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Antoine Compagnon: Literature , Theory, and Common Sense

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What Remains of Our Loves?

That Poor Socrates had only a prohibitive Demon;
mine is a great approver, mine is a Demon of action,
or Demon of combat.

—Baudelaire, “*Assommons les pauvres!*” [“Let’s Beat Up the Poor!”]

TO PARODY a famous expression, “The French have no head for theory.” At least not until the upsurge of the sixties and seventies. Literary theory then had its hour of glory, as if the faith of the convert had suddenly allowed it to catch up with nearly a century of foot-dragging in a split second. French literary studies were unfamiliar with Russian formalism, the Prague circle, and Anglo-American New Criticism, to say nothing of the stylistics of Leo Spitzer, the topology of Ernst Robert Curtius, the antipositivism of Benedetto Croce, Gianfranco Contini’s criticism of variants, the Geneva school and the critique of consciousness, or even with the deliberate antitheory of F. R. Leavis and his Cambridge disciples. Weighed in the balance against all these original and influential movements that occupied the first half of the twentieth century in Europe and North America, the French had only Valéry’s “Poétique” [poetics]—the title of the chair he occupied at the Collège de France (1936) and an ephemeral discipline whose progress was soon interrupted by the war, and then by Valéry’s death—and perhaps the ever-enigmatic *Fleurs de Tarbes* by Jean Paulhan (1941). In this work, Paulhan moved haltingly and confusedly toward the definition of a general, noninstrumental definition of language—“All is rhetoric”—a stance that Deconstruction was to rediscover in Nietzsche around 1968. By the end of the sixties, René Wellek and Austin Warren’s handbook, *Theory of Literature*, published in the United States in 1949, was available in Spanish, Japanese, Italian, German, Korean, Portuguese, Danish, Serbo-Croatian, modern Greek, Swedish, Hebrew, Romanian, Finnish, and Gujarati, but not in French. It made its appearance in France only in 1971, under the title *Théorie littéraire*, one of the first books in Éditions

du Seuil's collection "Poétique," and it has never been published in paperback. In 1960, shortly before his death, Spitzer cited three factors to explain this French foot-dragging and isolation: an old feeling of superiority bound to an unbroken and eminent literary and intellectual tradition; the general spirit of French literary studies, always marked by a nineteenth-century scientific positivism in search of causes; and the predominance of the scholarly practice of *explication de texte*, that is, an ancillary description of literary forms preventing the development of more sophisticated formal methods. Though it is really part of Spitzer's point, I would gladly add the absence of a curriculum in linguistics and a philosophy of language, comparable to those that had invaded universities in German- and English-speaking countries from the time of Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Rudolf Carnap, as well as the adherence to a weak hermeneutic tradition, which had been overturned in quick succession in Germany by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.

Then things swiftly changed—in fact, they began to move just when Spitzer pronounced his diagnosis. And by a very curious reversal that may well give us pause, French theory found itself from one moment to the next on the cutting edge of literary studies around the world. It was as though it had dawdled only to surge ahead; or perhaps such a gulf suddenly breached had allowed it to set the world ablaze with an innocence and an ardor that created the illusion of an advance during those wonderful years of the sixties that would last, in fact, from 1963, the end of the Algerian War, until 1973, the time of the first gasoline shortage. Around 1970, literary theory was in full swing, and it was exercising an enormous attraction on the young people of my generation. Under various labels—"new criticism," "poetics," "structuralism," "semiology," "narratology"—it shone in full force. No one who lived through those magical years can remember them without nostalgia. A powerful current was sweeping us all along with it. In those times, the image of literary studies sustained by theory was seductive, persuasive, triumphant.

This is no longer quite the case. Theory has been institutionalized, transformed into method, it has become a minor pedagogical technique often as stifling as the *explication de texte*, which it once attacked with such verve. Stagnation seems to be inscribed in the scholarly fate of all theory. Literary history, an ambitious and attractive young discipline at the end of the nineteenth century, saw the same sad evolution, and the new criticism has not escaped it. Since the frenzy of the sixties and seventies, when French literary studies caught up with and even surpassed others in the area of formalism and textuality, there have been no major developments in theoretical investigation in France. Should we blame the monopoly of literary history on French studies, which the new criticism

