

Theory of Literature

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Theory of Literature

PAUL H. FRY

Yale

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To all my Lit 300 Teaching Fellows, with fond gratitude

The trouble with most folks isn't so much their ignorance,
it's knowin' so many things that ain't so.

—JOSH BILLINGS

Contents

Preface ix

- | | |
|---|----|
| 1. Introduction: The Prehistory and Rise of "Theory" | 1 |
| 2. Introduction Continued: Theory and Functionalization | 12 |

FIRST REFLECTIONS ON INTERPRETATION AND READING

- | | |
|--|----|
| 3. Ways In and Out of the Hermeneutic Circle | 27 |
| 4. Configurative Reading | 39 |

TEXT AND STRUCTURE

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 5. The Idea of the Autonomous Artwork | 55 |
| 6. The New Criticism and Other Western Formalisms | 68 |
| 7. Russian Formalism | 82 |
| 8. Semiotics and Structuralism | 95 |
| 9. Linguistics and Literature | 108 |
| 10. Deconstruction I: Jacques Derrida | 123 |
| 11. Deconstruction II: Paul de Man | 137 |

AUTHOR (READER) AND PSYCHE

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----|
| 12. Freud and Fiction | 153 |
| 13. Jacques Lacan in Theory | 166 |
| 14. Influence | 179 |
| 15. The Postmodern Psyche | 192 |

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

16. The Social Permeability of Reader and Text	207
17. The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory	220
18. The Political Unconscious	233
19. The New Historicism	246
20. The Classical Feminist Tradition	259
21. African American Criticism	272
22. Postcolonial Criticism	285
23. Queer Theory and Gender Performativity	299
24. The Institutional Construction of Literary Study	312

THEORY CON AND PRO

25. The End of Theory? Neo-Pragmatism	329
26. Conclusion: Who Doesn't Hate Theory Now?	342

Appendix: Passages Referenced in Lectures 355

Notes 363

*The Varieties of Interpretation: A Guide to Further Reading
in Literary Theory, by Stefan Esposito* 365

Index 379

Preface

These chapters have passed through transformations that must be unusual in publishing, although the series the book appears in will probably change that. My twenty-six Open Yale Courses lectures in “Lit 300” for the Spring 2009 semester were videotaped, yes, but you could hear them as audiotape, too—while driving to work or going for a run—and on the assumption that the written transcripts might also appeal, the process then began that morphed at last into the written form of this book. I had delivered the lectures extemporaneously, guided for each one by a page or so of scribbled notes. The audiotape was sent to San Diego, where a machine wrote down what it thought it heard. The result was then given to a human being in New Haven who made what she could of it. That was the point at which I should have done what I’ve been doing for the last several months, but the incentive was then too low, and I took time only to glance through the transcripts and make a few quick changes—despite realizing that the written record was getting to look like a joke or a bit of gossip that has passed through too many hands.

In a way it then made sense to leave it alone, though, because these *were* supposed to be transcripts, not rewrites, and even though they had the accuracy of those instant captions for the hearing-impaired on television, nobody could say that any changes had intentionally been made. They are now to become a book, however: both digital and print, to be sure, but still a book. An editor at Yale University Press took the transcript in hand on first receiving it and made some cosmetic improvements. The lectures were then sent to me as a zip-file, the mark-up editing program already activated, and I went to work. At this point, I kept thinking about the first few paragraphs of a famous and famously difficult essay that I’d assigned for the course (discussed in Chapter 13), Jacques Lacan’s “Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious.” His paper, he says, is a written version (*écrit*, in a volume called *Écrits*) of a seminar presentation. He feels that the orality of that occasion is important to retain if he is to convey to the fullest what he wants to say about the role of language in the unconscious. At the same time (though Lacan doesn’t say this), it’s quite obvious to any reader with

experience as a listener that information conveyed in spontaneous speech is perhaps adequate to its occasion but not registered in at all the same way when it's taken in during a reader's more leisurely focus on a written text. Because this book is for readers, therefore, I have modified such parts of the lectures as seemed to me to need a more careful exposition, while hoping to retain a sense throughout of what the lectures sounded like. I am, notoriously, an impromptu speaker of "prose," so when you encounter a long sentence, please don't think it was any shorter in the lecture.

Without the extensive and indispensable help of my assistant, Stefan Esposito, I wouldn't have been able to focus on the unexpected challenge I have described. Stefan was one of the teaching fellows for this videotaped version of the lectures and is an important emerging scholar and theorist in comparative literature. To him I happily entrusted a last read-through and correction of the chapters—for each of which my subject line was always "revised revision, #x"—when I sent them to him in Boston. He composed the bibliographical essay, "The Varieties of Interpretation," with suggestions for further reading on each of our topics, which will be found at the end of the book. He has also furnished the references that we deemed necessary (as few as possible), and arranged in an appendix the handouts with passages to be discussed that I had circulated at some lectures or posted online.

Although references to the photocopied material I assigned have posed a challenge and at least conjecturally introduced a fussy element we had hoped in general to avoid, references to our main textbook were easy. I very strongly suggest that readers consider investing in this excellent volume, which stands out in the field for its judiciously and copiously chosen materials (including selections covering the entire history of criticism) and for its sensible introductions: David Richter, ed., *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends* (3rd ed.: Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007). All quotations from that volume are keyed in parentheses to the third edition.

The first two chapters are introductory and offer a good many of the apologies, disclaimers, and boasts that one might expect to find in prefaces, so I shall say very little here about what the ensuing tour through this vast subject matter includes. I am conscious, however, that there are certain recently influential names and ideas that the syllabus did not stretch to cover, although here and there some oblique or proleptic mention of these trends will be found. The "ethical turn," for example, encompasses late Derrida, as I point out, but I do not discuss the work of Giorgio Agamben or of neo-Marxists like Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou. Also current is the brilliant

Marxist attention devoted to textual surface in England, with Simon Jarvis, Keston Sutherland, and others micro-reading in the spirit of founder J. H. Prynne, which has only reached American shores as yet in the shape of their promising students.

Literary sociology is an emerging field, but my discussion of John Guillory (and mention of Pierre Bourdieu in that context) is not supplemented by any discussion of the important work, for example, of the sociolinguist Michael Silverstein. A formative influence on Silverstein is the semiotics of C. S. Peirce; and it must be said that as neo-pragmatist views like those of Knapp and Michaels (discussed here) converge today with attention to the social and cultural circulation of literary knowledge and taste that is modeled on Jürgen Habermas's concept of the "public sphere" even more than on Bourdieu's concept of "habitus," something like a Peircean tradition of the socially indexical sign has emerged in rivalry with the Saussurian tradition to which these lectures devote most of their attention. A general introduction to the Peircean tradition has yet to be written, and I hope it will quickly appear. The reader will find a few thoughts on this topic at the beginning of my twenty-fifth chapter.

