On Reading Literature: Literary Theory

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

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

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

Theory is often a pugnacious critique of common-sense notions, and further, an attempt to show that what we take for granted as ‘common sense’ is in fact a historical construction, a particular theory that has come to seem so natural to us that we don’t even see it as a theory. As a critique of common sense and exploration of alternative conceptions, theory involves a questioning of the most basic premisses or assumptions of literary study, the unsettling of anything that might have been taken for granted: What is meaning? What is an author? What is it to read? What is the ‘I’ or subject who writes, reads, or acts? How do texts relate to the circumstances in which they are produced?

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

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

So what is theory? Four main points have emerged.
1. Theory is interdisciplinary – discourse with effects outside an original discipline.
2. Theory is analytical and speculative – an attempt to work out what is involved in what we call sex or language or writing or meaning or the subject.
3. Theory is a critique of common sense, of concepts taken as natural.
4. Theory is reflexive, thinking about thinking, enquiry into the categories we use in making sense of things, in literature and in other discursive practices.

Literature is a practice in which authors attempt to advance or renew literature and thus is always implicitly a reflection on literature itself. But once again, we find that this is something we could say about other forms: bumper stickers, like poems, may depend for their meaning on prior bumper stickers: ‘Nuke a Whale for Jesus!’ makes no sense without ‘No Nukes,’ ‘Save the Whales,’ and ‘Jesus Saves,’ and one could certainly say that ‘Nuke a Whale for Jesus’ is really about bumper stickers. The intertextuality and self-reflexivity of literature is not, finally, a defining feature but a foregrounding of aspects of language use and questions about representation that may also be observed elsewhere.

Literature has been given diametrically opposed functions. Is literature an ideological instrument: a set of stories that seduce readers into accepting the hierarchical arrangements of society? If stories take it for granted that women must find their happiness, if at all, in marriage; if they accept class divisions as natural and explore how the virtuous serving-girl may marry a lord, they work to legitimate contingent historical arrangements. Or is literature the place where ideology is exposed, revealed as something that can be questioned? Literature represents, for example, in a potentially intense and affecting way, the narrow range of options historically offered to women, and, in making this visible, raises the possibility of not taking it for granted. Both claims are thoroughly plausible: that literature is the vehicle of ideology and that literature is an instrument for its undoing.

**Performatives and literature**

Literary critics have embraced the notion of the performative as one that helps to characterize literary discourse. Theorists have long asserted that we must attend to what literary language does as much as to what it says, and the concept of the performative provides a linguistic and philosophical justification for this idea: there is a class of utterances that above all do something. Like the performative, the literary utterance does not refer to a prior state of affairs and is not true or false. The literary utterance too creates the state of affairs to which it refers, in several respects. First and most simply, it brings into being characters and their actions, for instance. The beginning of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, ‘Stately plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed,’ does not refer to some prior state of affairs but creates this character and this situation. Second, literary works bring into being ideas, concepts, which they deploy. La Rochefoucauld claims that no one would ever have thought of being in love if they hadn’t read about it in books, and the notion of romantic love (and of its centrality to the lives of individuals) is arguably a massive literary creation. Certainly novels themselves, from *Don Quixote* to *Madame Bovary*, blame romantic ideas on other books.
In short, the performative brings to centre stage a use of language previously considered marginal – an active, world-making use of language, which resembles literary language – and helps us to conceive of literature as act or event. The notion of literature as performative contributes to a defence of literature: literature is not frivolous pseudostatements but takes its place among the acts of language that transform the world, bringing into being the things that they name.

**Literature and Identity**

Literature has always been concerned with questions about identity, and literary works sketch answers, implicitly or explicitly, to these questions. Narrative literature especially has followed the fortunes of characters as they define themselves and are defined by various combinations of their past, the choices they make, and the social forces that act upon them. Do characters make their fate or suffer it? Stories give different and complex answers. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is labeled ‘multiform’ (*polytropos*) but defines himself in his struggles to save himself and his shipmates and to get home to Ithaca again. In Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Emma strives to define herself (or to ‘find herself’) in relation to her romantic readings and her banal surroundings.

Literary works offer a range of implicit models of how identity is formed. There are narratives where identity is essentially determined by birth: the son of a king raised by shepherds is still fundamentally a king and rightfully becomes king when his identity is discovered. In other narratives characters change according to the changes in their fortunes, or else identity is based on personal qualities that are revealed during the tribulations of a life.

The explosion of recent theorizing about race, gender, and sexuality in the field of literary studies owes much to the fact that literature provides rich materials for complicating political and sociological accounts of the role of such factors in the construction of identity. Consider the question of whether the identity of the subject is something given or something constructed. Not only are both options amply represented in literature, but the complications or entanglements are frequently laid out for us, as in the common plot where characters, as we say, ‘discover’ who they are, not by learning something about their past (say, about their birth) but by acting in such a way that they become what then turns out, in some sense, to have been their ‘nature’.

This structure, where you have to become what you supposedly already were (as Aretha Franklin comes to feel like a natural woman), has emerged as a paradox or aporia for recent theory, but it has been at work all along in narratives. Western novels reinforce the notion of an essential self by suggesting that the self which emerges from trying encounters with the world was in some sense there all along, as the basis for the actions which, from the perspective of readers, bring this self into being. The fundamental identity of characters emerges as the result of actions, of struggles with the world, but then this identity is posited as the basis, even the cause of those actions. Literature has not only made identity a theme; it has played a significant role in the construction of the identity of readers. The value of literature has long been linked to the
vicarious experiences it gives readers, enabling them to know how it feels to be in particular situations and thus to acquire dispositions to act and feel in certain ways. Literary works encourage identification with characters by showing things from their point of view.

Poems and novels address us in ways that demand identification, and identification works to create identity: we become who we are by identifying with figures we read about. Literature has long been blamed for encouraging the young to see themselves as characters in novels and to seek fulfilment in analogous ways: running away from home to experience the life of the metropolis, espousing the values of heroes and heroines in revolting against their elders and feeling disgust at the world before having experienced it, or making their lives a quest for love and trying to reproduce scenarios of novels and love lyrics. Literature is said to corrupt through mechanisms of identification. The champions of literary education have hoped, on the contrary, that literature would make us better people through vicarious experience and the mechanisms of identification.