did not manage to shake to its depths, but only momentarily masked? This explanation—originally Gérard Genette's—seems weak, for the new criticism, even if it did not knock down the walls of the old Sorbonne, was solidly incorporated into the curriculum of France's national education, especially in secondary teaching. This may well have been precisely what made it so rigid. It is impossible today to pass an entrance exam without mastering the subtle distinctions and jargon of narratology. A candidate who cannot say whether the bit of text in front of him is "homo" or "heterodiaegetic," "singulative" or "iterative," or is in "internal" or "external focalization," will not pass, just as once he would have had to distinguish an anacoluthia from a hypallage, and to know the date of Montesquieu's birth. To understand the uniqueness of higher education and research in France, we must always come back to the historic dependence of the university in relation to the competitive recruitment examinations for teachers of secondary education. It is as though before 1980 candidates were given enough theory to renew pedagogy: a little poetics and narratology to explain verse and prose. The new criticism, like Gustave Lanson's literary history several generations earlier, was rapidly reduced to a few recipes, tricks, and tips for shining in the exams. The theoretical momentum was arrested from the moment it provided a little extra science to the sacrosanct *explication de texte*.

In France, theory was a flash in the pan, and the hope formulated by Roland Barthes in 1969—that the "'new criticism' must quickly become a new fertilizer, in order to make yet another afterward"¹—does not seem to have been realized. The theorists of the sixties and seventies found no successors. Barthes himself was canonized, which is not the best way to keep a work alive and active. Others recanted and devoted themselves to projects that were rather distant from their first loves. Some, like Tzvetan Todorov or Genette, went over either to the side of ethics or aesthetics. Many have returned to the old literary history, especially to the rediscovery of manuscripts, as evident in the trend toward so-called genetic criticism. The review *Poétique*, which is still in circulation, publishes the exercises of epigones for the most part, as does *Littérature*, another post-'68 organ that was always more eclectic, welcoming Marxism, sociology, and psychoanalysis. Theory has found its place, and it is therefore no longer what it was: it is there in the sense that all the literary centuries are there, where all the specialties rub shoulders in the university, each in its place. It is domesticated, inoffensive, it awaits students at the appointed hour, its only exchange with the other specialties or with the world is through the intervention of those students who wander from one discipline to the next. It is no more alive than other approaches now, no longer empowered to say why and how literature must be studied, and what is currently relevant

or at stake in literary studies. Nothing has replaced it in this role, and no one studies literature much anymore.

“Theory will come back, like everything else, and we will rediscover its problems the day when ignorance has receded so far that it will produce nothing but boredom.”² Philippe Sollers announced this return in 1980, in the preface to the reissue of *Set Theory*, an ambitious volume published during the autumn following May 1968, its title borrowed from mathematics and bringing together the names of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and the whole *Tel Quel* group, the spearhead of theory then at its zenith, with perhaps a whiff of “intellectual terrorism,” as Sollers recognized after the fact.³ The tailwind of theory was a reason for living. “Develop theory so as not to fall behind in life,” Lenin had decreed, and Louis Althusser claimed it for himself, calling the collection that he edited for Maspero “Theory.” In this series, published in 1968, the stellar year of the structuralist movement, Pierre Macherey published *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*, a work in which the Marxist meaning of theory (a critique of the ideology and the advent of science) and the formalist meaning (an analysis of linguistic procedures) met in the arena of literature. Theory was critical, even polemical, or militant—as in the disturbing title of Boris Eikhenbaum’s 1927 book, *Littérature, Théorie, Critique, Polémique*, translated in part by Tzvetan Todorov in his anthology of the Russian formalists, *Théorie de la littérature*, in 1966. But theory was also ambitious to establish a science of literature. “The object of theory,” Genette wrote in 1972, “would be not only the *real* but the totality of the *virtual* literary.”⁴ Formalism and Marxism were the two pillars that justified research into the nonvariables, or the universals, of literature: the consideration of individual works as possible works rather than real works, as simple exemplifications of the underlying literary system, more accommodating than nonpresent and only potential works; and the attempt to reach their structure.

If theory as ambiguous as Marxism and formalism was already outmoded in 1980, what about today? Are we ignorant and bored enough to want theory back again?

Theory and Common Sense

Is an assessment or survey of literary theory even conceivable? And in what form? Isn’t this, in principle, an attempt to do the impossible if, as Paul de Man maintained, “the main theoretical interest of literary theory consists of the impossibility of its definition”?⁵ Theory, then, could be captured only by the grace of a negative theory, on the model of the hidden God that only a negative theology manages to articulate.