Theories of the circulation of knowledge other than those of Foucault, discussed here, and Antonio Gramsci, mentioned in passing, have recently carried scholars into the interrelated fields of systems theory (notably Niklas Luhmann), history of media, remediation, and media theory (the classics in this field being works by Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler), and more specifically within these last fields the history of the book (as in the work of Peter Stallybrass and David Kastan). All of this and more, then, remains to be covered in another course, and another book.

The challenge of acknowledging my intellectual debts—my personal ones, I mean, as the written ones find their way for the most part into the bibliographical essay—is overwhelming. I can name here only a few of the people whose conversation and teaching over the years have shaped my understanding of the subject, whether they knew it or not: Jeffrey Alexander, Johannes Andereg, Marshall Brown, Margaret Ferguson, Stanley Fish, Hans Frei, Harris Friedberg, Paul Grimstad, John Guillory, Benjamin Harshav, Geoffrey Hartman, John Hollander, Margaret Homans, Helmut Illbruck, Carol Jacobs, Barbara Johnson, Jeremy Kessler, Eric Lindstrom, Alfred MacAdam, David Marshall, Irving Massey, Rainer Nägele, Ana Nersessian, Edward Nersessian, Cyril O'Regan, Brigitte Peucker, Anthony Reed, Joseph Roach, Charles Sabel, Naomi Schor, David Simpson, Peter Stallybrass, Garrett Stewart, Henry Sussman, Steve Tedeschi, Michael Warner, and Henry

Weinfield. It pains me even more than it has on similar occasions in the past, educating oneself in these matters (and allowing oneself to be educated) being such a crucial yet delicate business, that despite having made what began to seem a rather long list of acknowledgments, I have undoubtedly forgotten so many who deserve a place on it. I can only hope they are relieved to have escaped guilt by association. My debt to my teaching fellows, from my first involvement with the course in the 1980s (when Paul de Man's students brought their edge and zeal to our proceedings), is recorded in my dedication. For advice and encouragement along the way, in addition to Stefan Esposito I thank Diana E. E. Kleiner, the founder and tireless sustainer of Open Yale Courses, and, at Yale University Press, Laura Davulis, Christina Tucker, Sonia Shannon, Ann-Marie Imbornoni, and Aldo Cupo. My thanks also go to Wendy Muto and Brian Desmond at Westchester Book Group and to Julie Palmer-Hoffman, the copyeditor.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Prehistory and Rise of “Theory”

Readings:

Passages from Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Paul Ricoeur.

Let me begin with a few remarks about the title of our course because it has some big words in it: “theory” and “literature,” clearly, but it’s worth saying something about the word “introduction” as well.

The word “theory” has a complicated etymological history that I won’t linger over except to point out what can make its meaning confusing. The way the word has actually been used at certain periods has made it mean something like what we call “practice,” whereas at other periods it has meant something very different from practice: a concept to which practice can appeal. This latter is the sense of theory that prevails today, but perhaps we accept it too quickly. Whereas for us the difference between theory and practice goes without saying, there’s a less obvious difference between theory and methodology. Yes, it’s probably fair enough to say that methodology is “applied theory,” but that makes it like practice—call it disciplined practice—in the sense I just used. Theory, on the other hand, does not always have an immediate application. Theory can be a purely speculative undertaking. It’s a hypothesis about something, the exact nature of which one needn’t necessarily have in view because theory itself may serve to

bring it into view. Whatever the object of theory might be, if it even has one, theory itself requires—owing to whatever intellectual constraints may be in play—a large measure of internal coherence rather more urgently than a given field of application.

Of course there is no doubt that most existing forms of theory do exist to be applied. Very frequently, courses of this kind have a kind of proof text—*Lycidas*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a short story—and then once in a while the exposition of the lecture will pause, the text will be produced, and whatever type of theory has recently been talked about will be applied to the text; so that you'll get a postcolonial reading or a trauma theory reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*—there have been a lot of good ones, by the way—and so on throughout the course.

Now although I'm reluctant to say that theory should always have an application despite knowing that that's what usually happens, I won't depart from this custom; but I'll poke a little respectful fun at it by making it seem, at least at times, like breaking a butterfly on a wheel. Our text is a story for toddlers called *Tony the Tow Truck*. It's a little book made of thick cardboard pages with a line of text at the bottom, each page a picture of vehicles with human expressions and a row of houses with human faces expressing approval or disapproval in the background. We won't come back to this text for a while, but it's mercifully short, and as time passes we will do various tricks with it. As others revert to *Lycidas*, we shall revert to *Tony the Tow Truck* for the purpose of introducing questions of applied theory.

In this choice there is hardly any condescension toward theory and none at all toward literary texts. It's much more a question of reminding you that if you can apply theory to *Tony*, you can apply it to anything; and also of reminding you that, after all, reading—reading just anything—is a complex and potentially almost unlimited activity. That's one of the most important things that theory teaches us, and I hope to be able to prove it in the course of our varied approaches to *Tony the Tow Truck*.

Theory resembles philosophy, especially metaphysics, perhaps in this: it asks fundamental questions and also at times builds systems. That is to say, theory aims at a general description of what can be thought that resembles or rivals philosophy. But literary theory as practiced in the twentieth century and beyond differs in most instances from most philosophy in that to a surprising extent it entails skepticism. In literary theory there seems to be a pervasive variety of doubts about the foundations of what we can think, and it is certainly doubt that characterizes its modern history. Not all theory that we read in this course is skeptical. Some of the most powerful and pro-

found thought that’s been devoted to the theory of literature is positive in its intentions and its views, but by and large you will be coming to terms—happily or unhappily—with the fact that much of what you’re going to find in the recommended readings accompanying this course is undergirded, or perhaps I should say undermined, by this persisting skepticism. It’s centrally important, the skepticism of theory, and I’m going to be coming back to it over and over, but now I mention it just in passing to evoke what we might call the atmosphere of theory.

Turning to the word “literature,” this is not a course in theory of relativity, theory of music, or theory of government. This is a course in theory of literature, and theory of literature shares in common with other kinds of theory the need for definition. Maybe the most fundamental and, for me, possibly the most fascinating question theory asks is, what *is* literature? Much of what we’ll be reading takes up this question and provides us with fascinating and always—each in its turn—enticing definitions. There are definitions based on form: circularity, symmetry, economy of form, lack of economy of form, and repetition. There are definitions based on imitation: of “nature,” of psychological or sociopolitical states, definitions appealing to the complexity, balance, harmony, or sometimes imbalance and disharmony of the imitation. There are also definitions that insist on an epistemological difference between literature and other kinds of utterance: whereas most utterances purport to be saying something true about the actual state of things in the world, literary utterance is under no such obligation, the argument goes, and ought properly to be understood as fiction—making things rather than referring to things.

