swath of the globe. I am nonplused, if bemused, by New Age spirituality. I retain respect for liberation theologies. But, in general, I keep a wary eye on religion.

I had to play catch-up on literary studies, being two years behind my cohort. So I undertook a three-semester MA to compensate and satisfy my curiosities. The week I graduated a military draft notice arrived. It was a few days before Christmas, and I was applying for PhD programs. Quickly I took a six-month spring semester teaching job in a local high school to earn money and to forestall the draft. It was 1968, and I decided unequivocally I would go into exile to Canada or possibly Sweden if I were drafted into the Army. Vietnam changed forever my feelings about American imperialism and nationalism, teaching me the necessity of critical patriotism. The Vietnam War was stupid, immoral, and criminal, as was the post-9/11 war in Iraq. Later in this book, I shall have more to say about family, education, religion, government, and other spheres of socialization and ideology.

Let me jump ahead. By chance I was asked to referee a proposal in autumn 1994 for a “Norton Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism.” The publisher turned to me, I figured, because of my prior books. I ended up endorsing the idea of a Norton anthology devoted to theory, but not the specific proposal, recommending against the proposer, sketching what shape a proper anthology should take, and listing who should be considered for the job (not me). A few months later the editor showed up in my office and asked me if I would be interested. I hesitated but ultimately accepted with two understandings: that I could recruit a team of editors, and that revised editions, if deemed desirable, would happen on roughly eight-year rotations. I didn’t want the anthology to become a way of life and a full-time job. And I believed a collective approach to the task, never tried before with large theory anthologies, made the best sense. This was summer 1995. Luckily, it was an opportune moment for me because I had just finished the manuscript of my book, *Postmodernism—Local Effects, Global Flows* (1996). As it turned out, my next book was the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001), with me as general editor along with a team of five handpicked editors. The opening page of the Preface, drafted by me and approved by the team, defined “theory” this way for new generations of students and faculty:

Today the term encompasses significant works not only of poetics, theory of criticism, and aesthetics as of old, but also of rhetoric, media and discourse theory, semiotics, race and ethnicity theory, gender theory, and visual and popular culture theory. But theory in its newer sense means still more than this broadly expanded body of topics and texts. It entails a mode of questioning and analysis that goes beyond the earlier New Critical research into the “literariness” of literature. Because of the effects of poststructuralism, cultural studies, and the new social movements, especially the women’s and civil rights movements, theory now entails skepticism toward systems, institutions, norms; a readiness to take critical stands and engage in resistance; an interest in blind spots, contradictions, distortions (often discovered to be ineradicable); and a habit of linking local and personal practices to the larger economic, political, historical, and ethical forces of culture.

This is what I believe. And I came by it the hard way. It is not my teachers's theory. It's a survival skill for our times that I advocate throughout this book.

My motivation for undertaking the anthology project was largely missionary. After I completed my PhD on the history of poetry and poetics, I converted to criticism and theory as a specialty. There were no such specialty programs when I was coming up. Like others in my cohort, I "reengineered" myself over the next decade through self-directed study, research, and teaching interrupted with short periods of formal postdoctoral education: Summer Seminar funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (1976), School of Criticism and Theory (1978), Fulbright-Hays Theory Lectureship (1979), International Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies (1981), Alliance Française in Paris (1982). I also completed a bachelor's program in French while I was working as a beginning professor during the 1970s. In its post-formalist first wave, theory in North America was vital, exciting, life-enhancing, not the narrow and deadening dogma of the previous era. I was a convert.

For me the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2nd ed., 2010) was, and is, designed to accomplish several missions: to dignify and monumentalize theory; to consolidate the many gains of contemporary theory; to defend theory during the culture wars, which were started by the antitheory right-wing in the mid-1980s and persist today; most important, to introduce students and faculty, in the US and abroad (where nearly half of its sales happen), to a wide-ranging, provocative, and accessible textbook that is both scholarly and up-to-date, being constructed from the standpoint of twenty-first-century cultural critique. (Forgive the promo.) I see myself as both an insider and a populizer. I make no apologies to my hierophantic colleagues. The mission lives on.

Here is a piece of illuminating background. I was flabbergasted and bitterly angry when I heard ex-CIA agent Philip Agee on a 1970s late-night television interview explain how in the 1950s and 60s the CIA recruited candidates at Catholic colleges. Why Catholic colleges? It turns out the CIA preferred to recruit there because Catholics understand hierarchy, discipline, and duty. "Son of a bitch," I spluttered. From kindergarten to tenth grade (ages 5 to 16 years), I was enrolled in Catholic schools. I wore a uniform every day and marched to class, went to confession on Saturdays, attended 9.00 a.m. mass in uniform each Sunday. They

taught me acquiescence to authority, selflessness, and endless rules (preconditions for fascism). As a theorist, I teach skepticism toward authority, self-assertive cultural criticism, and intimate critique.