This is raising the bar awfully high, or pushing the very real affinities between literary theory and nihilism rather far. Theory cannot be reduced to a technique or a pedagogy—it sells its soul in the shop windows, in multicolored book jackets displayed in the bookstores of the Latin Quarter. But this is not a reason to make it a kind of metaphysics or mysticism. Let us not treat it as a religion. On the other hand, is literary theory merely of “theoretical interest”? No, not if I am right to suggest that it is also, perhaps basically, critical, oppositional, or polemical.

It seems to me that theory is truly interesting and authentic, not in its theoretical or theological aspect or in its practical or pedagogical uses, but in the savage and rejuvenating struggle it led against received ideas in literary studies, and in the equally determined resistance with which those received ideas opposed it. An assessment of literary theory might be expected, first, to offer its own definition of literature (arguable by definition and indeed the first theoretical common place: “What is literature?”); then to pay a quick homage to ancient, medieval, and classical literary theories, from Aristotle to Batteux, remembering to take a detour by way of non-Western poetics; and finally to list the different schools that have shared theoretical attention in the twentieth century: Russian formalism, Prague structuralism, American New Criticism, German phenomenology, Geneva psychology, international Marxism, French structuralism and post-structuralism, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, neomarxism, feminism, etc. Numerous manuals exist in this format; they occupy professors and reassure students. But they illuminate a side that is only incidental to theory. They even denature it, or pervert it, for what really characterizes theory is quite the contrary of eclecticism, namely its commitment, its *vis polemica*, as well as the impasses into which it charges headfirst. The theorists often give us the impression of raising very sensible criticisms against the positions of their adversaries; but as those adversaries, comforted by their ever clear conscience, refuse to give up and continue to hold forth, the theorists too begin to hold forth and push their own theses, or antitheses, to absurd lengths, and as a result annihilate themselves before their rivals, who are delighted to see themselves justified by the extravagance of their opponents’ position. Just let a theorist speak and interrupt him from time to time with a slightly mocking “Oh, really?” and he will burn his boats under your very eyes!

When I entered the sixth form at the little *lycée* Condorcet, our old teacher of Latin and French, who was also the mayor of his village in Brittany, would pose the following questions about each text in our anthology: “What do you make of this passage? In what way is the writer’s vision original? What lesson can we take away from it?” There was a time when we believed that literary theory had swept away these boring questions for good. But the answers pass away and the questions remain. They are always approximately the same. There are some that

always recur, generation after generation. They were asked before theory, they were asked even before literary history, and they are still asked after theory, almost identically. To such a degree that one wonders if a *history* of literary criticism exists, as there exists a history of philosophy or linguistics, punctuated by inventions of concepts like the *cogito*, or the indirect object. In criticism, the paradigms never die, they accumulate, they coexist more or less pacifically, and they play forever on the same notions— notions that belong to popular language. This is one of the motifs, perhaps the central motif, the feeling of going over the same ground, that seems inevitable in the face of a historical picture of literary criticism: nothing new under the sun. In theory, one spends one's time trying to cleanse terms of current usage: literature, author, intention, meaning, interpretation, representation, content, background, value, originality, history, influence, period, style, etc. This is also what people have been doing in the field of logic for a long time now: they have been carving out of ordinary language a linguistic region endowed with truth. But then logic was formalized. Literary theory has not managed to get rid of ordinary language in speaking about literature, the language of readers and booklovers. And when theory retreats, the old notions reassert themselves unharmed. Is it because they are "natural" or "meaningful" that we never escape them for good? Or, as de Man believes, because we ask only to resist theory, because theory does harm, it bruises our illusions about language and subjectivity? One would say that today, almost everyone has felt brushed by the wing of theory, which is undoubtedly more comfortable.