All of these definitions have had currency. We’ll be going over them again and discovering their respective merits as we learn more about them; but at the same time, even as I rattle off this list of possibilities, you’re probably thinking that you could easily find exceptions to all such claims. Well and good, that’s properly ecumenical of you, but at the same time your tough-mindedness raises the uneasy sense, does it not, that maybe literature just isn’t anything *at all*?—in other words, that literature may not be susceptible to definition, to any one definition, but is just whatever you think it is or, more precisely, whatever your interpretive community says that it is. But even if you reach that conclusion, it won’t seem disabling as long as you remember that certain notions of literature do exist in certain communities, that those notions in themselves reward study, and that after all you yourself know perfectly well, and for practical purposes agree with, what counts as literature among your peers. I have just outlined the so-called neo-pragmatist

view of literature and of definition in general, but it doesn't excuse us from delineating an object of study. Definition is important to us, even if it's provisional, and we're certainly not going to give it short shrift in this course.

In addition to defining literature, literary theory also asks questions that open up the field somewhat. What causes literature and what are the effects of literature? As to cause, we ask: What is an author? And what is the nature of literary authority? By the same token, if literature has effects, it must have effects on someone, and this gives rise to the equally interesting and vexing question, what is a reader? Literary theory is very much involved with questions of that kind, and the need to organize these questions is what rationalizes the structure of our course. You'll notice from the contents that we move in these lectures from the idea that literature is formed by language to the idea that literature is formed by the human psyche to the idea that literature is formed by social, economic, and historical forces. There are corollaries for those ideas with respect to the kinds of effects that literature has, and the course moves through these corollaries in the same sequence.

Finally, literary theory asks one other important question, the one with which we'll begin before turning to form, psyche, and society. This question is not so much "What is a reader?" but "How does reading get done?" That is to say, how do we—how does anyone—form the conclusion that we are interpreting something adequately, that we have a basis for the kind of reading that we're doing? What is the reading experience like? How do we meet the text face-to-face? How do we put ourselves in touch with the text, which may in many ways be remote from us? These are the questions that are asked by what's called *hermeneutics*, a difficult word that we will be taking up soon. It derives from the name of the god Hermes, who conveyed language to man and who was, among many other things, the god of communication.

So much then for *literature* and its contexts in theory. Now let me pause quickly over the word "introduction." I started teaching this course in the late 1970s and 1980s, when literary theory was a thing absolutely of the moment. I had a colleague who was only half joking when he said he wished he had the black leather concession at the door. Theory was both hot and cool, and it was something about which, following from that, one had not just opinions but very, very strong opinions. In consequence, a lot of people thought that you couldn't teach an "introduction" to theory. They meant that you couldn't teach a survey, saying, "If it's Tuesday, it must be Foucault. If it's Thursday, it must be Lacan." It was a betrayal to approach theory that way. What was called for, it was thought, was a radical effort to grasp the

basis for all possible theory. You were a feminist or a Marxist or a student of Paul de Man, and if you were going to teach anything like a survey you had to derive the rest of it from your fundamental conviction.

That’s the way it felt to teach theory in those days. It was awkward teaching an introduction. While I was teaching this course, which was then called Lit Y and required for our literature major then as now, Paul de Man was teaching Lit Z, the art of interpretation as he practiced it. That course did indeed cast its shadow across every other form of theory, and it was extremely rigorous and interesting, but it wasn’t a survey. It took for granted that everything else would derive from a fundamental idea, but it didn’t for a minute suppose that a whole series of ideas, each considered fundamental in turn, could jostle for attention and get mixed and matched in a cheerfully eclectic way—which perhaps we will be seeming to do from time to time in our introductory course.

Do I miss the coolness and heat of that moment? Yes and no. As Wordsworth says, “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,” and I hope to convince you that it’s still advantageous for us too to be “into theory.” We still have views; we need to have them and above all to recognize that we have them. We still have to recognize, as literary journalism by and large does not, that whatever we think derives from theoretical principles. We have to understand that what we do and say, what we write in our papers and articles, is grounded in theoretical premises that, if we don’t come to terms with them, we will naively reproduce without being fully aware of how we’re using them and how, indeed, they are using us. So it is as crucial as ever to understand theory.

Yet there’s an advantage too in realizing that the cachet of theory has waned and the heat of the moment has passed. (I am not speaking here of methodology, which is as much as ever a matter of urgent dispute today.) We have the vantage point of what we can now call history. Some of what we’ll be studying, indeed much of it, is no longer considered essential groundwork for today’s methodologies. Everything we’ll study has had its moment of flourishing and has remained indirectly influential as a paradigm that shapes other paradigms, but much of it is no longer lingered over as a matter for ongoing discussion—which gives us the opportunity for historical perspective. Hence from time to time I’ll be able to be reasonably confident in explaining why certain theoretical issues and ideas pushed themselves into prominence at certain historical moments. With this added dimension an *introduction* becomes valuable not only for those of us who simply wish to cover the high points. It’s valuable also in showing how theory is, on the one hand, now a historical topic, yet is, on the other hand, something that we’re

very much engaged in and still committed to. All that then by way of rationale for teaching an introduction to the theory of literature.

How does literary theory relate to the history of criticism? The history of criticism is a course that I like to teach, too; usually I teach Plato to T. S. Eliot or Plato to I. A. Richards or some other important figure in the early twentieth century. It's a course that shares one important feature with literary theory: literary criticism is, like theory, perpetually concerned with the definition of literature. Many of the issues that I raised in talking about defining literature are as relevant for literary criticism as they are for literary theory. Yet we all instinctively know that these are two very different enterprises. For one thing, literary theory loses something that literary criticism just takes for granted. Literary theory is not concerned with *evaluation*. Literary theory just takes evaluation, or appreciation, for granted as part of the responsive experience of any reader and prefers, rather, to dwell on questions of description, analysis, and speculation, as I've said. Or to be a little more precise: how and why certain readers under certain conditions value literature or fail or refuse to do so is indeed an object of literary theory, or at least of theory-inflected methodology, but why we *should* or should not value literature or individual works belongs only in the domain of criticism. I should say in qualification, though, that theory sometimes implies value even though it never lays claim to it. Sir Philip Sidney's "poetry nothing affirmeth and therefore never lieth," with which Paul de Man would agree completely, speaks both to theory and criticism.

So that's what's lost in theory; but what's gained in theory that's missing in criticism? Here I return to the topic that will occupy most of my attention for the remainder of the lecture. What's new in theory is the element of skepticism that literary criticism—which is usually affirming a canon of some sort—does not share for the most part. Literary theory is skeptical about the foundations of its subject matter and also, in many cases, about the foundations of its own arguments. How on earth did this come about? Why should doubt about the veridical or truth-affirming possibilities of interpretation be so widespread, especially in the twentieth century and beyond?

Here by way of answer is a dollop of intellectual history. I think the seeds of the sort of skepticism I mean are planted during what often is called "modernity." Modernity should not be confused with modernism, an early twentieth-century phenomenon. Modernity refers to the history of modern thought as we trace it back to the "early modern" time of Descartes, Shakespeare, and Cervantes. Notice something about all of those figures: Descartes in his First Meditation wonders how he can know for sure that he

isn't mad or whether his mind has been taken over by an evil genius. Shakespeare is preoccupied with figures like Hamlet who may or may not be crazy. Cervantes makes his hero a figure who *is* crazy—or at least we're pretty sure of that, but Quixote certainly isn't. He takes it for granted that he is a rational and systematic thinker. We all take ourselves to be rational, too, but Cervantes makes us wonder just how we know ourselves not to be paranoid delusives like Don Quixote.