My *Postmodernism—Local Effects, Global Flows* was followed by *Theory Matters* (2003) and *Living with Theory* (2008). All three books practice cultural criticism rooted in theory. What holds this later work together is an ongoing project of mapping as well as evaluating postmodern culture. I construe postmodernity as neither a philosophy nor a movement nor a style, but a new period that started in the 1970s and has continued to morph until this day. I have more to say about it in Chapter 8. Not uncritically, I am working in the wake of Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, and the British New Times project (Hall and Jacques), all dating from the early 1990s and continuing into the new century. My experience and observations confirm that we are still living in a postmodern culture, a distinct post-Welfare State period, more or less helpfully labeled postindustrial, post-Fordist, consumer society, late capitalism, and globalization.

What most dramatically characterizes postmodern culture for me is disorganization. Think of the TIAA-CREF case. On the one hand, financial consumers are offered an excessive array of choices of investment products pitched to their tolerances for risk, time frames, and preferences. On the other hand, who has the time and expertise to make intelligent choices? I'm confused, stressed, perplexed. I seek a guide for idiots or dummies, the latest edition since the pace of change is rapid. This is a symptomatic genre for our times. As a wine drinker (my Italian heritage), I am befuddled by the number of decent Chardonnay and Syrah/Shiraz wines under \$20 a bottle. This largesse dates from the wine revolution starting in the 1970s. *Wine Spectator* magazine (established 1976) nowadays evaluates 20,000 wines annually. I have a similar experience in a bookstore (for example, the self-help section), a supermarket (the cereal aisle), a footwear store (walls of sneakers). The speeded-up proliferation of commodities and choices, plus the disaggregation of niches and spheres, render the big picture perhaps knowable yet unmasterable. Hence, the value of mapping. Theory has not escaped postmodern disorganization, a claim I graph in Figure 1 and discuss in this book.

One last unexpected turn of events helps explain what I believe and why. I couldn't find a position the year I received my PhD, the

US literature job market having crashed several years earlier (1970 to be exact and continuing today). So, I ended up teaching on a one-year interim appointment in the Department of Humanities at the University of Florida. There I met Gregory Ulmer, a new PhD in Comparative Literature who had just secured a full-time tenure-track job. Two decisive things occurred during that year. First, Ulmer introduced me to French theory. That shook me up and helped me get past my New Critical training and frame of mind. Second, the job required me to teach multiple sections of Humanities 211, 221, 231 during the fall, winter, and spring quarters. The course content was set by the department, with only a few open spots. One step ahead of the students, I learned and taught Ancient & Medieval, Renaissance & Enlightenment, and Modern Western Humanities. The curriculum programmatically juxtaposed art history, literature, philosophy, religion, and music (with the latter handled by a musicologist in large lectures). A typical module would be the Parthenon, Plato's *Republic*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Aristotle's *Poetics* or Abstract Expressionism, Existentialism, Beat Literature, and Bebop Jazz. Although it covered old-fashioned intellectual rather than social history, the program put me in touch with big pictures. It struck a resonant cord within me. Early and late, my work has instinctively aimed for wide-ranging comparative history.

The program also introduced me to art history (specifically architecture, sculpture, and painting). Out of this material came a life-long interest in contemporary painting, plus modern museums, galleries, art journals and books, and local art scenes. When I first came to think about postmodernism, I naturally turned to painting as well as to literature, philosophy, and popular arts (I am a child of the 60s). One of the genuine benefits of construing postmodernism as a period, not just a school of philosophy or a style, is the necessity to investigate political economy and society as well as the arts high and low. Postmodern fusion, multiculturalism, and backlash manifest themselves, I find, in the period's food, wine, fashion, film, music, art, philosophy, religion, literature, and theory. Through accidents and blindly, it appears, I was being prepared and preparing myself early on for a job of cultural criticism and critique. Our times demand it.

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# 2

## Antitheory

There are a dozen or more identifiable contemporary antitheory factions in North America and the United Kingdom. It's an odd phalanx. Among them are traditional literary critics; aesthetes; critical formalists; political conservatives; ethnic separatists; some literary stylisticians, philologists, and hermeneuticists; certain neopragmatists; champions of low and middlebrow literature; creative writers; defenders of common sense and plain style; plus some committed leftists. What most characterize many of the antitheory factions as well as independent and maverick critics of theory are arguments calling for a return to the close reading of canonical literature, for clear writing of critical prose that avoids obscurity and jargon, and for settling disagreements through reasoned argumentation rather than statements of personal beliefs. Antitheorists often complain bitterly about contemporary theory's commitments both to social constructionism (versus scientific truth and objectivity) and to multiculturalism with its critical focus on race-class-gender analyses. For their part, theorists refer to antitheorists as the "I love literature crowd." I'll unpack this loaded accusation as I progress through this chapter. When tolerated at all by antitheorists, theory serves as a handmaiden to appreciation of literary texts. In no case should theory become autonomous, a separate field, or a new academic discipline. This is a consecration to be accorded only to literature itself.

With its 48 pieces written over three decades, *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, edited by Daphne Patai and Will H. Corral and published in 2005, remains the bible of contemporary antitheory arguments. It is a hodgepodge, with selections from such notables as René Wellek, M. H. Abrams, Marjorie Perloff, Tzvetan Todorov, and Denis Donoghue. They are brought together



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