Is there nothing left, then, or only the minor pedagogy I have described? Not at all. In its full flowering, around 1970, theory was a counter-discourse that challenged the premises of traditional criticism— *objectivity*, *taste*, and *clarity*, as Barthes summed them up in *Criticism and Truth*,⁶ in the magic year 1966. It was these premises, the articles of faith of universal "critical verisimilitude," that he wanted to replace with a "science of literature." Theory comes about when the premises of ordinary discourse on literature are no longer accepted as self-evident, when they are questioned, exposed as historical constructions, as conventions. In its beginnings, literary history also based itself on a theory, in the name of which it eliminated the old rhetoric from literary teaching, but this theory was lost from sight or toned down to the extent that literary history was identified with the institution of scholarship and the university. The appeal to theory is by definition oppositional, indeed subversive and insurrectional, but the fate of theory is to be transformed into a method by the academic institution, to be "recuperated," as they say. Twenty years later, what is at least as striking, if not more so, as the violent conflict between literary history and literary theory is the

similarity of the questions they each posed in their enthusiastic beginnings, and notably this one, which is always the same: "What is literature?"

The permanence of questions, the contradiction and fragility of answers. It is always relevant, then, to go back again to the popular notions that theory wanted to eliminate, the same notions that have been resurrected since theory has run out of steam, in order to review the oppositional responses it proposed, but also to try and understand why these responses did not settle the old questions once and for all. Perhaps theory, in its battle against the Lernaean hydra, pushed its arguments too far and they backfired. Every year, before new students, we have to go back over the same figures of good sense and irrepressible clichés, the same few enigmas or commonplaces that mark ordinary discourse on literature. I shall examine some of the most resistant, and around these we can construct a sympathetic presentation of literary theory as it hurled the full strength of its justified fury against them—in vain.

Theory and Practice of Literature

Several preliminary distinctions are indispensable. First of all, when we speak of theory—and without being Marxist—we presuppose a practice, or a *praxis*, to which this theory corresponds, or which it theorizes. In the streets of Geneva, some shops display this sign: "Theory Hall." They do not do literary theory there, but teach the highway code. As opposed to driving behavior, then theory is the code of driving behavior. What, then, is the code or the practice, that the theory of literature codifies, that is, organizes rather than regulates? It is not, it seems, literature itself (or literary activity)—theory of literature does not teach one how to write novels, the way rhetoric formerly taught public speaking and eloquence, but rather it teaches literary studies, that is, literary history and literary criticism, and even literary research.

In this sense—that of code, didacticism, or rather the *deontology* of literary research itself—theory of literature may look like a new discipline. In any case, it seems to be of later vintage than the birth of literary research in the nineteenth century, with the reestablishment of the European universities, then the American ones, on the German model. But if the term is relatively new, the thing itself is relatively old.

We can say that Plato and Aristotle were doing theory of literature when they were classifying literary genres in the *Republic* and the *Poetics*, and that the model of the theory of literature today rests for us on Aristotle's *Poetics*. Plato and Aristotle were doing theory because they were interested in general or even universal categories, in the literary constants behind particular works: in genres, forms, models, and figures,

for example. If they were preoccupied with individual works (the *Iliad*, *Oedipus Rex*), it was as an illustration of general categories. To do theory of literature is to be interested in literature in general, from a perspective that aims at the universal.

But Plato and Aristotle were not doing theory of literature in the sense that the practice they wanted to codify was not literary studies or literary research, but literature itself. They were seeking to formulate the prescriptive grammars of literature, so normative that Plato wanted to exclude poets from the City. In the current sense, if the theory of literature cites the authority of rhetoric and poetics, and revalorizes their ancient and classical tradition, it is not in principle normative.

Descriptively, theory of literature is therefore modern: it assumes the existence of literary studies, inaugurated in the nineteenth century and emerging from Romanticism. It is not unrelated to the philosophy of literature as a branch of aesthetics, which reflects on the nature and function of art, on the definition of beauty and value. But theory of literature is not philosophy of literature; it is not speculative or abstract, but analytical and topical. Its object is the multiple discourses on literature, literary criticism, and history, whose practices it questions, problematizes, and organizes. Theory of literature is not the policing of letters or studies of letters but in some way their epistemology.

And in this sense, it is not really new anymore. Lanson, the founder of French literary history at the turn of the twentieth century, was already saying of Ernest Renan and Emile Faguet, the literary critics who had preceded him—Faguet was his contemporary at the Sorbonne, but Lanson judged him outmoded—that they had no “literary theory.”⁷⁷ This was a polite way of signaling to them that in his eyes they were impressionists and imposters and did not know what they were doing, that they lacked rigor, scientific spirit, and method. Lanson himself claimed to have a theory, which shows that literary history and theory are not incompatible.