All these doubts about the basis of thought in reason arise in the seventeenth century. Why then do we get this nervousness about the relationship between what I know and how I know it arising at this moment? Well, I think it's characterized at least in part by what Descartes goes on to say in his *Meditations*. Descartes answers the question he has posed about how he can know himself to exist, which depends in part on deciding that an existing alien being doesn't exist as it were in his place—he answers this question to his own satisfaction by saying, “I think. Therefore, I am”; and furthermore, as a concomitant, I think, therefore all the things that I'm thinking about can be understood to exist as well.

Now this “Cartesian revolution” establishes a central premise for what we call the Enlightenment of the next 150 years. Thenceforth it was given that there is a distance between the mind and the things that it thinks about. At first this distance was considered highly fortunate. After all, if you look too closely at a picture or if you stand too far away from it you don't see it clearly—it's out of focus—but if you achieve just the right distance from it, it comes into focus. The idea of scientific objectivity, the idea that motivates the creation of the great *Encyclopedia* by the figures of the French Enlightenment—that idea depends on maintaining this objective middle distance between the perceiver and the perceived. Gradually, however, the supposition that this distance is neither too great nor too small begins to erode, so that in 1796 Kant, who isn't enlisted on the side of the skeptics by most of his serious students, nevertheless does say something equally as famous as the “cogito” of Descartes and a good deal more disturbing: “We cannot know the thing in itself.” To be sure, Kant erected such a magnificent scaffolding around the thing in itself—the variety of ways in which, although we can't know the thing, we can triangulate it and come to terms with it obliquely—that it seems churlish to enlist him on the side of the skeptics. Yet at the same time there's a sense of danger in the distance between subject and object that begins to emerge in thinking of this kind.

By 1807, Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Mind* is saying that in recent history and in recent developments of consciousness something unfortunate

has set in. We have “unhappy consciousness,” an estranged state of mind that drives us too far away from the thing that we’re looking at. We are no longer certain of what we’re looking at, and consciousness, therefore, feels alienated. Here you see a development in the mainstream of intellectual history that opens the door to skepticism. But the crucial shift hasn’t yet come about, because in all of these accounts, even that of Hegel, there is still no doubt about the authority of consciousness to think what it thinks. It may not think clearly enough about objects, but it is still the origin of its own thoughts, uncertain as they may be. But then come three great figures—there are others but these are considered the foundational figures—who begin to raise questions that complicate the whole issue of consciousness. They argue not only that consciousness doesn’t clearly understand what it’s looking at and is therefore alienated from it but also that consciousness is alienated from its own underpinnings, that it doesn’t have any clear sense of where it’s coming from any more than what it’s looking at. In other words, consciousness is not only estranged from the world but deracinated from the sources of its own thoughts.

Marx, in the famous argument about commodity fetishism in *Das Kapital*, describes the way in which we take a product of human labor and turn it into a commodity by saying that it has objective value, not the value of the labor that produced it. He compares commodity fetishism with religion: God is a product of human intellectual labor that we objectify and posit as the producer of ourselves, having the timeless, immutable value of a commodity. One aspect of Marx’s argument is that consciousness, the way in which we believe things, is deluded because it is determined by factors outside its control: social, historical, and economic factors that shape what we suppose to be our own authentic ideas, creating what Marx calls ideology.

So by the mid-nineteenth century the challenge to consciousness is twofold: it struggles not only with its inauthentic relationship with the things it looks at, distorted by ideology, but also with its inauthentic relationship with its own underpinnings, the “real existing conditions” that shape the bourgeois outlook and make it seem universal. The argument is a parallel one for Nietzsche, but he shifts the ground of attack. For Nietzsche, what makes the operations of consciousness inauthentic is the nature of language itself. When we think we’re telling the truth, we’re actually using worn-out figures of speech. “What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified . . . and are now no longer of account as coins but are debased.” That word *now* is very inter-

esting and not always noticed by those who have since wished to enlist Nietzsche for polemics against truth claims in language. Nietzsche appears to imagine a time when perhaps language was capable of naming reality, when the coin of the verbal realm had real exchange value, arguing that language has *now* reduced itself to a conquering invasion of worn-out figures, all of which dictate what we believe to be true. We speak in a figurative way about the relationship between the earth and the sky and soon believe there’s a sky god. We slide from speech into belief, unwittingly using figures of speech that are not—or not any longer—verifiable.

Freud finally argues for a parallel relationship between consciousness—what I think I am thinking and saying from minute to minute—and what determines it, in his case the unconscious, which perpetually undermines what we think and say from minute to minute. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud reminded us that the Freudian slip isn’t something that happens just sometimes—and nobody knows this better than an ad-libbing lecturer—it’s something that happens all the time. The Freudian slip is something that one dimly recognizes as the slipping of consciousness under the influence of the unconscious, yet for Freud it represents the perpetual, inescapable subjection of reason to desire.

Paul Ricoeur, a modern philosopher in the hermeneutic tradition who didn’t fully believe Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, retorted in the third passage in the appendix that these great precursors of recent thought—and particularly of modern literary theory—together dominate a “school of suspicion.” *Suspicion*, like skepticism, is a word that can also be understood as negation. That is to say, whatever seems manifest or obvious or patent in what we are looking at is undermined for this kind of mind by a negation that is counterintuitive. Because it is dialectical, the reversal of what has been posited, negation does not just *qualify* what we suppose ourselves to know for certain (anyone might agree by the way that socioeconomic influences, language, and the unconscious exert *some* influence on thought), but undermines it *altogether*. The reception of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as strong negative thinkers has been tremendously influential. When we read Foucault’s “What Is an Author?” for the next lecture, we’ll return to the question of how Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud have been received and what we should make of that in view of Foucault’s idea that it’s dangerous to believe that there are authors because we soon turn them into authorities. But if it’s dangerous to believe that there are authors for that reason, what about Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, all of them powerful precursors of Foucault himself? Foucault confronts this question in “What Is an Author?” and responds, as

we'll see, with a striking turn of thought. For us, the aftermath of the very passages I have just discussed, and certainly of the oeuvres of their three authors, can to a large degree be understood as accounting for our topic—the phenomenon of literary theory as we study it. In other words, literary theory, because of the influence of these figures, is to a considerable degree a hermeneutics of suspicion, an exercise in negation recognized as such both by its proponents and, at one time vociferously, by its enemies.

During the period when I was first teaching this course, a veritable six-foot shelf of diatribes against literary theory was being written, many for popular audiences, some with academic credentials. Today you can take or leave literary theory without much fuss being made about it; but the incredible outcry against it at that time reflected its dynamic appeal. For many, many people, most of whom for a while seemed to be writing books, literary theory had something to do with the end of civilization as we know it. The undermining of foundational knowledge, which seemed to motivate so much that went on in literary theory, was seen as the main threat to rationality emanating from the academy and was attacked for that reason in countless lively polemics. That the counterinsurgency against literary theory arose in part from theory's characteristic skepticism is what I have thought it best to emphasize at the present time, because today the humanities are still under fire but with a different emphasis. The main theme of the attacks on the humanities is no longer their negativity but—sometimes as an implied result—their uselessness.

