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## Response: An End to Literary Theory

### 1.

Not unlike ›Literary Studies‹ (and German ›Literaturwissenschaft‹) whose emergence as academic institutions and disciplines goes back to the later decades of European Romanticism, ›Literary Theory‹ has a well circumscribed historical origin. It occurred during the early twentieth century when, for the first time, in several European countries, and under locally different circumstances, young scholars launched the idea that Literary Studies needed a programmatic conceptual underpinning in order to acquire legitimacy as a ›scientific‹ enterprise.

Today, we may interpret those converging endeavors as reactions to a crisis that had overcome Literary Studies after a short century of its existence as a new, dynamic, and conquering academic discipline – that is as a functional equivalent of ›theology‹ in relation to Literature which, as a discourse, had taken over, in nineteenth century bourgeois societies, the place traditionally reserved for Religion. During that first happy century of its history, Literary Studies had indeed promoted the reading of Literature as a quasi-transcendental expression of two different horizons of social knowledge and cultural imagination. In those nations whose statehood had emerged from a successful bourgeois revolution, like in Great Britain, the United States, or France, literary texts from all historical ages and in all languages were appreciated as illustrations of central concepts and values of Enlightenment philosophy. In those countries, by contrast, whose birth as nations had taken the more dramatic form of a resurrection from humiliating moments of defeat, as it was the case with Prussia and most other German States, with Russia and, later during the nineteenth century, also with France and with Spain, Literature (and that meant quite strictly in these cases: texts in the respective national languages) was seen as the afterglow of a glorious, mostly medieval national past.

While these transcendental horizons of 19th century nationhood had enjoyed a status of unquestioned realities through several generations, they became the object of an all-pervasive and ›scientifically grounded‹ scepticism in the years before 1900. As the frames of reference ›beyond‹ Literature and ›beyond‹ Literary Criticism were fast vanishing in reaction to this attack, a series of concerns began to come up within Literary Studies that had remained mute as long as the

discipline was able to simply see Literature as the expression and illustration of Enlightenment values or of an idealized national past. From an institutional point of view, the most fundamental of these emerging concerns was the one about the task of Literary Studies, in absence of its traditional horizons of reference. Secondly, the search for a metahistorical and transcultural definition of ›Literature‹ appeared to be a necessity as soon as it was no longer understood that ›literary‹ were all those texts that could be used as illustrations for the transcendental horizons of reference. In similar fashion, the question became relevant what the relationship between Literature, on the one side, and Music and the Arts on the other side might be (but also, for example, between Literature, the State, and the Economy) now that such fields of practice could no longer be expected to simply and automatically converge in normative cultural frames.

## 2.

These were some of the predominant concerns for example in the debates of the Russian Formalists who, after 1910, came together as the first intellectual and academic movement that, quite explicitly, wanted to be recognized as developing a ›Theory of Literature‹. Now, while Formalism, in the political environment of the early Soviet Union, failed to impose a thoroughgoing reform of Literary Studies along the lines of its own answers to those new questions, and while neither Formalism nor any other Theories of Literature that followed were ever successful in producing generally accepted solutions to these problems, they all contributed to keeping the discipline of Literary Studies alive by replacing much hoped for solutions through intense but unending discussions.

We can then say that, paradoxically, Literary Theory saved Literary Studies by making its early twentieth century crisis potentially eternal. In other words: Literary Criticism is an academic discipline that may have survived until the present day thanks to its own incapacity of finding an adequate conceptual and epistemological grounding. This is a way of describing the ›improbability‹ of Literary Theory as an academic subdiscipline and as a discourse – and viewing an institution from the angle of its improbability will always make us feel, with relief or indignation, that it would have been possible to live without it. So we must say, grudgingly perhaps, that while Literary Criticism might have had a hard time sustaining itself without Literary Theory, humankind would certainly continue to exist in the absence of both.

## 3.

During the first half of the twentieth century, most Literary Theories were spinning off, as it had already been the case with Russian Formalism, from the new »structuralist« theories of Language and from related practices in the analysis of literary style. After World War II, by contrast, Literary Theories developed a tendency to adopt their key intuitions, rather than from modes of intellectual concentration on the text, from Philosophy and from other disciplines in the Humanities that were not always centrally and not even necessarily text-related. Following the short international age of New Criticism, as it had first constituted itself during the 1920s in Britain and the United States through a self-reflexive attitude vis-à-vis literary analysis and as it had been imposed upon Literary Studies in most Western countries during the late 1940s and the 1950s, in reaction to their ideologization through fascist and communist regimes, Marxism and Psychoanalysis, Phaenomenology and Hermeneutics, theories of Gender and theories of History began to develop, in different contexts, their heavy influence on Literary Theory. For the longest time, however, these discourses and disciplines continued to produce new answers to the traditional questions of Literary Theory (to questions regarding the key functions of Literary Criticism, the general definition of »Literature« etc.) – without ever coming close to a consensus. Also, up until the 1980s, there was a certain rhythm of alternation between intellectual configurations that tried to make Literary Theory as »scientific« and »rigorous« as possible (Structuralism, Marxism, Reception Theory etc.) and others (New Criticism, Deconstruction, New Historicism, for example) that emphasized their more impressionistic styles and even their closeness to literary writing itself. For the longest time, however, the multiple episodes of epistemological borrowing and readjustment in reaction to theories and philosophical positions that, in their origin, were not focused on Literature, left the central position of »Literature« and of »literary phenomena« within Literary Theory untouched.