The appeal to theory necessarily responds to a polemical or oppositional intention (criticism, in the etymological sense of the word). It contradicts and challenges the practice of others. It is useful to add here a third term to those of theory and practice, in conformity with the Marxist, but not only Marxist, usage of these notions: the term *ideology*. Ideology takes place between theory and practice. A theory would tell the truth of a practice, articulate its conditions of possibility, while an ideology would merely legitimate this practice by a lie, would dissimulate its conditions of possibility. According to Lanson, who was, incidentally, well received by the Marxists, his rivals had no theory because they had only ideologies, or received ideas.

Thus theory reacts against practices that it judges to be atheoretical, or antitheoretical. In doing so it often marks them as scapegoats. Believing

that philosophy and historical positivism possessed a solid theory, Lanson attacked the traditional humanism of his adversaries (men of culture or taste, bourgeois). Theory is opposed to common sense. More recently, making a 360-degree turn, theory of literature has taken a stand against positivism in literary history (which Lanson represented) and against sympathy in literary criticism (which Faguet had represented), as well as against the frequent combination of the two (positivist history of the text, then humanist interpretation)—like those austere philologists who, after a detailed study of the sources of Prevost's novel, have no qualms passing homely judgments on the psychological reality and humanity of Manon, as if she were a girl of flesh and blood standing beside us.

Let us summarize: Theory stands in contrast to the practice of literary studies, that is, literary criticism and history, and it analyzes this practice (or rather these practices), describes them, exposes their assumptions—in brief, criticizes them (to criticize is to separate, discriminate). Theory, then, in a first approximation, would be the *criticism of criticism*, or *metacriticism* (just as language is distinct from the metalanguage that describes it, such as the grammar that designates its workings). It is a critical consciousness (a criticism of literary ideology), a literary self-reflection (a *critical inversion*, a *self-consciousness* or self-referentiality)—all features that we attribute to modernity since the time of Baudelaire and especially Mallarmé.

Let us immediately add examples. I have used a series of terms that should be defined themselves, or further elaborated, to solidify certain concepts, to understand the critical consciousness that accompanies theory. *Literature*, then *literary criticism* and *literary history*: theory articulates the difference between them. Let us relegate literature to the next chapter and look more closely at the other two.

Theory, Criticism, History

By literary criticism I mean a discourse on literary works that emphasizes the experience of reading, that describes, interprets, evaluates the meaning and effect these works have not only on (good) readers, but also on readers who are not necessarily erudite or professional. Criticism appreciates, it judges; it proceeds by sympathy (or antipathy), by identification and projection. Its ideal site is the salon, and the press is one avatar, not the university; its first form is conversation.

By literary history I mean, by contrast, a discourse that insists upon factors external to the experience of reading, for instance the conception or the transmission of works, or other elements that in general do not interest the nonspecialist. Literary history is the academic discipline that

appeared in the course of the nineteenth century, better known as philology, scholarship, *Wissenschaft*, or research.

Literary criticism and history are sometimes compared, one being an intrinsic and the other an extrinsic approach: criticism is attached to the text, history to the context. Lanson said that he was doing literary history when he looked at the name of the author on the cover of the book, as soon as he gave the text a minimal context. Literary criticism makes statements of the type: "A is more beautiful than B," while literary history claims that: "C derives from D." The first aims to evaluate the text, the second to explain it.

Literary theory demands that the assumptions underlying these assertions be made explicit. What are you calling literature? What are your criteria of value? These are questions that it would ask critics, since it's smooth sailing between readers who share the same norms and who understand each other without having to spell things out. But if this is not the case, criticism (conversation) quickly becomes a dialogue of the deaf. It is not a matter of reconciling different approaches, but of understanding why they are different.

Theory will ask the historians, What are you calling literature? How do you appropriate its special properties or its special value? Once it is acknowledged that literary texts have distinctive features, you treat them like historical documents by searching for their factual causes: the author's life, the social and cultural framework, stated intentions, sources. The paradox is obvious: you are using context to explain an object that interests you precisely because it escapes this context and survives it.

Theory always protests against the implicit: it is the gadfly, the *protervus* (the protestant) of the old school. It calls for an accounting, and it does not embrace Proust's opinion in *Le Temps Retrouvé*, at least in regard to literary studies: "A work in which there are theories is like an object on which one leaves the price tag" (p. 461).⁸ Theory wants to know the price. It is not abstract; it poses questions, those questions that historians and critics constantly encounter with regard to particular texts, but whose answers they take for granted. Theory reminds us that these questions are problematic, that they can be answered in various ways: it is relativistic.