I think that one influence Ricoeur leaves out of his negative pantheon, one that we can expect to become more and more important for literary theory and other kinds of theory in the twenty-first century, is that of Darwin. Darwin could very easily be considered a fourth hermeneutist of suspicion. He himself was not interested in suspicion, seeing in natural selection no real threat to religion broadly conceived, but he was certainly the founder of ways of thinking about consciousness that see it as determined, socio-biologically determined or determined in the realm of cognitive science, determined as artificial intelligence, and so on. All of this thinking descends from Darwin and will be increasingly influential in the twenty-first century. What will alter the shape of literary theory as it was known and studied in the twentieth century is, I think, an increasing emphasis on cognitive science and sociobiological approaches both to literature and to interpretive processes that will derive from Darwin in the same way that strands of thinking of the twentieth century derive from the three figures that I've discussed.

But what the hermeneutics of suspicion gave rise to first is something like an uneasy feeling in the air, contributed to also by sweeping historical changes; and this brings me finally to a preview of the passages from Henry James’s 1903 *The Ambassadors* and from Chekhov’s 1904 *The Cherry Orchard*. I am at pains to remind you that this is a specific historical moment. In both cases the speaker argues that consciousness—the feeling of being alive and being someone acting in the world—no longer involves agency: the feeling that somehow to be conscious is merely to be a puppet, that there are severe limits to our scope of activity. Strether in *The Ambassadors* and Yephiodov in *The Cherry Orchard* speak for a point of view that echoes the doom and gloom in the air, yet strikingly anticipates texts that are much more systematically informed. I want to begin the next lecture by taking up the passages from James and Chekhov before plunging into the question “What is an author?”

CHAPTER 2

Introduction Continued

Theory and Functionalization

Readings:

Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author?" In *The Critical Tradition*, pp. 904–914.

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." In *The Critical Tradition*, pp. 874–877.

Passages from Henry James and Anton Chekhov.

In the first lecture we discussed the reasons why literary theory in the twentieth century is shadowed by skepticism, but as we were talking about that we actually introduced another issue that isn't quite the same as skepticism—namely, *determinism*. In the course of intellectual history, we said, first you encounter concern about the distance between the perceiver and the perceived, a concern that gives rise to skepticism about whether we can know things as they really are. But then as an outgrowth of this concern in figures like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, you get the further question, not just how we can know things as they really are but how we can trust the autonomy of that which knows. How can we be certain that consciousness is independent if in fact there's a chance—a good chance, according to these writers—that consciousness is in turn governed by, controlled by,

“determined” by, hidden agencies? Determinism is at least as important in the arguments of literary theory as skepticism. They’re plainly interrelated in many ways, but I want to focus in this lecture on the question of determinism.

In the last lecture, following Ricoeur, I mentioned Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as key figures who inaugurated the negative mood of theory, and then I added Darwin. It seems pertinent to think of Darwin when we begin to consider the ways in which, in the twentieth century, human agency comes under siege. Circumstances of every kind have threatened the idea that we have autonomy, that we can act independently or, at least, that we can act with a sense of integrity and not just with a sense that we are being pulled by our strings like puppets. In the aftermath of Darwin in particular, our understanding of genetic hardwiring and other such factors made us begin to wonder how we could consider ourselves, each of us, to be free agents. Thus as scientific voices in addition to voices across the humanities responded to historical cataclysms that seemed as inescapable as divine thunderbolts, the crisis of agency intensified.

At the dawn of this epoch, we find the two passages by Anton Chekhov and Henry James that I introduced in the last lecture. Let’s begin with the Chekhov. As you know, *The Cherry Orchard* is about the threat to a landed estate arising from the socioeconomic conditions that soon led to the Menshevik Revolution of 1905, with the characters’ varied reactions—including avoidance—to this threat. One of the more interesting reactions comes from a family retainer who is not really a protagonist: the house servant Yepihodov, who is something of an autodidact. In a completely undisciplined way, that is, he is aware of intellectual currents. He is full of self-pity, and his speeches are more characteristic of Chekhov’s gloomy intellectual milieu than are almost anyone else’s. He says, “I’m a cultivated man. I read all kinds of remarkable books and yet I can never make out what direction I should take, what it is that I want, properly speaking.” As I quote bits of this monologue, pay attention to the way he constantly talks about language and about the way he himself is subject to the vagaries of language. He searches for a mode of “properly speaking.” He is somewhat knowledgeable about books and thinks himself caught up in the matrix of book learning. He is preoccupied with his conditioning by language that is not his own, not least when perhaps unwittingly he alludes to *Hamlet*. “Should I live or should I shoot myself?”—or, properly speaking, “To be or not to be?” Thus he inserts himself into the dramatic tradition to which as a character he himself belongs and shows himself to be, in a debased form, derived from one of those

famous charismatic moments in which a hero expresses a comparable concern.

Here then is a character who is caught up in the snare of language. “Properly speaking and letting other subjects alone, I must say . . .” He is *forced to say*, that is. He would be an egoist if the commonplaces of language would only let him have an ego of his own: “I must say, regarding myself among other things, that fate treats me mercilessly as a storm treats a small boat.”¹ And the end of the passage: “Have you read Buckle?” Henry Thomas Buckle is a forgotten name today, but at one time he was just about as famous as Oswald Spengler, who wrote *The Decline of the West*. Buckle was a Victorian historian preoccupied with the dissolution of Western civilization, an avatar of the notion in the late nineteenth century that everything was going to hell in a handbasket. One of the texts, then, that in a certain sense *determines* Yepihodov is Buckle. “Have you read Buckle? I wish to have a *word* with you, Avdotya Fyodorovna.” The saturation of these speeches with words about words, language, speaking, and books is just the dilemma of this character. He is book- and language-determined, and he’s obscurely aware that this is his problem even though knowing books is a source of pride for him.