## 4.

This implicit tradition came to an end in the early 1980s, when the return of yet another academic generation to Marxist principles and concepts, together with a more surprising interest in empirical research methods and a fascination for ethnic and gender identities began to trigger a tendency towards redefining and complexifying »Literary Studies«, deliberately and programmatically, into »Cultural Studies«. Roughly at the same and almost exclusively at German universities, a similar movement came underway for the transformation of »Literary Studies« into »Media Studies«.

The undoubted intrinsic conquests and merits of ›Cultural Studies‹ and of ›Media Studies‹ which, by the way, have both maintained an astonishing distance from each other, will not be at stake here. Nor will we discuss the historical reasons for their emergence – among which there might have been both a frustration with Literary Theory's incapacity of solving its key questions (no consensus about a foundational concept of ›Literature‹ after an almost century-long debate) and the vague feeling, during the 1980s and 1990s, that ›Literature‹, as a discourse and as a medium, was beginning to fade into the past. Much more important and less frequently mentioned is the observation that this double movement of departure into Cultural Studies and Media Studies seems to have left the field of ›Literary Theory‹ without the energy of intellectual innovation. Whoever teaches courses on the history of ›Literary Theory‹ today and uses one of the numerous anthologies with texts from this tradition, will realize that, after many decades of constant transformation and change, no new, internationally successful paradigms have occupied the center stage of ›Literary Theory‹ since the early days of Gender Studies and of Postcolonial Studies, i.e. for more than a quarter century now. After a good ninety years into its historical existence that were filled with constant provocations, changes, and revisions, this hiatus should be diagnosed as one end of Literary Theory, even if the intellectual pertinence and the curricular status of the field may well be more safely established today than ever before.

## 5.

The end of ›Literary Theory‹, however, has by no means become synonymous with an end of ›Literary Studies‹, as many of us would have feared (and some of us would have hoped) as recently as in the 1970s. On the contrary, the number of academic classes is clearly increasing, internationally and quite steeply, that simply concentrate on the oeuvre of a literary author, on a specific literary genre, and sometimes even on an individual literary text, without any perspectives of theoretical or political legitimation. While more and more sophisticated research projects and paradigms are emerging within the realm of ›Literary History‹, the latest tone in the academic engagement with Literature may be characterized as predominantly ›existentialist‹. If, however, literary texts from the past and present resonate strongly today, once again, with concerns of individual (and sometimes also collective) existence, it appears only natural that Literary Criticism at this point is returning to a renewed, rather un-programmatic closeness with Philosophy.

I hesitate to call this new closeness between Literary Studies and Philosophy a ›dialogue‹ because it seems to emerge from a multiplicity of intellectual needs and inspirations rather than from disciplinary planning and politics. A side effect

of this distance from programmatic disciplinary claims may lie in the impression that Literary Studies today has a much greater respect for philosophical texts and philosophical traditions than ›Literary Theory‹ used to show during much of the second half of the twentieth century when, quite often and almost brutally, philosophical books were reduced to the little they had to say about Literature. And yet ›Literary Theory‹ has survived as a discursive and as an intellectual space – perhaps only as an effect of widespread institutional inertia. Do we need ›Literary Theory‹ in the early twenty-first century?

The only acceptable reaction to this question lies in another question, i.e. in the question *whether there has ever been a field or a discipline in the Humanities that responded to a real and truly irreplaceable societal need*. If, as I suppose, the answer is negative, then this means that we, the humanists, should make good, i.e. selfish use of the spaces that we possess, instead of questioning their right to exist or instead of using them to problematize the existence of our profession – as we have done, to a large extent, throughout the history of ›Literary Theory‹. This self-reflexive obsession may also explain why the range of literary phenomena that Literary Theory has ever intensely dealt with is so reduced if we compare it with the countless proposals for a reform or for a complete reconceptualization of our entire discipline. Today, I find it increasingly tiresome to argue for the disciplinary, political, or even epistemological legitimacy of topics and questions that my students, colleagues, and I are fascinated by.

In this spirit and under this premise, I hope that ›Literary Theory‹ will return, rather sooner than later, to the big question concerning the relation, the interference, and the joint effects of textual content and literary form. If, since the eighteenth century, some intellectuals have been complaining about the ›scandal of Philosophy, i.e. about the impression that Philosophy, since the age of Plato, has not come any closer to solving some of its key problems, then the ›scandal of Literary Studies‹ may be that we have not developed any good answers to those questions concerning the function of literary form that ›amateur‹ readers expect us to deal with – primarily and successfully.

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