Theory or Theories

Until this point I have used the word *theory* in the singular, as if there were only one. Yet everyone has heard that there were literary *theories*: Mr. So-and-so's theory, Ms. So-and-so's theory. Theory, then, or theories, would be a little like critical doctrines or dogmas, or ideologies. There

are as many theories as there are theorists, as is typical in domains where experimentation can rarely be done. Theory is not like algebra or geometry: the professor of theory teaches his theory, which allows him, like Lanson, to claim that others have none. Someone will ask me, "What is your theory?" I will answer, "None." And that is what frightens people: they would like to identify my doctrine, the faith they must subscribe to in reading this book. Don't worry, or be very worried. I have no faith—the *protervus* has neither faith nor law, he is the eternal devil's advocate, or the devil himself: *Forse tu non pensavi ch'io löico fossi!* as Dante has him say, "Perhaps you didn't reckon I'd be versed in logic."⁹ I have no doctrine except the doctrine of radical doubt in the face of all discourse on literature. I see any theory of literature as an analytic and aporetic attitude, a skeptical (critical) apprenticeship, a metacritical point of view that aims to interrogate, to question the assumptions of all critical practices (in the broader sense), a perpetual "What do I know?"

Of course, there are particular contrasting, conflicting, divergent theories—the field, I have said, is polemical—but we are not going to advocate this or that theory. Instead we are going to reflect in an analytical and skeptical way on literature, on literary studies, that is, on all discourse—critical, historical, theoretical—relating to literature. We are going to try to teach ourselves about life. The theory of literature is an apprenticeship in learning about life. "As concerns literary criticism," Julien Gracq wrote, "all words that command categories are traps" (p. 174).¹⁰

Theory of Literature or Literary Theory

A last small, preliminary distinction. I have spoken in the previous paragraphs of *theory of literature*, not *literary theory*. Is this distinction relevant? For instance, on the model of the *history of literature* and *literary history* (synthesis versus analysis; the picture of literature as opposed to the philological discipline; Lanson's 1895 manual *Histoire de la littérature française*, as opposed to the *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, founded in 1894). Theory of literature, as in Wellek and Warren's manual, which bears this phrase as its title—*Theory of Literature* (1949)—is generally understood as a branch of general and comparative literature: it designates reflection on the conditions of literature, of literary criticism and literary history; it is the criticism of criticism, or metacriticism.

Literary theory is more contrarian and presents itself, in addition, as a critique of ideology, including that of the theory of literature. It says that one always has a theory, and if you believe you do not, that is because you depend on the dominant theory of your time and place. Literary theory is also identified with formalism, with the Russian formalists at the

beginning of the twentieth century, who were heavily influenced by Marxism. As Paul de Man reminds us, literary theory comes into existence when the approach to literary texts is no longer based on non-linguistic considerations, such as historical or aesthetic ones; when the subject of discussion is no longer meaning or value but the modes of production of meaning or value.¹¹ These two descriptions of literary theory (critique of ideology, linguistic analysis) reinforce one another, for the critique of ideology is a denunciation of linguistic illusion (the idea that language and literature are self-evident). Literary theory exposes code and convention where nontheory postulated nature.

Unfortunately, this distinction (theory of literature *versus* literary theory), clear in English for example, has been obliterated in French. Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* was translated—belatedly, as was said—under the title *Théorie littéraire* in 1971; Tzvetan Todorov's anthology of Russian formalists had been published several years earlier, by the same publisher, under the title *Théorie de la littérature* (1966). We must set this chiasm straight in order to find our bearings.

As the reader will have understood, I borrow from these two traditions: from theory of literature, the reflection on general notions, principles, and criteria; from literary theory, the criticism of literary good sense and the reference to formalism. Providing recipes, then, is not the point. Theory is not method, technique, cuisine. On the contrary, the purpose is to become skeptical of all recipes, to eliminate them by reflection. My intention, then, is not in the least to facilitate things, but to be vigilant, suspicious, skeptical, in a word: critical or ironic. Theory is a school of irony.