Let us turn, then, to a passage in a very different tone from James’s *The Ambassadors*. An altogether charming character, the late middle-aged Lambert Strether, has gone to Paris to bring home the son of a friend, Chad Newsome, who is to take over the family business, manufacturing an unnamed household article in Woollett, Massachusetts—probably toilet paper. In Paris Strether has awakened to the sheer wonder of urbane culture. He sees that he’s missed something. He goes to a party given by a sculptor, and at this party he meets a young man named Little Bilham, whom he takes aside and addresses in a long speech, saying: “Don’t do what I have done. Don’t miss out on life. Live all you can. It is a mistake not to.” And this is why, he goes on to say:

The affair—I mean the affair of life—couldn’t, no doubt, have been different for me; for it’s at the best a tin mould, either fluted and embossed, with ornamental excrescences, or else smooth and dreadfully plain, into which, a helpless jelly, one’s consciousness is poured—so that one “takes” the form as the great cook says, and is more or less compactly held by it: one lives in fine as one can. Still, one has the illusion of freedom.²

At this point, Strether, who is infinitely smarter than Yepihodov, says something very clever that I think we can make use of. He goes on to say, "Therefore, don't be, like me, without the memory of that illusion. I was either at the right time too stupid or too intelligent to have it. I don't quite know which." Now if he was too stupid to have it, then of course he would have been liberated into the realm of action. He would have been what Nietzsche in a book about the uses of history calls "historical man." He simply would have plunged into life as though he had freedom, even though he would have been too stupid to recognize that his freedom was an illusion. On the other hand, if he was too intelligent to—as it were—bury this illusion and live as though he were free, if he was too intelligent to do that, he would be a prototype for the literary theorist. He would be the sort of person who can't forget long enough that freedom is an illusion to get away from the crippling preoccupations that characterize a certain kind of thinking in the twentieth century. And it's delightfully circumspect of him that he says at last—because how can a determinate being know anything?—"I don't quite know which."

So these are characteristic passages that can introduce us to this lecture's subject, which is the loss of authority: "the death of the author" in Roland Barthes's title and what is implied in Foucault's question, "What is an author?" With the denial of human agency, the first sacrifice for literary theory is the author, the idea of the author.

Now let me set the scene. Like Strether but seventy years later, we're in Paris. It wouldn't have to be Paris. It could be Berkeley or Columbia or maybe Berlin. It's 1968 or 1969, spilling over into the 1970s. Students and most of their professors are on the barricades, in protest not only against the war in Vietnam but also against the authoritarian resistance to protest that marked the 1960s. A ferment of intellectual revolt takes all sorts of forms in Paris but is largely organized by what quickly became a bumper sticker in this country: "Question authority." Hence the most prominent intellectual in France writes an essay at the very peak of the student uprising entitled "What Is an Author?"

Yet Foucault offers a series of historically inflected answers to this question that are by no means straightforward or simple. Maybe you anticipated what I've just been saying about the historical setting and about the role of Foucault and were therefore more confused and frustrated by what he actually says than you expected to be. Yet you also saw that "What Is an Author?" nonetheless is written as much in the spirit of critique as you had

anticipated. Because this course is introductory, I won't spend a great deal of time with the more unexpected turns of Foucault's argument; I'll emphasize, rather, the parts you may have anticipated.

Now most of us are likely to raise our eyebrows and ask whether this Foucault person really doesn't think he himself is an author. After all, he's a superstar. He's used to being taken very seriously. Does he want to say that he's not an authority but just an "author function," that the textual field of his own essay is a set of structural operations within which one can discover, just as one discovers a plot or an element of grammar, an *author*? Well, this is an emperor's new clothes sort of question that we're going to take seriously in the long run, but there *are* ways of keeping the question at arm's length, even of disarming it, and they need to be explored.

So yes, this very authoritative-sounding person would seem to be an author. I never met anybody who seemed more like an author than Foucault, yet he's asking whether there is any such thing as one, or in any case how difficult it is to decide what it is if there is. Let me digress with an anecdote that may help us to understand this odd connection between a star author and the atmosphere of thought in which there is no such thing as an author. A former colleague of mine was taking a lecture course at Johns Hopkins in the 1960s. The course was given by Georges Poulet, a "phenomenological critic" whose important work I regret not having time to cover in our survey. He was, in any case, a star author. Poulet would be lecturing away, and the students from time to time would raise their hand and simply utter a name. One would raise her hand and say, "Mallarmé." And Poulet would say, "Mais oui! Exactement!" and then go on with his lecture. Then somebody else would raise his hand and say, "Proust." "Ah, précisément! Proust. Proust." Then back to the lecture. So my colleague decided to act on a hunch. He raised his hand and said, "Voltaire," a famous author but not one in whom theorists typically find anything of interest. Sure enough, Poulet looked puzzled and said "Quoi donc? . . . Je ne vous comprends pas," then returned in a state of bemusement to his lecture.

Now this ritual of dropping names actually shows that they are not just names, not even just the names of stars. They are plainly names that stand for something other than mere authorship, names that stand for domains or fields of interesting "discourse." Poulet was the kind of theorist who believed that the oeuvre of an author was a totality that could be understood as a structural whole, and his commentaries worked toward that end. He would speak of "le texte mallarméen" or "le texte proustien." In this context, to refer to an author is to name a domain. That's of course what my

colleague—because he knew perfectly well that when he said “Voltaire,” Poulet would have nothing to do with it—had figured out. There were relevant and interesting fields of discourse and there were completely irrelevant fields of discourse. We spontaneously make these distinctions, perhaps, but we need to be aware that when we accord authorship to such fields we may well be thinking *not* of some intending consciousness but of isolated textual effects, “signatures” amid many other textual features that are not necessarily authorial traces but—for example—transpersonal language effects or the constraints of an occasion.

Theorists in Poulet’s and Foucault’s time liked to speak of “discourse” or “discursivity,” as opposed to authorial speech. I said last time that sometimes people just throw up their hands when they try to define literature and say that literature is whatever anyone says it is. Such people are more likely to use the word “discourse” or “textual field” or “discursivity” than the word “literature.” Like much jargon, such circumlocution does have a rationale. The word “discourse,” or “discursivity” understood as the potential of discourse to become an arena for discussion, suggests that the boundary is extremely porous both between authors and between types of speech. One can speak hesitantly of literary discourse, political discourse, anthropological discourse, but one doesn’t want to go so far as to say literature, political science, anthropology; and by the same token, the names “Fanny Burney,” “Maria Edgeworth,” and “Jane Austen,” “Georges Poulet,” “Michel Foucault,” and “Tzvetan Todorov” are open fields, not enclosed fiefdoms. These are habits of speech that arise from sensing the permeability of all forms of utterance with respect to each other; and such habits challenge the notion that certain forms of utterance can be understood as authorized pieces of private property.

Best to clear up a common, sometimes willful misunderstanding: no one, certainly not Foucault, has said or ever will say that a written document doesn’t have an author, isn’t written by some person or persons. Yes, Barthes talks about the “death” of the author, but even Barthes doesn’t mean that the author doesn’t exist. We are asked only whether we really do necessarily appeal to the authority of an author in making up our mind about the nature of a given field of discourse. We can as readily find the author somewhere within the textual experience, with the advantage that it is then a text we are reading and not a decree from above. The author is a set of practices, a virtual presence, not an actual one: what Foucault calls a “function.” The important questions now are how we recognize the author’s presence, first, and, second, whether in attempting to determine the meaning of a text—and

this is something we'll be talking about in the next lecture—we should appeal to the authority of the author. If the author is a function, that function is something that appears, perhaps problematically appears, here and there across the field of the text, something that for one thing (and this is a turn of thought you've been familiar with since high school English) we need to distinguish from the speaker or the narrator, or, yet more obviously in the case of plays, from the characters.

For Foucault a text is an entity composed of interactive functions. For Barthes, too, a text is a system of functions, but he lays more emphasis on the permeability of this system to other systems. Barthes opens "The Death of the Author" (874) by quoting a short story by Balzac called "Sarrasine":

In his story "Sarrasine" Balzac, describing a castrato disguised as a woman, writes the following sentence: *"This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings and her delicious sensibility."* Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing "literary" ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject [and this is a deliberate pun] slips away ["our subject" meaning that we don't quite know what's being talked about sometimes, but also, and more importantly, *the* subject, the authorial subject, the actual identity of the given speaking subject, is what slips away] into the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.

At the time he wrote this essay, Barthes was writing a whole book about "Sarrasine" called *S/Z*. In this book, Barthes, known until then as a leading "structuralist," became increasingly preoccupied with the mazelike shapelessness of what seems to be structural. Although both Foucault and Barthes are dethroning the same authority in the same antiauthoritarian climate, the author is eclipsed here more completely than in Foucault, for whom "disappear" would be an overstatement.

Foucault, who I think does take for granted that a textual field is more firmly systematic than Barthes had come to suppose, says that when we speak of the author function rather than the author, we no longer raise certain questions, such as the following (913): “How can a free subject penetrate the substance of things and give it meaning? How can it activate the rules of a language from within and thus give rise to the designs which are properly its own?” In other words, we no longer ask how the author exerts autonomous will with respect to the subject matter being expressed. We do not suppose the meaning to coincide with the meaning of the author. Foucault continues:

Instead, these questions will be raised: “How, under what conditions, and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the order of discourse? What place can it occupy in each type of discourse, what functions can it assume, and by obeying what rules?” In short, [when we speak in this way of an author function] it is a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) [a character, for example, or a speaker, as when we say the speaker is not the author in “My Last Duchess”] . . . of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse.

(“The subject” in “discourse” of this kind always means the subjectivity of the speaker, not the subject matter.)

With this much said about what Foucault and Barthes do and do not mean in dethroning the author, it’s probably time to say something in defense of the author. I will speak for all of you who want to stand up and defend the author by quoting a wonderful passage from Samuel Johnson’s “Preface to *Shakespeare*,” in which he explains why we have always paid homage to the authority of the author. It’s not just a question—as obviously Foucault and Barthes are always suggesting—of deferring to authority as though the authority were the police laying about them with truncheons. We can also think of authorship as human accomplishment. This is what Johnson says:

There is always a silent reference of human works to human abilities, and as the inquiry, how far man may extend his designs or how high he may rate his native force, is of far greater

dignity than in what rank we shall place any particular performance, curiosity is always busy to discover the instruments as well as to survey the workmanship, to know how much is to be ascribed to original powers and how much to casual and adventurous help.³

It's all very well to consider a textual field as a system, but at the same time we want to remind ourselves of our worth. We want to say that a "work" (somebody's work) is not just a set of functions—variables, as one might say in the lab. It's produced by genius. It's something that allows us to rate human ability "high." Especially in this vale of tears—and Johnson is very conscious of this being a vale of tears—that's what we want to keep doing. Clutching at such straws as we can, it is in the spirit of homage rather than in cringing fear that we appeal to the authority of an author.

But we are speaking of different times, the vale of tears having perhaps changed in character. This is 1969, and the purpose that's alleged for appealing to the author as a paternal source, as an authority, is, according to both Barthes and Foucault, to *police* the way texts are read even within the academy. (A very angry don at the Sorbonne had written a book against Barthes called *Nouvelle critique, nouvelle imposture*.) In other words, both of them insist that the appeal to the author—as opposed to the submersion of the author in the functionality of the textual field—is a kind of delimitation or policing of the possibilities of *meaning*.

Let me just cite two passages to that effect, first going back to Roland Barthes (877). Barthes says, "Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile." By the way, once again there's a rift here between Barthes and Foucault. Foucault wouldn't say "quite futile." He would say we can decipher it, but that the author function is just one aspect of the deciphering process. But Barthes had entered a phase of his career, again, in which structures seemed so complex that they ceased to be structures. This has a great deal to do with the influence of deconstruction, to which we'll return later in the book.

In any case, Barthes continues:

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism [criticism here is a lot like policing—"criticism" means being a nasty critic, *criticizing*] very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or

its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty [i.e., agency]) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is “explained”—a victory to the critic.

In other words, the policing of meaning has been accomplished and the critic wins, just as in the uprisings of the late 1960s the cops win. We can reinforce this attitude with the pronouncement by Foucault (913): “The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning.”

Now once again, we are likely to counter skepticism with skepticism. You may well say, “Why shouldn’t I fear the proliferation of meaning? I want to know what something definitely means. I don’t want to know that it means a million things. I’m here to learn what things mean in so many words. I don’t want to be told that I could sit here for the rest of my life just parsing one sentence. Don’t tell me about these vertiginous sentences from Balzac’s short story. I’m here to know what things mean. I don’t care if it’s policing or not. Whatever it is, let’s get it done.” The reason I could feel sympathy if you were to respond in this grumpy way is that to a certain extent the preoccupation with the ideological misuse of the appeal to an author belongs very much to its historical moment, a time when you could scarcely say the word “author” without thinking “authority,” and you could certainly never say the word “authority” without thinking about the police. I know—I was then a student at Berkeley. This is a structure of thought that perhaps pervades the lives of many of us even to this day and has always pervaded the lives of many people in many places, we mustn’t forget that, but it is not quite as much the default point of view in the academic world today as it was in the moment of these essays by Barthes and Foucault.

With all this said, how can the theorist recuperate honor for certain names like, for example, *her own*? “You’re not an author, but I am”: let’s suppose someone were dastardly enough to harbor such a thought. Could you develop an argument in which the thought might actually seem to make sense? After all, Foucault—setting himself aside, he doesn’t mention himself—Foucault very much admires certain writers. In particular, he admires, like so many of his generation and other generations, Marx and Freud. It’s perilous to reject the police-like authority of authors in general—in some of whom we may justly discover authoritarian tendencies—when we don’t feel that way about Marx and Freud. How can Foucault mount an argument in which privileged authors—that is to say, figures whom one cites positively and without a sense of being policed—can retain a place of honor?

Foucault, by the way, doesn't mention Nietzsche here, but he might very well have done because Nietzsche's idea of "genealogy" is perhaps the most important influence on Foucault's work. Frankly, I think it's just an accident that he doesn't mention him. It would have been a perfect symmetry for us, because in the last lecture we quoted Paul Ricoeur to the effect that these authors, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, were—and this is Ricoeur's word—"masters." Whoa! Masters? That's the last word Foucault would want to hear. How, then, does he circumvent this problem? He invents a concept. He says that Marx and Freud aren't authors but "founders of discursivity." A founder of discursivity is someone whose discourse enables constructive and progressive responses to it over time. Here he makes a subtle distinction between founders of an intellectual legacy and influential innovators in the development of genres. He speaks of Anne Radcliffe (he should be speaking of Horace Walpole, but never mind) as a person who established certain tropes, *topoi*, and premises that govern the writing of gothic fiction for the next hundred years and, indeed, even up to the present, yet should *not* be called a founder of discursivity. She doesn't establish a discourse or sphere of debate, he claims, within which ideas, without being attributable necessarily, can nevertheless be developed. This seems to me rather anti-literary, as though negotiating literary influence were not precisely a matter of speaking or writing in the wake of a "founder of discursivity," but I won't belabor the point.