Literature Reduced to Its Elements

What great notions cause us, stimulate us, to exercise our critical faculties? The relation between theory and common sense is naturally conflictual. It is therefore ordinary discourse on literature, by designating the targets of theory, that best allows it to put literature to the test. All discourse on literature, all literary study, invites several large, basic questions, that is, an examination of its assumptions relative to a few basic notions. All discourse on literature takes a position on these questions, most often implicitly but sometimes explicitly, and as a whole these define a certain idea of literature:

What is literature?

What is the relation between literature and the author?

What is the relation between literature and reality?

What is the relation between literature and the reader?

What is the relation between literature and language?

When I speak of a book, I necessarily make hypotheses based on these definitions. Five elements are indispensable in literature: an *author*, a *book*, a *reader*, a *language*, and a *referent*.

To which I would add two questions that are not at all on the same level, and that are related, specifically, to *history* and *criticism*: What hypotheses do we make on literary change, movement, evolution, and on literary value, originality, relevance? Or again, How do we understand the literary tradition in its dynamic aspect (history) as well as its static aspect (value)?

These seven questions designate the chapter headings of my book—*literature, the author, the world, the reader, style, history, and value*—to which I have given common sense titles, since it is the eternal combat between theory and common sense that gives theory its meaning. Whoever opens a book has these notions in mind. Reformulated somewhat more theoretically, the first four titles might be the following: *literariness, intention, representation, reception*. For the last three—*style, history, value*—it does not seem necessary to distinguish between the language of amateurs and professionals: both have recourse to the same words.

For each question, I would like to show the variety of possible responses, not so much those that have been given historically as those that can be made today: my project is not a history of criticism, nor a picture of literary doctrines. Theory of literature is a lesson in relativism, not pluralism; in other words, several responses are possible but not equally possible, acceptable but not compatible. Instead of adding up to a total and more complete vision, they are mutually exclusive since they do not call the same thing literature or qualify it as literary; they do not envisage different aspects of the same subject but different subjects. Ancient or modern, synchronic or diachronic, intrinsic or extrinsic: they are not all possible at once. In literary research, “more is less”; and one must choose. Moreover, if I love literature, I have already chosen. My literary decisions refer to extra-literary norms—ethical, existential—that govern the other aspects of my life.

Furthermore, these seven questions about literature are not independent. They form a system. In other words, the answer that I give to one of them restricts the options open to me in answering the others. For example, if I emphasize the role of the author, it is likely that I do not give as much importance to language; if I insist on literariness, I will minimize the role of the reader; if I accent the determining role of history, I will downplay the contribution of genius, etc. The choices are interdependent. This is why any question would be a satisfactory entry into their system, and would summon all the others. A single one, intention, for example, would perhaps be enough to deal with them all.

That is also why the order of their analysis is basically unimportant: we could draw a card at random and follow the trail. I have chosen to examine them by basing myself on a hierarchy that corresponds to common sense as well, which, with regard to literature, thinks of the author before the reader, and the material before the manner in which it is written.

All the sites of theory will be visited in this way, except, perhaps, genre (which will be mentioned briefly with regard to reception), but that is because genre was not a *cause célèbre* of the literary theory of the sixties. Genre is a generality, the most obvious mediation between the individual work and literature. On the one hand, theory mistrusts anything obvious; on the other, it aims at universals.

This list seems somewhat provocative, since it is quite simply a list of the *bêtes noires* of literary theory, the windmills that theory has tilted at to forge sound concepts. But it is not meant maliciously. To count the enemies of theory seems to me the best, the only way—in any case the most economical way—to render an account of it with any confidence: to retrace its steps, bear witness to its energy, capture its living presence, just as it is indispensable, after more than a century, to describe modern art by the conventions it challenged.

In the end, we may be led to conclude that the “literary field,” despite often exacerbated differences of position and opinion, beyond the endless quarrels that animate it, rests on a set of assumptions and beliefs shared by everyone. Pierre Bourdieu judged that

[p]osition-takings on art and literature, like the positions where they are generated, are organized around pairs of oppositions, often inherited from past polemics, and conceived as insurmountable antinomies, absolute alternatives, in terms of all or nothing, and while these structure thought, they also imprison it in a series of false dilemmas.¹²

The task at hand is to defuse the power of these false perceptions, these deceptive contradictions, these fatal paradoxes that are tearing literary studies apart, to resist the pressing alternative of theory or common sense, of all or nothing, for the truth always lies somewhere in between.