Foucault is concerned also to distinguish figures like Marx and Freud from scientists like Galileo and Newton. In defense of Foucault here, notice that whereas we speak of people as Marxist or Freudian, we don't speak of people as Radcliffean or Galilean or Newtonian. We use the adjective "Newtonian" in just the author-neutral way that Poulet used such terms in my anecdote, but we don't speak of writers who are still interested in Newtonian mechanics as "Newtonian writers." This appeal to usage may indeed justify Foucault's understanding of the textual legacy of those author functions known as Marx and Freud—whose names might be raised in Poulet's lecture class with an enthusiastic response—as placeholders for Marxist and Freudian fields of discourse. It may, in some sense, reinforce Foucault's argument that "Marx" and "Freud" are special inaugurations of debate, of developing thought, that does not necessarily cringe under the influence of the originary figure. That's certainly debatable; of course there are a great many people who think of Marx and Freud as tyrants, but within the traditions that they established, it is quite possible to understand them as instigating ways of thinking without necessarily presiding over those

ways of thinking authoritatively. That in any case is the special category that Foucault wants to reserve for those privileged figures whom he calls founders of discursivity.

Very quickly then to conclude: one consequence of the death of the author and the reduction of the author to author function is, as Foucault curiously says in passing (907), that the author “has no legal status.” What? What about copyright? What about intellectual property? Surely to say that the author has no legal status puts us back in the eighteenth century. Notice once again, however, the intellectual context of which Foucault is fully aware. Copyright arose as a bourgeois idea, allowing me to say that I possess my writing, I am its owner. The disappearance of the author, in keeping with the disappearance of bourgeois thought itself, entails, in fact, setting aside notions of copyright or intellectual property. In Foucault’s time, Jean-Luc Godard made this point in ceasing to be director (*auteur*) and disappearing into film communes. So there is after all consistency in what Foucault is saying about the author having no legal status.

But maybe at this point it really is time to dig in our heels. “I am a lesbian Latina. I stand before you as an author articulating an identity and finding a voice for the purpose of achieving freedom; not to police you, not to deny your freedom, but to find my own freedom. I stand before you, in pride, as an author. I don’t want to be called an author function. I don’t want to be called an instrument of something larger than myself because frankly that’s what I’ve always been, and now, invested in the authority of my authorship, I want to remind you that I am not anybody’s instrument but that I am autonomous and free.”

The traditional idea of the author, call it a paternalistic idea—so much under suspicion in the work of Foucault and Barthes in the late 1960s—can obviously be turned on its ear in this way. It can be understood as a source of *newfound* authority, of the freedom of one who is only recently liberated and hopes to be received by a reading community with that understanding. It’s hard to know how a Foucault might respond; and the issues entailed bring to the surface a problem that dogs much of what we’re going to read during the course of these lectures—even and especially within the sorts of theorizing that are called cultural studies and concern the politics of identity. Within those disciplines there is a division of thought between people who affirm the autonomous integrity and individuality of the identity in question and those who say any and all identities are only “subject positions”—*functions*, in short—that are revealed through the matrix of social practices. This same split exists, too, within those forms of theory that don’t directly

have to do with the politics of identity. A dispute arises sooner or later between those for whom what's important is the discovery of autonomous subjectivity and those for whom what's important is the discovery of an effacement of the ego or freedom from selfhood within the very instability of any and all subject positions.

So much then for these introductory lectures, which have touched lightly on key topics that we'll keep circling back to. In the next lecture we'll turn to a more sharply delineated subject matter: hermeneutics, what hermeneutics is, and how we can think about the consequences of conflicting hermeneutic premises. Our primary texts will be the excerpt from Hans-Georg Gadamer and a few passages from Martin Heidegger and E. D. Hirsch.

First Reflections on Interpretation and Reading

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CHAPTER 3

Ways In and Out of the Hermeneutic Circle

Readings:

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. “The Elevation of the Historicity of Understanding to the Status of Hermeneutic Principle.” In *The Critical Tradition*, pp. 721–737.

Passages from Martin Heidegger, E. D. Hirsch.

Despite the intimidating sound of the word, “hermeneutics” is easily defined as the science of interpretation. You would think hermeneutics had always been a matter of interest, but in fact it’s of continuous interest only fairly recently. Aristotle did write a treatise called *De Interpretatione*, and the Middle Ages were much concerned with interpretation, so I suppose what I’m saying in part is that the word “hermeneutics” wasn’t then available; but it’s also true that at many times the idea that there ought to be a systematic study of how we interpret things wasn’t a matter of pressing concern.

Although there had long been prodigious feats of interpretation in the Talmudic tradition, what gave rise in the Western world to what is called “hermeneutics” was the Protestant Reformation. There’s a lot of significance in that, I think, and I’ll try to explain why, because at the heart of this historical fact we can find the reason why people care about interpretation at

some times and don't care about it at others. You don't really puzzle your head about approaches to interpretation, how we determine the validity of interpretation and so on, until (a) meaning becomes terribly important to you, and (b) the ascertainment of meaning becomes difficult. You may ask yourself whether it isn't always the case that meaning is important and that meaning is hard to construe. Well, not necessarily. If you are a person whose sacred scripture is adjudicated by the pope and the occasional tribunal of church elders, you yourself don't really need to worry very much about what scripture means. You are told what it means. But in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, when one's relationship with the Bible became personal and everyone was engaged—with the guidance of their minister—in understanding what is after all pretty difficult stuff (who on earth knows what the parables mean?—and the whole of the Bible poses interpretative problems), then of course worries about how to interpret scripture become prevalent. Needless to say, since it's your sacred text, the meaning of it is important to you. It's crucial to you to know exactly what it means and why what it means is important.

So as Protestantism gained currency, by the same token thinking about hermeneutics took hold, and people began to write treatises about interpretation—but it was always interpretation of the Bible. In other words, in hermeneutics, religion came first because for the laity sacred texts were the only texts that it was crucial to understand. Soon enough, though, constitutional democracies began to appear, and when that happened people became much more interested—as citizens or as persons with suffrage or as persons with rights conferred by a state or nation—they became much more interested in the nature of the laws they lived under. That's why hermeneutics gradually expanded beyond religion to the study of the law. The governing principles that had been developed in thinking about interpreting scripture were then applied to the interpretation of something the meaning of which had become almost as important. You know of course that hermeneutics is inescapable in the study of the law to this day: what are the grounds for understanding the meaning of the Constitution, for example? There are widespread controversies about it, and many of the courses you would take in law school are meant to arbitrate among them. So once again you see that hermeneutics enters a field when the meaning of the foundational documents in that field becomes more important to a community of readers than it had been before and when that meaning is recognized to be difficult to grasp.